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**One Line Flirts and Passionate Debates:
On-line Spaces and Identities as Observed in Lesbian and Bisexual Women's
Internet Mailing Lists**

K. Celeste Wincapaw, B. A. (Magna Cum Laude)

**A Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Geography**

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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*One Line Flirts and Passionate Debates: On-line Spaces and Identities as Observed in
Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Internet Mailing Lists*

submitted by K. Celeste Wincapaw, B. A. Magna Cum Laude
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

The lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists of the Internet have created electronic lesbian and bisexual spaces which simultaneously reflect and yet differ from real time lesbian spaces. This thesis summarizes data collected in a 1995 survey in which over 100 subscribers of the lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists answered both qualitative and quantitative questions about the interface between their on-line and real-time lives. As is reported in this thesis, many of the survey respondents sought lesbian and bisexual on-line spaces where they could avoid men and heterosexuals but, in order to do so, had to negotiate the sometimes difficult terrain of electronic co-existence with a diverse group of lesbians and/or bisexuals. This diversity caused difficulties for some survey respondents which mirrored many of the difficulties of their real-time lives. Yet, the impetus was also planted for the development of identity-specific electronic mailing lists where like-minded lesbians and/or bisexuals could enjoy affirming communication and interaction.

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Chapter One: What are Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Electronic Mailing Lists?

There are "real time" spaces of the bar, the k.d. lang concert, or the North American softball field; spaces inhabited by real smelling, living breathing lesbian bodies.¹ There are also electronic spaces, spaces which are not found in the landscape or as part of the urban built environment but are, instead, an intellectual or emotional connection between people via the written word and an electronic medium. The lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists of the Internet (hereafter referred to as the LISTs) are an example of such an electronic space and are the subject of this thesis. The culture of this recently developed space will be explored along with the interface between the real lives and actions of the survey respondents and their participation in the electronic spaces of the lists. Specifically, this thesis is about the way one type of electronic space affects, and is affected by, the lived identities of its inhabitants.

The purpose of this thesis is to show that the spaces of the LISTs are important spaces to LIST subscribers. Yet, the reasons for that importance vary and depend upon the real, lived experiences of the subscriber. For some women, the LISTs are important because they provide places to meet women with like identities. For others, the LISTs are important because they provide opportunities to explore and develop ideas about identity. Yet for others, the LISTs, or at least a specific LIST, can be an important space of refuge from a lesbian or bisexual world which can sometimes be as hostile as the rest of the world.

Context for A Project About Technology, Gender, and Sexuality.

The word "context" means different things to different people. As Slack says,

"There is considerable agreement in communications studies that the proper way to study communication technologies is in their 'social

¹ k.d. lang is a Canadian, lesbian popular singer.

context.'...[but] to assert that one studies technologies in context is really to take a particular position on what constitutes that context and thus to enter a terrain where there is little agreement."²

Each person brings her experiences to her use of the Internet. As Edwards notes, "...people always encounter technology in a particular context and develop their understanding from there."³ So, for example, if a woman has experienced racism in a lesbian organization, she then takes that experience with her when she explores the lesbian spaces of the Internet. She might choose to go where she feels most comfortable. Her decisions about her use of the Internet stem from her cumulated life experience, both in "real time" and "on-line."⁴

In order to differentiate this project from others, the remainder of this chapter specifies which aspects of technology, gender, and sexuality will be considered in this project.

Specific Internet Technologies

Just as persons approach the Internet with differing life experiences, the Internet itself is not monolithic in either structure or content. Different Internet technologies are currently being utilized to provide women-only spaces. There are chat rooms on the World Wide Web (WWW) and on local Bulletin Board Services (BBS's). There are women-only channels which can be accessed via Internet Relay Chat (IRC). As well, there are also women-only electronic mailing lists.

Women-only electronic mailing lists are usually facilitated by a real, live person, usually called a list moderator or list owner, and one of a variety of software which allows the list moderator to create a mailing list where any list subscriber,

² Slack 1989, 329

³ Edwards 1995, 281

⁴ Used throughout this thesis, the word "real time" refers to life outside the Internet while "on-line" refers to experiences while using the Internet or any other form of computer mediated communication.

including herself, can send electronic mail to everyone on the list. List subscribers can then reply to those pieces of electronic mail via either private e-mail or to the list as a whole.

While some mailing lists are mostly automated and require only basic maintenance by their list moderator, many women-only lists and, in particular, many lesbian and bisexual women's lists require that the list moderator approve potential list subscribers before they are allowed to subscribe to the list. For many lesbian and bisexual women's lists, this means that the list moderator has the dubious job of deciding if the potential subscriber seems like a lesbian or a bisexual woman. How this happens will be discussed later in this thesis.

There are differences in the technologies which facilitate access to the WWW, BBS, IRC, and electronic mailing lists. One kind of Internet account is needed to browse the WWW and another, more basic account can allow one to subscribe to an electronic mailing list. Therefore, in order to achieve technological consistency, this thesis will focus only on the technology of the mailing lists. The mailing lists were also chosen because they usually require one of the least expensive and most widely available aspects of Internet technology, an electronic mail account. They are also some of the only semi-controlled public spaces on the Internet; that is, they are Internet spaces theoretically open to anyone but they are monitored by the list moderator and list subscribers themselves so not just anyone can subscribe. That makes the mailing list a unique and popular way for women, especially lesbian and bisexual women, to provide themselves with women-only spaces.

Another reason for a study of the specific technology of the mailing list is: As access to Internet technologies differ, so do personal concepts of "What is the Internet?" When one woman talks about "The Internet" she may be taking about e-mail while another might be referring to her experiences on the World Wide Web. That

means that if each of these women's experiences were to be studied without placing⁴ each in a specific technological context, it would make for a decidedly confused comparison.

Gender and Internet Technology

While women-only space might include a bar, coffee shop, or Women's centre, it also includes virtual space, that is, an electronic space, a space without a street address or even latitude and longitudinal coordinates. The number of women using such women-only spaces is increasing as communications technologies, such as the Internet, become more popular.⁵ These new women-only spaces provide a way for women to experience the freedom of a women-only environment without leaving her desk. That means that a woman can transcend her physical location and circumstances to electronically reap the benefits of a virtual place. As one woman wrote, "The conversations are much more relaxed and open (in my experience) in wimmin-only (sic) space."

Women perceive women's on-line spaces as places to interact without the often oppressive, albeit sometimes unconscious, presence of men. Referring to the Internet, another woman said "There seems to be a freedom in women-only space, even cyberspace.

Sexuality, Gender, and Internet Technology

One group of women, lesbians and bisexual women, have been astute in the development of distinctly pro-lesbian and sometimes pro-bisexual women's spaces. The reasons for this development can only be hypothesized but it certainly must have something to do with location. Many lesbian and bisexual women simply do not have physical access to lesbian, and the even fewer, bisexual organizations. A lesbian

⁵ The Internet is the world-wide network of computer networks which facilitate computer mediated communication.

and/or bisexual mailing list can help such women feel like they belong to a larger community of lesbian and bisexual women. Also, even if there are established lesbian or bisexual organizations nearby, many women seem to be seeking that something special that can only be found on-line.⁶ Whether it is the ability to be anonymous, to "eavesdrop" on the conversations of others, or to express one's ideas without the cues of physical appearance, lesbian and bisexual women are finding something they like on the electronic mailing lists.

Estimations may vary, but at the time this research was conducted there were at least twenty five lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists and at least a few thousand subscribers in total. It was impossible to know exactly how many mailing lists and how many subscribers there were because new lists are continually being started and old ones folding. Also, lists can be fairly low-profile or subscription can be obtained by private invitation only. That makes it almost impossible to count how many lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists exist. As well, people are subscribing and unsubscribing on a daily basis and might have multiple subscriptions making any anonymous count of subscribers unreliable. Of course, if persons were required to register under either their real or assumed names and subscriptions, then a more accurate estimate could take place.

While it is important to estimate the number of subscribers, it is also important to recognize that the research findings reported in this thesis are in no way reflective of those numbers. The hundred or so subscribers who answered a survey as part of this research are not a representative sample of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing list subscribers. In the same way, the information gathered in this thesis does not represent all, or even some, lesbian and

⁶ The word "on-line" means the electronic world of computer mediated communications. It includes everything accessed via modem or ethernet (direct wiring) connection.

bisexual women. This thesis is a particular story about lesbian and bisexual spaces where women connect via a mailing list to make friends, to flirt, and to passionately debate the issues of the day.

Identity questions are certainly central to any study of lesbian and bisexual electronic mailing lists. The definition of words like "lesbian" and "bisexual" are hotly debated. Subscribers are sharing or re-enforcing ideas of what it means to be lesbian or bisexual. That implies that subscribers are helping to shape the lesbian identity of the mailing list in two ways. First, the list administrator decides which identities will be allowed to subscribe. Second, the discussion which ensues via the list is based on the interests and comments of the list subscribers.

As well, list subscribers may get ideas about lesbian or bisexual identity from reading other people's posts on the mailing list. So, for example, if a person reads posts about football, music, and hairstyles on a lesbian and/or bisexual electronic mailing list then that person starts to think about these topics as lesbian and/or bisexual issues. Likewise, the race, age, class, income, citizenship, or abilities of the majority of the lesbian or bisexual list subscribers who actually send out messages to the mailing list (also called "posting" to the list) will determine the content, type and tone of the conversation on the mailing list. For example, if the majority of the "posters" to a particular list are from the United States, then they will most likely start discussing a topic such as U.S. regional politics which is usually of little interest to those who live outside the U.S.

The ideological underpinnings of this study were based on LIST subscribers' representations of the link between their *on-line* and *real time* lives.⁷ Inspiration came from persons who speak of the importance of studying the relationship between

⁷ On-line refers to life within the setting of computer mediated communication while real time refers to life off line.

technology and everyday lives. As Haraway says, "...taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means...embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life..."⁸

For the purposes of this project, technology, such as that of the electronic mailing list, was studied to determine how it is shaping and being shaped by the experiences of its creators and users. The permeable boundaries between the on-line and the off-line lives of those who subscribe to electronic mailing lists were considered. This seems to be of particular importance for lesbians and bisexuals, especially those who are physically located in homophobic environments, who might be able to use their on-line experiences with lesbian and bisexual mailing lists to cope with a daily life of isolation.

Lesbian and/or bisexual women, even those who live in more lesbian or bi-positive environments, might be coming to the mailing lists to do more than cope with daily life in a heterosexually dominated world. They might be pro-actively using the mailing lists to transform the world. They might be doing political organizing or sharing major news stories which have been ignored by local, national or international media because of their lesbian (or bisexual) content. They might also be looking for information about local events, seeking emotional support in "coming out" or may very well be using the Internet as a place to cruise for sexual partners. They might be seeking to expand what is often a very incestuous local network of friends, lovers and ex-lovers.⁹

Lesbians (and bisexual women) may even be looking to challenge or educate other lesbians and bisexual women about issues such as lesbian health or safer sex

⁸ Haraway 1985, 223.

⁹ Valentine 1993, 114. Valentine wrote "...because of the limited opportunities lesbians have to meet others in non-gay environments who are therefore unknown to other members of their networks, the community is very incestuous."

with women. They might be seeking to address some of the big problems in many lesbian and bisexual women's communities (and elsewhere) such as bi-phobia, racism, able-ism, age-ism, size-ism, or violence by women against women. In a space where lesbian and bisexual women are in the majority, internal assessment and proactive changes within lesbian and bisexual communities (such as combatting biphobia amongst lesbians) can be strategized without the constant threat of another negative aspect of lesbian life being advertised to a heterosexually dominated world already filled with negative stereotypes about lesbians and bisexual women.

Or, the LIST participants might be sitting at their work place or student computer coping with charades of being passably heterosexual while reading and writing on-line lesbian erotica. Lesbian electronic spaces can be anything and everything from lesbian and bisexual educational sources to quick escapes to a lesbian-positive, on-line world.

Conclusion: Questions to Be Addressed in this Thesis

When the survey for this thesis research was designed, it was done so with three ideas in mind. The first was to ask LIST subscribers about their lives in the off-line, "real-time" world. The second was to ask LIST subscribers about their lives in the on-line world of the Internet. The third was to ask how their lives on-line have affected their lives off-line and vice versa.

These are important questions for feminist geographers committed to the study of sexualized identities and spaces because of the impossibility of separating the sexuality of a space from the sexual identities of its inhabitants. The geographer, one who is often concerned with identities and spaces, must decide if she will focus on linguistic identities by studying persons with a particular linguistic signifier such as "lesbian" which encompasses a diverse group of people and sexual practices. She

might decide instead to focus on identity created by action instead of words by, for example, choosing to study women who have particular sexual relations with other women.

For the purposes of this project, sexual identities created by language and by action were considered to be important. Women who called themselves lesbian and bisexual were considered along with women who do not choose to call themselves either lesbian or bisexual but who take the particular action of subscribing to an electronic mailing list designed for persons who call themselves "lesbian" or "bisexual."

While certainly self-identified lesbian and bisexual women comprised the majority of subscribers to lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, there is a minority of persons who do not. Off-line, and sometimes on-line, they would identify as heterosexual, omnisexual, or prefer not to take any sexual labels at all. Despite the mixed reaction these women often get from lesbians, bisexuals, or others, they are in unique positions where they could seek to mend divisions amongst women of differing sexual identities. Heterosexual women who spend time in spaces dominated by lesbian and bisexual women can be allies in the fight against lesbian and bisexual oppression. Persons who refuse to take a sexual identity can challenge the need for anyone's life, love, or sex to be described by a particular sexual identity. Considering the positive impact both the presence of heterosexuals and persons without a sexual identity could have on lesbian and/or bisexual spaces, these persons were included in this project along with lesbians and bisexuals.

Also, considering identities and spaces, both on-line and off-line, allows the researcher to develop connections between a person's on-line and off-line lives. Just as lesbian and bisexual *spaces* are not only found in on-line experiences, lesbian and bisexual identities are not considered to be only part of the off-line, "real time." They

are also part of the on-line world. This approach to identity and space sees both as crossing the boundaries between the on-line and the off-line worlds. It does not necessitate the on-line, Internet life being deemed less important than the "real time" life. It also allows for the idea that for some women, their on-line lives might be equally, or more important, than their "real time" lives.

In considering the definition of "woman" for this project, the self-identification of the respondents was accepted at face value. If someone said she was a woman, then it was accepted that she was a woman. Transsexuals and transgendered persons were included in this project as women, period. If a participant in this project wanted to speak about their experiences as a transsexual or transgendered person on-line, it was simply included as part of the diversity of gendered identities of lesbian and bisexual women.

The information contained in this thesis was gathered from books, electronic and print journals and an electronic survey of LIST subscribers. It has been organized into five chapters—an introduction, three main chapters, and a concluding chapter. This first chapter outlines the contents of the thesis and provides the context for the research project upon which it rests.

The second chapter provides the theoretical framework upon which this project was developed. It includes works from several disciplines including feminist geography, gender & technology, and lesbian studies. It contains an explanation of the overlap between lesbian and bisexual identities and how that manifests itself in the shared spaces of the LISTs. Female masculinity, particularly lesbian butch identity, is considered in order to show that the LISTs are decidedly pro-woman and anti-male but that they are also a place where masculinity is not necessarily rejected.

The third chapter traces the process of taking theoretical ideas and placing them in the context of a vehicle for data gathering. In this chapter, I explain how I

developed an electronic survey which would provide me with suitable data for this project. I also explain some of the problems with choosing the Internet as a medium for data gathering. Issues of security are considered. Also, the strengths and weaknesses of an insider methodological approach, in which I openly study my own community, are examined.

The fourth chapter contains a summary of the information gathered via the electronic survey of LIST participants. Approximately one hundred women responded to the survey; some replied with pages of text, others with one word answers. Some even agreed to some on-going personal correspondence on the subject. The data reported in this chapter includes basic demographic data and direct quotes from participants about their experiences on the LISTs. It summarizes information gathered about the on-line and real time lives of approximately one hundred, mostly white, highly educated, lesbian and bisexual LIST subscribers. It explains how many of the participants' on-line experiences reflect their real life concerns. It also shows how on-line experiences have translated to real life changes such as real time meetings with someone met on-line.

The fifth chapter of the thesis contains the geographical conclusions developed by this research and suggests topics for further research. Weaknesses of the research are examined and suggestions made for further research or similar methodology.

In summary, the research question for this thesis is two-fold "In what ways are women's experiences in the on-line, lesbian and bisexual electronic mailing lists affecting their off-line, "real time" lives?" and "How are off-line, "real time" life experiences affecting the on-line world of the lesbian and bisexual Internet mailing lists ?"

Considering thus, the next chapter will contain the theoretical underpinnings¹²
for the dialectical nature of lesbian and/or bisexual identities and lesbian and/or
bisexual spaces.

Chapter Two: Theorizing Gender, Sexuality and Electronic Spaces

The concepts discussed in this chapter address the rather controversial issue of authenticating identity, both in "real life" and via electronic communication by highlighting the type of questions which need to be asked of lesbian and bisexual list subscribers to determine how off-line identities are intermeshed with on-line identities and vice versa.

The main theoretical areas which will be addressed in this chapter are: Electronic Spaces as Geographical Spaces; Essentialism and Social Construction of Gender, and Multiple Understandings of Sexual Identity. Each of these areas focus on the main question of this chapter: "How do the gendered and sexualized spaces of the women-controlled LISTS subvert heterosexual and male control of the Internet?"

The conceptual debates raised in this chapter stem from diversity and tension within and across lesbian and bisexual communities, both on-line and in real time. These happen at different levels including: 1) Individual balance or intertwining of on-line and real time lives; 2) Conflicts or differences of opinion within lesbian and bisexual women's communities; 3) Hostility between heterosexuals and lesbian and bisexual women's communities. Therefore, an investigation of the gendered and sexualized nature of LIST spaces requires examination on many different scales.

This chapter questions how either a sex-differentiated (male/female) or a socially-constructed (masculine/feminine) understanding of sex can be used as a theoretical tool for understanding gender and sexual inequity without denigrating particular groups of women such as masculine women or bisexuals.

Implicit throughout this thesis is an understanding that equity often comes from the potentially liberatory practice of formulating, as bell hooks writes, "...theory from lived reality."¹⁰

Such "lived reality" is both the on-line and real-time experiences of lesbian and bisexual women. As Moss wrote "Experiential analysis subscribes easily to a feminist methodology because it not only fosters self-emancipation but also forms a base for interpretation and explanation."¹¹

For this project, such theory would recognize the multiple functions of lesbian and bisexual women's spaces. Such a space can be a refuge from a homophobic, or otherwise hostile world or a space to plan world change. Theories based in lived reality can provide concrete examples of such multiple functions; they can allow those who participate in the spaces of the LISTs to explain the meanings of their spaces.

It is important, as Bondi wrote, to keep experience as a source of knowledge because it was important in challenging the dominant idea of "woman." "Without this, there is little scope for resisting dominant groups' oppressive definitions of subordinated others."¹² Yet, Bondi also cautions that experiential knowledge can be essentialized.

"Assuming that knowledge flowed directly from experience and that experience ensured the authenticity of knowledge. This implies that, rather than being constructed, experience has the quality of an irreducible essence, which resides in such characteristics as femaleness, middle-class-ness, white-ness and so on."¹³

¹⁰ hooks 1994, 75.

¹¹ Moss 1993, 49.

¹² Bondi 1993, 95.

¹³ Bondi 1993, 95.

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Such an "irreducible essence" has often been critiqued by post-structuralism which, according to Fuss, uses spatial metaphors such as *place* as another form of "essentialism." Bondi wrote "One consequence of the spatial metaphor is that the question 'Who am I?' evident in some versions of identity politics becomes 'Where am I?' In this way, place takes the place of essence."¹⁴

The political significance of identity politics is this very tension between the questioning of experience as a source of knowledge and the ability of experience-based models to challenge the dominant power structures.

Bondi wrote "...the geographical metaphors of contemporary politics must be informed by conceptions of space that recognize place, positions, location and so on as *created*, as *produced*."¹⁵ Therefore, the next section of this chapter will consider the creation, the production of power relations in the electronic spaces of the LISTs.

The Production of Electronic Space

In order to imagine electronic mailing lists as *spaces*, this thesis shall consider a particular theoretical understanding of the structure of space which will be developed in this section. Soja writes,

"Once it becomes accepted that the organization of space is a social product-that it arises from purposeful social practice--then there is no longer a question of its being a separate structure with rules of construction and transformation that are independent from the wider social framework."¹⁶

The LISTs are an example of how social interactions, such as communication amongst LIST subscribers, make up spaces. The communication is the space and the space is the communication. The connections amongst those communicating via this

¹⁴ Bondi 1993, 98.

¹⁵ Bondi 1993, 99.

¹⁶ Soja 1989, 80.

space is the geography of such a space. As Gould writes, "You cannot have a *geography* of anything that is unconnected. No connections, no geography."¹⁷ Certainly "it is the sheer connectivity of things that creates many spaces of interest to a geographer."¹⁸

Massey writes that the concept of *time-space compression* was developed by Harvey and has been used to describe "... something of the sort is going on (and) is marked by the almost obligatory use in the literature of terms and phrases such as speed-up, global village, overcoming spatial barriers, the disruption of horizons and so forth."¹⁹

It is also the power relations implicit in these geographers of time-space compression, these spaces of rapid communication—which must be examined, as described by Massey according to "the power-geometry of it all."²⁰

Communication technologies are not viewed as creating neutral flows or connections. This is because spaces of communication, such as the LISTs, are made up of people who experience inequity in controlling or directing the use of such spaces. As Massey writes,

"Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility: some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it."²¹

For the purposes of this project, this means a recognition that the interconnections created by the LISTs warrants a geographic analysis which articulates inequitable power relations on different fronts. That means thinking about

¹⁷ Gould 1991, 4.

¹⁸ Gould 1991, 10.

¹⁹ Massey 1993, 59.

²⁰ Massey 1993, 61.

²¹ Massey 1993, 61.

heterosexual and male dominance both in on-line and in real-time spaces. It also means identification of inequity amongst LIST participants based on factors such as race, class, size, ability and sexual practice. Finally, it also means remembering that the majority of the world's population, particularly those in poverty or in the countries of the South, are neither using nor benefiting from either the LISTs or the Internet.

A consideration of inequitable power relations would also show some of the ways in which LIST spaces resist, re-work, or subvert the dominant societal forces of heterosexism and patriarchy by allowing persons whose voices are often absent from mainstream forms of mass communication, such as radio and television, to have group conversations about lesbian and bisexual topics with people from all over the world. This capacity enables people, who might never have otherwise met, to get to know one and other, to share each other's joys and difficulties, and to strategize for pro-lesbian and bisexual world change. In particular, it allows people who might not be able to travel due to work, family, or other commitments, the opportunity to interact with people who do not live in their local area and to gain a broader perspective on lesbian and bisexual women's reality.

It also means the questioning of heterosexist assumptions which place the experiences of the male heterosexual as the norm by which all other persons are measured. Therefore, when Gould, in writing about differences of geographic scales in communication, uses as an example the spermatozoa's actions in the cervical canal, the assumptions he makes about the rendering of the cervical canal as "structureless" because it did not facilitate the movement of the sperm, can be questioned for its proclaiming of the sperm's perception as a neutral "reality."²² For

²² Gould 1991, 15.

there are attendant power relationships in the place of meeting between the female cervical canal and the male supplied sperm; there are also overarching societal norms and customs which imply that sperm has a right to be in the cervical canal in the first place. In the context of the space of the LISTS, such assumptions of *compulsory heterosexuality*, as Rich calls it, are questioned and the perception of the sperm is replaced by the perception of the cervix—something with form, shape, and meaning with, without, or in complete oblivion to the existence of sperm.²³

This is not to say that such writing is the domain of Gould alone for, as Rich writes, "The bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible, could be illustrated from many texts..."²⁴

While LIST subscribers as a whole create the space of the LISTS, there are key persons, the LIST owners, moderators, and facilitators who design the system which makes it happen, the women who give of their time and effort to set up the LISTS. They are not typical of the generally-accepted gender norms of computer usage in which men control and understand computer technology. For, as Cockburn and Ormrod write, "Some individuals do respond to a contrary gender symbolism that exists in the interstices of the hegemonic culture, a subversive appeal to shatter gender stereotypes."²⁵

According to Turkle's research on child programmers, there are gendered ways of learning about computers. Turkle writes,

"The lines are not fixed but there is a difference in computer styles which tends to follow gendered lines. Boys view a program as something to master—as something which is either right or wrong. Girls tend to have a 'negotiating' and 'relational' style in which '...the

²³ Rich 1993, 227-54.

²⁴ Rich 1993, 229.

²⁵ Cockburn and Ormrod 1993, 161.

machine is enough alive to deserve a compromise.' For example, if the computer had been slightly misprogrammed and a bug appeared in the running of a machine, the error might be interpreted as a humanlike quirk."²⁶

Building on Turkle's idea, perhaps women have a tendency, for reasons to be discussed further in this chapter, to interact with computers in a way that is distinctly different from how men relate to machines. Yet, because there are certainly differences within and amongst women it makes sense to theoretically unpack the words "woman" and "gender" in considering the ways certain kinds of women, namely lesbian and bisexual women, interact with computers. Therefore, the lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists of the Internet (LISTs) will be considered in this chapter.

While the spaces of the electronic mailing lists are indeed creating international, long distance, and cross-border conversations, they are by no means addressing cross-border or internal inequities. Some Internet theorists see the possibility of electronic communication as a proponent of democracy which will allow all persons equal opportunities to speak to each other, to governments, and to businesses.²⁷ Yet, it must be remembered that the majority of the world's population does not, and may never have, Internet access. This is simply because everyone does not have the money to pay for it. Many portions of the world, such as most of Africa and many poorer countries, lack the infrastructure necessary to purchase and therefore access such technology.²⁸

Even within the wealthier countries, such as the United States, where Internet connections are readily available to almost anyone with a telephone, there are still

²⁶ Turkle 1984 110-115.

²⁷ For examples see Rheingold 1991 and Doctor 1994.

²⁸ Crow and Tauscher 1995 write on p. 18 "the Internet reflects western cultural, social, political, and economic values."

huge numbers of people who lack the money, technical skills, literacy, or self confidence to access the Internet. In particular, one might suppose that people with very little disposable income, a high proportion of whom are women, recent immigrants, or persons of color, do not have the money to spend on an Internet connection. Likewise, many of those same persons might lack the technical skills necessary to use even a public computer lab to access a free, or low-cost version of the Internet, such as the community-sponsored Freenets. In particular, studies of computer usage have shown that men tend to feel comfortable and confident around computers while women are more likely to avoid computers all together or to use them to complete stereotypical female work such as data entry and word processing. Therefore, when one considers the Internet, it would be fair to say that its users are predominantly, but certainly not entirely, white, middle class, men with at least some computer confidence. As Lennox writes, "Women are still a relatively rare species on-line."²⁹

Literacy is a particularly important consideration in determining who is participating in the electronic mailing lists of the Internet. If a person cannot read, or if their computer is not equipped with an automated reader such as those designed for the blind, that person cannot use the Internet. Most (but not all) of the information contained on a web site is in the form of pictures and text which require some literacy to access.

For the type of Internet technology to be considered in this project, the electronic mailing list, literacy is an absolute requirement. One must also be able to read and type in a language which is used on the mailing list. There are many languages used but English is particularly dominant because many Internet users and

²⁹ Lennox 1996, 68.

providers reside in English-speaking countries. Therefore, the cultural dominance of ²¹ English on the Internet could be considered on par with its cultural dominance in film, television, and print media. It is a product of the worldwide economic system and technological power of the English speaking countries, particularly the United States.³⁰ While aspects such as U.S. cultural imperialism would certainly be an interesting topic to research, regrettably, such work is beyond the scope of this thesis and therefore must be left for others. The focus of this thesis is therefore limited to those lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists where English is the predominant language.

Beyond basic literacy or language differences, words are still very important in the context of the electronic mailing lists. Mailing lists are a forum for people to exchange ideas via the written word. Individual list subscribers compose messages and transmit them electronically to a central computer which then distributes them to each list subscriber. Words are the way that the mailing list participants execute technical commands and express their thoughts and emotions. People also identify themselves and their ideas. It is also important to remember that words are what people use to express their sexuality via the electronic mailing list. Potential subscribers to lesbian or bisexual mailing lists (LISTs) are usually asked to describe, via written words, why they want to join a lesbian or bisexual women's mailing list. The reasons are then analyzed by the list moderator to determine if that person should be allowed to join the list. Most list moderators look for linguistic signs that the potential subscriber is indeed female and self-identifies as either "lesbian" or "bisexual." Some administrators also use their technological skills to check at least the most basic aspects of the list subscriber's identity. "I try to keep a sharp eye,"

³⁰ Menzies 1991, 8 citing Hartley, Noonan and Metcalf 1987, 120 writes "the United States dominates the world database industry. It produces two-thirds of the world's databases and two-thirds of all online economic and financial databases."

writes one list administrator, "and I use some list admin. tools to learn a lot more about people than they think I can discover."³¹

Other list administrators do not want to check the identities of potential subscribers. "If someone says they're a woman I have to believe them," writes one lesbian list moderator, "I don't have the time to police people's gender identities. For that reason my list is open to all women, including transgendered women."³²

These differences amongst LIST moderators make the boundaries of the lesbian and bisexual spaces of the electronic mailing lists highly permeable in some places and, in others, almost impossible to enter. Likewise, the personal advertising strategies of the LIST moderator and the LIST participants make the existence of some LISTs very visible and others almost invisible both to heterosexuals or even lesbians and bisexual women. Some LISTs are so underground that members are found via word of mouth (or computer) only.

Not only does the list moderator set the policy for who can and cannot subscribe to her list, she also arranges for a real-life location for the electronic reception and transmission of messages on the mailing list. This means that the moderator finds an Internet Service Provider (ISP) who will dedicate some space on his or her computer for the software needed to facilitate the electronic mailing list. She must either pay for such a service out of her own pocket or find an ISP who will allow her to set up her list for free.

Another consideration is the physical location of the list's ISP. Currently, a majority of lesbian lists are based in the United States. If the United States were to decide that the electronic transmission of words or images related to lesbianism or bisexuality was in violation of U.S. law, then a majority of the world's lesbian and

³¹ Survey Response.

³² Survey Response.

bisexual women's mailing lists would be threatened. If lists were scrutinized and found to be in violation of law, the person or organization who owned the ISP through which the list was facilitated could face criminal charges. While this is not happening currently, it is an important consideration for any ISP which hosts lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists.

Thus linguistic and technical literacy are equally essential pre-requisites to participation in lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. List subscribers must know how to read the instructions for LIST subscription and posting. Subscribers must also have a basic comfort level with computers or at least the willingness to learn about new aspects of computing technology in order to get an electronic mail account and then subscribe to an electronic mailing list.

Another important part of accessing lesbian and bisexual spaces, both real-life and electronic, is affinity or at least recognition of words such as *lesbian* or *bisexual*. The meanings of such words are debated and contested in many women's circles. There are generally accepted definitions of what the words *lesbian* and *bisexual* mean. Just as the words have no fixed meanings in real life, so they are subject to differing interpretations amongst electronic mailing list moderators and subscribers. The list moderators, in particular, are in key positions, akin to that of being a bouncer in a virtual bar, to determine who will and who will not access lesbian and/or bisexual women's electronic spaces.

While certainly many lesbians find out about mailing lists from friends, partners, or others, another kind of literacy which is particularly relevant to this project is what could be labeled *lesbian and/or bisexual cultural literacy*. This type of literacy means that a potential subscriber not only has the ability to read English and use computers but also the ability to interpret lesbian and bisexual codes and symbols in order to find the virtual location (the subscription information) for lesbian

and/or bisexual women's mailing lists. The danger with such codes is that they can
serve as another way of excluding those lesbians or bisexual women who are
unaware of or who have rejected such codes. 24

This type of literacy can be used in a number of ways. On a practical level, one can do a key word search via a World Wide Web search engine by typing in a words like "lesbian" or "bisexual" and "Internet" to find some lesbian or bisexual women's mailing lists. Other mailing lists are harder to find and require that a potential subscriber know enough about lesbian literature, history, or popular culture to do key word searches. Still other mailing lists are impossible to find. These are invitation-only mailing lists which are usually only open to those who have demonstrated their linguistic ability elsewhere and impressed someone enough to be invited to join an exclusive list.

It is important to remember that categories such as lesbian and bisexual are sexual categories whose meaning is contingent on the existence of a heterosexual category. As Butler writes,

"...identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear at political occasions under the sign of lesbian, but that I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies."³³

For the purposes of this project, such an undefined concept makes sense because it subverts and destabilizes any kind of regulation of lesbian and bisexual identity. And, by doing so, it opens up a space for theorizing the many differences in sexual identity amongst LIST subscribers.

³³ Butler 1993, 308.

Computer-mediated communication allows people to express their thoughts and ideas without interruption. As Perolle reported, this is quite different from real-life where men interrupt women eighty percent of the time. "By interfering with our ability to tell if we are conversing with a man or a woman, most computer-mediated communication systems change the societal norm of interruption of women by men."³⁴ Therefore, when women are present and have ambiguous genders, computer-mediated communication changes communication. How might women's presence and/or gender differences on the Internet be explained?

It has been observed that male Internet users probably outnumber female Internet users by a ratio of 3:1. Of course, no one can be certain of this estimate because there are no comprehensive sets of data about Internet users and even if there were, they would become outdated as fast as they were published. Yet, Internet scholars agree that the world of the Internet is largely populated by men. As Barlow says of the Internet "present, but far less in abundance than in the physical world...are women."³⁵

Considering that more men than women utilize technology such as the Internet, it is not surprising that differences between male and female experiences have been central to feminist studies of computing technology. In particular, a substantial number of feminist projects have focused on how technological changes affect women's paid labor. As Wajcman says "The study of technologies in the context of paid work has been and still is the main subject of research on technological change."³⁶ The gendered effects of office automation, the sex-

³⁴ Perolle 1991, 356.

³⁵ Barlow 1995, 53.

³⁶ Wajcman 1995, p. 190-2.

stereotyping of skills, cost-comparisons between female and male labour are all examples of feminist studies of technology. A smaller thread of feminist studies of technology includes debates over reproductive technologies, domestic technologies, and home-based communications technologies.³⁷

By comparison, the gendered nature of the Internet has received less attention. This could be because some Internet scholars assert that old "barriers" such as gender and race become less important in computer-mediated communication. As Rheingold wrote "Because we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public."³⁸ While this is certainly true, it does not address a general underlying assumption that the generic "person" is a white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual citizen of the United States, that is unless he/she chooses to identify his/herself as something different. Just by being the majority, the male Internet user is considered by much of the computing industry to be a "typical user" while the female Internet user is more unusual, deviant, an "other." That is unless she is using a word processing program in which case she fits the feminine norm of women as secretaries.

This minority position gives most women few options. She can either assimilate with the male majority or she can expend considerable energy in verbally disagreeing with many heterosexual, male Internet users who will often perceive her as sexual fare. As Loader says, "...men begin to "talk" to you about a subject (say bull terriers) and the next thing you know they are telling you about the group sex they had with two lesbians the night before."³⁹

³⁷ Wajcman 1995, p. 194.

³⁸ Rheingold, 1995, 64.

³⁹ Loader writes in Gilbert and Kile, 1996.

Shade writes "Harassment can take many forms, and it has occurred in both public forums and private e-mail. It can be subtle, such as personal questions directed to a women; or blatant, such as women receiving sexual propositions via e-mail."⁴⁰

The remaining option for women is to create pockets of women-centred Internet space. Admission to these women's spaces, in particular those of the lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, is based on a complex understanding of difference as viewed through the lenses of both *sex* and *gender*. Therefore, this section will contain an explanation incorporating both *sex* and *gender* differences in considering the women-centred spaces of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. The main idea for consideration in explaining such differences is that neither a sex-differentiated nor socially-constructed concept of gender is adequate in and of itself to theorize about lesbian and bisexual women's experiences on the Internet. Any concept of gender must go beyond subsuming lesbians and bisexuals under the categories of either "female" or "woman" to theorize lesbian and bisexual as more than just another variation of "woman." Lesbians and bisexuals can be distinctly and simultaneously "woman" and "non-woman." That is, lesbians and bisexuals can interpret and define the concept of "gender" to fit their individual needs at a particular time and place.

Male/Female Sex Differences

Considering that Internet users are physically located at millions of computer terminals around the world, how can one ascertain the sex of a particular user or a group of Internet users? Some computers are equipped with voice or audio communication devices which can convey visual or audio cues but these communication devices are not widely used. One could also look at a person's name

⁴⁰ Shade 1993, 7.

and try to decide if it is a male or a female name. This approach is very problematic for two reasons. First, the person could have an androgynous name or second, the person could be using a pseudonym. One could even look suspiciously for communication which seemed "masculine" in style or content.

An important theoretical question arises when one tries to verify the sex of an Internet user. Is there a specific kind of femininity which a person must convey in order to be a woman on the Internet? Is there an essential tie between the characteristics and behavior of this femininity and the biological sex of the person involved? Could a person who is biologically male take on feminine gender cues and become a woman on the Internet?

Gender Difference-Masculine, Feminine

Consideration of the words "men" and "woman" have become increasingly important in recent years. What was once asserted as a biological given, has been re-structured to include learned characteristics or behaviors. The biological categories of *male* and *female* have been enriched with an understanding of the *masculine* and the *feminine*. Pro-feminist men are described by Jackson as "...men who praise the 'formidable' intelligence of their feminist friends."⁴¹

In recent years, it has been shown that not all men possess masculine values and not all women have feminine values. This has led some feminists to a shift from sex-differentiated categories of "male" and "female" to categories based on the socially constructed categories of "masculine" and "feminine." The idea that males have essentially masculine traits while females have essentially feminine traits is replaced with the idea that persons of either gender can have masculine traits, feminine traits or both masculine and feminine traits. Men can reveal or intellectually

⁴¹ Jackson 1995, 108.

develop their nurturing, cooperative, femininity. Men can also recognize the existence²⁹ of systemic gender inequity and work for equity. As Edwards wrote "many men are more at home in what I have described as 'women's' culture."⁴²

This understanding of gender allows both men and women to make alliances based on feminine values. These values promote a world where people do not oppress and dominate one another. Instead, mutual respect and cooperation is held as the ideal for which all persons, regardless of gender, must strive. The feminine characteristics of cooperation, emotional connection, and subjectivity are revered while masculine characteristics such as dominance, control and objectivity are denigrated.⁴³

Sex, Gender and Computing Technology

Instead of stemming from a socially-constructed (masculine/feminine) approach, the earlier studies of women and computers were based on the sex differentiated model. Some studies said that computers were just another tool created by men to reinforce patriarchy and the systemic inequity between men and women. Women were often using a word processor or working on a computer manufacturing assembly line rather than programming computers or using the Internet. Keller writes about these gender, science, and technology literatures, "Especially problematic was the slippage it invited between 'women' and 'gender.'" ⁴⁴

⁴² Edwards 1995, 282.

⁴³ Greenbaum (1990) writes that the masculine expectation of logic over feeling caused her to "quiet my heart and prove my worth only with my mind." She felt that she "paid a price" because she had to leave her emotional side at the door in order to be considered successful (p. 16). Wajcman (1995) writes there are those feminists who argue that Western technology itself embodies patriarchal values and that its project is the domination and control of women and nature. This approach finds political expression in the cultural feminism and the eco-feminism of the 1980's, which calls for a new feminist technology based on women's values (p. 189). Frissen (1992) says that men have had more control over computers because they are located in the public sphere which is more male than female-oriented.

⁴⁴ Keller 1995, 84.

One particular area of woman-gender slippage involved those gender and technology scholars who ascribed certain essential characteristics to women in describing the problems women have with technology. Franklin wrote in 1985, that technological values differ from women's values, and the technological values of "order, structure, planning, control, access, and efficiency" differ from what women value: coping with the unexpected, diversity of skills, personal loyalty, and personal experience.⁴⁵

In writing about gender differences in computer networking, writers such as Benston emphasized gendered linguistic differences. "Technology is a means, or a 'language' for action and self-expression with consequent gender differences in the ability to use this language."⁴⁶ "Men and women do not, however, communicate as equals about technology," wrote Benston, "The information flow is almost entirely one-sided: men may explain a technological matter to women but they do not discuss it with them: that they do with other men."⁴⁷

Such explanations as those given by Franklin and Benston attribute certain traits and values to a particular sex. This process, often called essentialism, takes socially-constructed (masculine/feminine) gender values (i.e.. "cooperation is good") and ties them to persons of a particular sex (i.e.. women). The resulting idea is that a particular sex has particular traits and values (i.e.. "women value cooperation").

Other studies of gender and technology carefully describe the difference between sex and gender. For example, there are those who view the computer as a machine which reflects masculine values such as dominance and control. It is argued that masculinity is reinforced through technological competence. As Wajcman writes:

⁴⁵ Franklin 1985, p.6.

⁴⁶ Benston 1988, 26.

⁴⁷ Benston 1988, 26

"Technology in this sense is more than a set of artifacts; it includes the physical and mental know-how to make use of those things. Appropriating these sorts of knowledge and practices is integral to the constitution of male gender identity. Men affirm their masculinity through technical competence and posit women, by contrast, as technologically ignorant and incompetent. That our present technical culture expresses and consolidates relations among men is an important factor in explaining the continuing exclusion of women. Indeed as a result of these social practices, women may attach very different meanings and values to technology. To emphasize the ways in which the symbolic representation of technology is sharply gendered is not to deny that real differences do exist between women and men in relation to technology. Nor is it to imply that all men are technologically skilled or knowledgeable. Rather, it is the dominant cultural ideal of masculinity that has this intimate bond with technology."⁴⁸

Wacjman is quoted at length because she so succinctly shows that men who can master computers are affirming their masculinity, something which is highly valued in dominant North American culture of the late twentieth century. She also says that this affirmation of masculinity "posits women as technologically ignorant and incompetent." Wacjman also mentions that women might therefore associate "different meanings and values with technology." One of those meanings might be that the culture of masculinity is unsuited for women. According to the dominant Western culture, women should be feminine. The word feminine can have many meanings but, if it is considered in relation to gendered understandings of technology, it means to be baffled and overwhelmed by computers. Therefore, a woman who has mastered a computer has expressed a masculine aspect of herself. She has gone against the culturally sanctioned norm of femininity. She is a masculine female.

Turkle also wrote about how masculine computer culture did not support female hackers. She notes that the predominant culture of masculinity amongst

⁴⁸ Wacjman 1995, 201-2.

hackers helps men, not women, become hackers. "There are few women hackers." writes Turkle, "This is a male world. Though hackers would deny that theirs is a macho culture, the preoccupation with winning and of subjecting oneself to increasingly violent tests makes their world particularly male in spirit, particularly unfriendly to women."⁴⁹

Yet, when the values ascribed to femininity are revered while the values ascribed to masculinity are denigrated, an interesting dilemma is presented with the arrival on the computing scene of technologically competent, and therefore technologically masculine, females. According to a sex-differentiated (male/female) understanding of technology, she might be thought of as female and therefore in need of extra help and assistance in gaining technological skills. Yet, according to a socially constructed (masculine/feminine) consideration of gender and technology, she is not part of the feminine masses. She is mastering the machine. She might even be mastering other women. Where does she fit into gendered understandings of technology?

Masculine Women

The socially constructed (masculine/feminine) concept of gender recognizes that if men can be feminine, then women can be aggressive, domineering, and oppress other people. A non-essentialized understanding of gender opens the possibility that all women are not inherently feminine. Women are not essentially feminine. Yet, it does not necessarily know what to make of female masculinity. Where femininity is revered, men are encouraged to develop their femininity. Yet, how can the masculine woman fit into a gendered feminist picture?

⁴⁹ Turkle 1984, 210.

While there are certainly many variations and interpretations of female masculinity, only two concepts will be considered for the purposes of this thesis, the *lesbian* and the *butch*.

The Lesbian

The values of masculinity and femininity differ based on place, ethnicity, class, religion, and culture. They also vary historically according to the juxtaposition of sexual identity and class.

The word "lesbian" is historically specific to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When it was first used by the sexologists of the nineteenth century, it referred to sexual inverters otherwise thought of as masculine women. These were women who were thought to be mentally ill because they did not want to conform to rigid standards of femininity.⁵⁰ She might want to wear trousers, smoke a pipe, favor athletics, and have sexual relations with women. Women who had the unfortunate diagnoses of "lesbian" might be forced to undergo shock treatment or genital mutilation. It was not until the 1970s that respected institutions such as the American Psychiatric Association agreed that lesbian was not a mental illness.⁵¹

By that time, popular usage of the term "lesbian" had shifted from the sexologists' idea of lesbians as masculine women to the more action oriented idea of lesbians as women who have sex with other women. This fairly recent definition of "lesbian" was not just based upon the action of having sexual relations. It was also based on self-identification with the word "lesbian." Certainly there were and are many women who have sex with other women who cannot or will not call themselves "lesbians." It could be because they think of themselves as bisexuals or

⁵⁰ Groneman 1994, 356. Says that physicians in the late nineteenth century "tended to group all sexualized women together: nymphomaniacs, lesbians, and prostitutes." p.355. She also writes "The late nineteenth-century medical model of biologically based gender roles meant that women who stepped outside the norm were assumed to be diseased."

⁵¹ See Gilhooey and Blackbridge, 1985 for a first person account of such treatment.

heterosexual women who occasionally have sex with women. Or they might be homosexual women who just do not like the word "lesbian." Whatever the reason, for many, the word "lesbian" still brings to mind the mentally ill or the masculine women, both of which are still the subject of many negative myths, stereotypes, and sometimes violence in late nineteenth century North America.⁵²

In thinking about the word *lesbian*, it is important to remember that she might be of any race, class, religion, ethnicity, ability. She could have any job, live on any street corner, or be born into any family. The majority of the world's lesbians are probably so invisible to heterosexuals, and to some degree to other lesbians, that little is known of them. Yet one thing is certain. Anytime a woman chooses to do something the dominant society deems to be masculine, especially if she develops a relationship and mastery of a machine, someone will wonder if she is indeed a lesbian.

The Butch

The situation of *the lesbian* can be further understood by considering a particular lesbian, *the butch*. "Before the 1970s," write Kennedy and Davis, "their presence was unmistakable in all working-class lesbian communities: The butch projected the masculine image of her particular time period—at least regarding dress and mannerisms."⁵³

Differing from the mostly feminine middle and owning class lesbian communities of the 1950s, many (but not all) North American working class lesbians sometimes were divided into gendered sexual identities known as *femme* and *butch*. Most femmes looked like heterosexual women. Femmes wore dresses, make up, and

⁵² Card 1995, 11. Writes that the word *lesbian* is sometimes rejected because its short form *lezzie* has often been used as a term of ridicule by outside observers.

⁵³ Kennedy and Davis 1993, 5.

had a feminine hairstyle and she generally acted according to the norms and customs³⁵ for women of the time.⁵⁴

As a sharp contrast to the femme, butches were masculine women who wore men's clothes and acted "mannish" by romantically and sexually pursuing femmes. Yet, the butch differed from sexologists' ideas of a sexual invert in that many butches do not desire to be men; instead, they are masculine women. As Kennedy and Davis write about working class lesbian history, it was the masculine-looking, bar-fighting woman who made lesbians visible in the urban landscape. It was these women who transgressed gender norms which caused the clashes with the police which led to the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s. "Butches defied convention by usurping male privilege in appearance and sexuality, and with their femmes, outraged society by creating a romantic and sexual unit within which women were not under male control."⁵⁵

Just as the butch was (is) the lesbian most often harassed by police officers or singled out by straight men looking for a street fight, she is also the woman who regularly defies gendered stereotypes of what women or even lesbians should be. Her very existence breaks with societal convention; therefore, it is not surprising that butches of the 1990s might choose to break other gender conventions and acquire stereotypically male skills such as computer repair or programming.

The butch is also a visible symbol of female to female sexual desire. As de Lauretis wrote,

"Gender reversal in the mannish lesbian, then, was not merely a claim to male social privilege or a sad pretense to male sexual behavior, but...an assertion of sexual agency and feelings, but autonomous from

⁵⁴ Kennedy and Davis (1993) discuss Butch/Femme in a historical context. Bell, et al. discuss a more current version of the femme, the lipstick lesbian.

⁵⁵ Kennedy and Davis 1993, 6

men, a reclaiming of erotic drives directed toward women, of a desire for women not to be confused with woman identification."⁵⁶

Many lesbians of the 1990s do not think of themselves as *butch*, per se, but do value persons who self-identify as *butch* and the butch-like acquisition of stereotypically masculine skills such as auto repair and computer programming. For some, this valuing of butch-y skills might be a sign of respect for women who are willing to take the societal risks associated with acquiring a masculine skill. For others, notably many lesbian-feminists, it is desirable for women to possess skills which can release them from reliance upon men. Others probably do not think about women's technological competence in the context of "butch-ness" or lesbian-feminism but can appreciate a woman who has the technical skills necessary to earn a solid paycheck, especially amongst female couples, who, on average, earn considerably less than male-female or male-male couples.

In the context of this study of lesbian and bisexual women's spaces in the mid 1990s, the masculine lesbian (or bisexual) *butch*, the feminine lesbian (or bisexual) *femme*, and the androgynous lesbian (or bisexual) all make up important and vital aspects of lesbian on-line culture. Of course there are many differences within and amongst lesbians and bisexuals over the meaning of *butch*, *femme*, and *androgen*. Yet, it can be concurred that there are indeed many variations on what it means to be lesbian or bisexual. In the case of some, it can even include a female's rejection of both the words *woman* and *feminine* without wanting to be a man.⁵⁷

Wittig writes "The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this

⁵⁶ de Lauretis 1993, 146.

⁵⁷ Case (1993) 294 writes of *butch/femme* as examples of "the kinds of self-determination the feminist subject demands."

goes further than the refusal of the *role* 'woman.' It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man."⁵⁸

Thus, a study of lesbians and/or bisexuals cannot assume that lesbians and bisexual women will fall under either the conceptual categories of *woman* or the *feminine*. This is not to say that some lesbians and bisexual women might not be adequately theorized by thinking of them as *women*. Surely many have faced the same kind of difficulties such as discrimination in the workplace or sexism in the classroom. Yet, the critical component missing in a gendered understanding of such a problem is that an underlying difficulty for women in masculine fields, such as science and technology, is homophobia. Valentine writes that because public spaces are appropriated by heterosexuals, lesbians are fearful of expressing a lesbian sexual identity because "they recognize that they are likely to encounter hostility, rejection, and violence at work, in the community, and in the neighborhood."⁵⁹ Women who look masculine or who do masculine work, be they heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian, face the possibility that they will be perceived as lesbian and be received with the hostility and attendant homophobia so common in many lesbians' daily lives.⁶⁰

A gendered understanding of computer usage must also recognize that lesbians and bisexual women often cannot be amalgamated with heterosexual women, yet they are not completely different from heterosexual women. Women in masculine professions, particularly masculine lesbians in masculine professions, face great challenges in a heterosexually dominated world. Yet, the very same women are often revered amongst lesbians for their intelligence and strength.

⁵⁸ Wittig 1992, 13.

⁵⁹ Valentine 1994, 8.

⁶⁰ Calhoun, 1995, 22. writes of butch women "In their power to generate the question 'To which sex does s/he belong?'" invite a reading of themselves as lesbians.

Therefore, the daily lived realities of a masculine lesbian in the computing world might simultaneously reflect her place as: 1) a woman who must deal with on-line sexism as do other women and 2) a lesbian who is often an admired part of the lesbian and bisexual sub-culture or co-culture.

In this context of both hostility from the larger society and support from within lesbian communities, it is not surprising that many lesbians have chosen to go on-line and create women-centred communities where lesbians and bisexuals are in the majority. The next section, *Sexuality*, contains information designed to deepen an understanding of gendered, sexualized electronic spaces by articulating some of the differences amongst lesbians and bisexuals and how these tensions affect the configuration of lesbian and bisexual women's on-line spaces.

Sexuality

In articulating a theoretical approach toward *lesbian* and bisexual electronic spaces, it should be kept in mind that there are no universal definitions of such words. That is not to say that these words should be discarded and replaced with something else. The words *lesbian* and *bisexual* can be valuable starting points for on-going conversation about and re-definition of both gender and sexuality. As Phelan writes of recent lesbian theories, "While retaining 'lesbian' as a meaningful category, they have worked against the reification of lesbians and toward views of lesbianism as a critical site of gender deconstruction rather than as a unitary experience with a singular political meaning."⁶¹

Dyke Seriality

In writing of gender as seriality, a concept she bases on Satre's writing of class as seriality, Young states that gender can be thought of as a seriality, that is,

⁶¹ Phelan, 1994, xvii in reference to Anzaldúa, Fuss, Butler, and de Lauretis.

"a collective whose members are unified passively by the relation their actions have³⁹ to material objects of practico-inert histories."⁶² That means to be part of the seriality of "woman" or "femininity" is not to have a common identity but certain issues or experiences in common..

In the case of women, an area of commonality, or seriality, is to have biologically similar bodies and a set of rules called "enforced heterosexuality." The pervasive values of heterosexuality combine forces with culturally-sanctioned masculinity and reinforce the idea that North American men should be masculine and aggressive in many ways, including sexually. This renders all female bodies in the common position of having their bodies presumed available to heterosexual male desire. Even those bodies which are not heterosexual bodies are subject to this experience, even though the results of such evaluation can differ markedly for women who do not meet the dominant standard of beauty, feminine gestures, or heterosexual attractiveness. As a result, masculine women, particularly masculine lesbians, suffer the greatest amounts of societal disapproval for as Young writes "The assumptions and practices of heterosexuality define the meaning (and the value) of bodies."⁶³

Young's ideas of gender as seriality allow for a feminist concept of gender which does not universalize experiences as women or men. It also allows for an almost infinite number of series to be used to describe coalition building around particular issues. Perhaps, if this concept of seriality were used to describe lesbians and bisexual women then the concept of, for lack of a better word, dyke seriality could be described. A dyke can be lesbian, bisexual, or can refuse identification with

⁶² Young, 1994, 728.

⁶³ Young, 1994, 729. My parenthetical addition.

either. Dykes have no universal shared experiences but have knowingly questioned the societal rules of enforced heterosexuality.

This idea of dyke seriality would adequately theorize lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists because there are great differences amongst electronic list subscribers. The only thing that they have in common is the desire to subscribe to a lesbian and/or bisexual women's list. Beyond that, other commonalities such as the ability to read and operate a computer, may be supposed but can still differ greatly from person to person.

A problem with using dyke seriality as a theory for this project is that many lesbians still subscribe to certain lesbian-feminist ideas which reject any affiliation with bisexuals or heterosexual women. Therefore, before this idea of dyke seriality is developed any further, tensions between lesbian-feminism and bisexuality must be addressed.

Lesbian-feminism

Lesbian theorists have noted that the conceptual category of "woman" is problematic whether in its sex-differentiated or gendered form. In the 1970s, when a sex-differentiated understanding of "woman" was popular amongst feminists, the highly visible lesbian-feminist movement popularized the idea that lesbianism could grow out of feminism. It allowed feminist women who had previously identified as heterosexual to become lesbians. It also generally rejected anyone who was not a woman-born-woman; that is, male-to-female transsexuals were not accepted as lesbians.

Lesbian-feminism "centred the movement upon a rejection of men and patriarchal society. Many of its proponents claimed that gender (here meaning sex-differentiated gender) is the primary basis of lesbian identity, and argued that power

was something imposed from without, by men."⁶⁴ If there were any problems in a lesbian-feminist organization, it was often asserted that these problems stemmed from male influences because women were naturally cooperative and peace-loving.

"In a lesbian-feminist framework," writes Armstrong, "a woman's commitment to feminism can be measured by the strength of her commitment to women, which is sometimes evaluated by how thoroughly she manages to exclude men from her life."⁶⁵ This exclusion was, of course, especially important in sexual matters.

Most lesbian-feminists adopted a feminist dress code which visually differentiated themselves from non-feminist women. The mainstream fashions of the time, high heels, skirts, and make-up were criticized as elements of patriarchy which placed all women as subjects of male desire. By refusing to conform to societal expectations for female dress, the lesbian-feminist was reminding her world that she did not want to be a subject of male desire. The lesbian-feminist also differentiated herself from those lesbians who practiced stereotypical masculine and feminine gender roles, often called butch-femme roles, by dismissing them as imitations of patriarchy. Women who took on the role of femme were criticized for making their lesbian lives invisible while the masculine woman, the butch, was rejected because it was modeled after the male enemy of lesbian-feminism.

Lesbian writers Kennedy and Davis suppose that lesbian-feminist's rejection of butch-femme roles "...seems to be a response to the explicit sexuality these communities expressed through butch-femme roles. From the beginning, lesbian feminists tended to downplay sexuality between women in an attempt to free lesbians of the stigma of sexual deviance."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Stein 1991, 44.

⁶⁵ Armstrong, 1995, 201.

⁶⁶ Kennedy and Davis 1993, 11.

Lesbian-feminism was never a unified, pan-North American movement because⁴² it was made up mostly of white, middle-class women who articulated lesbian-feminism as "the expression of the aspirations of *all* women."⁶⁷ Working class and women of color criticized this notion that one piece of a person's identity, that is the lesbian identity, could be deemed more important than other aspects of the person, such as race and class. According to Stein, "A series of challenges, largely from within lesbian communities themselves, have shaken many of the ordering principles of lesbian-feminism."⁶⁸

Although the often rigid ideas of lesbian-feminism were, and continue to be, oppressive toward many different groups of people, they did popularize the idea that women had *choices* as to which gender and sexual roles they chose for themselves. Women could *choose* to reject a prescribed norm of femininity and heterosexuality. What was missing in this analysis was a recognition that social stratification based on race, class, ethnicity, amongst others, allowed widely differing degrees of choice. Working class secretaries had to retain the feminine norms for dress or risk losing their jobs. Also, the middle-class white ideals of lesbian-feminism, by either implicitly or explicitly placing the experiences of middle-class white women as normative were replicating oppressive structures.⁶⁹

The lesbian-feminist utilized a sex-differentiated understanding of gender to define the "lesbian" as a biological, woman-born-woman who has sex with other biological woman-born-women and who calls herself a lesbian. The idea of whether a transsexual, a person who has had or is in the process of changing his or her

⁶⁷ Stein 1991, 45.

⁶⁸ Stein 1991, 35.

⁶⁹ Ross (1995) writes of 1970's Toronto area lesbian feminism.

biological sex can be a lesbian, is rejected by lesbian-feminism and is still the subject⁴³ of heated controversy in many women-only spaces.

Calhoun challenges a tie between lesbianism and feminism when she asks "Can one theorize about lesbians within a feminist frame?"⁷⁰

She asks this because she views the use of a conceptual category 'woman' as a possible gender closet to lesbians. This is because the very existence of the *lesbian* was created by the early sexologists' thinking of lesbians as neither women nor men. Calhoun writes,

"If thinking the lesbian depends on thinking a position outside of 'women' and 'man,' then lesbian representation cannot be accomplished under the sign 'women.' Positioned in a lineup of womanly differences in race, class, and so forth *lesbian* difference cannot appear. In short, 'women' may operate as a lesbian closet."⁷¹

This is a problem because the subsuming of the lesbian under the sign of 'woman' diffuses the gender-disruptive power of non-man and non-woman. The lesbian is considered a woman and is therefore compared, often unfavourably so, to the dominant heterosexual standard of what it means to be a woman. "Rather than being perpetually accused of being a woman who imitates men," writes Calhoun, "the lesbian could claim to be a distinct gender."⁷²

This distinct third gender could subvert the categories of feminine and masculine to make room for all those people who are both or neither. In thinking about lesbian cyberspaces, this third gender would mean that the biological sex of people in lesbian Internet spaces would become a non-issue, for the sex of the person could never be ascertained anyway. The lesbian who self-identifies as a

⁷⁰ Calhoun 1995, 7.

⁷¹ Calhoun 1995, 9.

⁷² Calhoun 1995, 28. My parenthetical addition.

lesbian is a lesbian, meaning the taking of the lesbian signifier supplants biological sex or sexual acts in determining who is a lesbian in Internet spaces.

This idea of third gender thinking is really appealing for a lesbian-specific study because it shows the lesbian as someone whose self-definition is distinct from the heterosexuality of the dominant culture's ideal woman. Calhoun writes,

"If feminism is about women, then lesbians cannot be adequately theorized within that frame. If instead feminism is about women, *and* the open space of possibilities signified by "the third sex," then lesbians can be theorized within the feminist frame."⁷³

Bisexuality

One of the problems with thinking about lesbianism as a third sex is that bisexuality must be included in that third sex or placed in a fourth sex of its own. The problem with amalgamating lesbian and bisexuality is both political and practical. It is political, in that many lesbians do not want to be placed in the same category as bisexuals because bisexuals are seen to be either immature lesbians or persons who take the pleasures of being with women along with the societal privileges of being with men. For practical purposes, it is difficult to place lesbians and bisexuals in the same conceptual categories because their lived realities might be vastly different. What, beyond a linguistic affinity, do a monogamous heterosexually-married woman who, for whatever reason, calls herself "bisexual" and a non monogamous politically active, woman-who-sleeps-with-women lesbian have in common?

Yet, the problems with creating a fourth sex for bisexuals are two-fold: First, it is extremely problematic to define categories based on the differences between lesbians and bisexuals. It is not something which can be based on sexual activity because lesbians can have sex with men and still call themselves lesbians while

⁷³ Calhoun 1995, 31

bisexual women can have sex exclusively with women and still retain a bisexual identity. Second, such a commonality amongst bisexuals thereby privileges sexual identity over other aspects of identity. Certainly some bisexual women may have more in common with straight women or lesbians of a particular race or class, than they do with bisexual women of differing race or class. These commonalities might be based on similar life experiences. They might also be based on particular activities or gender identities.

Some of the electronic mailing lists examined here were specifically focused on lesbian or bisexual issues but many of the lists were open to both and most of the electronic lists had both lesbian and bisexual subscribers. This project equally considered the experiences of lesbians and bisexuals; therefore, the gender theories utilized for this project must privilege neither lesbians nor bisexual women.

The topic of bisexuality leads directly to questions about the validity of sex differentiated versus socially constructed understandings of gender. Although there is no singular bisexual identity, many bisexual women believe that love and sexual attraction are not contingent on the sex of a person. These bisexual women say that the traits they seek in a person are socially-constructed and can be found in men or women. Some bisexual women report that they have a distinct preference for men or women while others say that they are equally attracted to persons of either sex.

Kaplan, a bisexual theorist writes,

"By seeing bisexuals as a group separate from hetero- and homosexuals, one can see that having a sexuality that is not predicated on gender distinctions may be fundamentally different from one that is. Bisexuality can be seen as different from, not a combination of, an exclusive attraction to men and an exclusive attraction to women."⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Kaplan, 1995, 274.

Bisexual theorists state that bisexual identification might or might not be based on sexual activity. Evidence for this is that there are persons who have been in life-long heterosexual partnerships who choose to call themselves bisexual. There are also many persons who have had either sex or love or both with males and females and yet they do not choose to take the label of "bisexual." It could be asserted that reluctance to call one's self "bisexual" is particularly strong amongst lesbians in environments or organizations which are hostile to bisexuals. Lessons from lesbian-feminist experiences which can be applied to current understanding of bisexual identities are that no one can decide on a hegemonic set of definers for sexual identity. Persons who attempt to make a sharp division between the identities of lesbian and bisexual will soon recognize that people can call themselves both or neither, depending upon the context. Persons who choose to focus on either the words "lesbian" or "bisexual" as linguistic signifiers recognize that the discursive power of these words is contingent on ever-changing, inconsistent, and socially constructed meanings. Yet, the differences between and amongst lesbians and bisexuals reach far beyond the contested terrain of the words "lesbian" and "bisexual" to societal inequity based upon, amongst other things race, class, size, ability, and religion.

Whose Sex, Whose Gender?

"Lesbian computer nerds," writes Griggers, "quietly wait for Bright (a well-known, pro-sex lesbian author) "to assist in the world's first virtual sex program designed by a lesbian...lesbian bodies are going techno-culture, and they're going mainstream."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Griggers 1994, 119.

In this mainstreaming of lesbians, Griggers writes that lesbians are "subjects⁴⁷ in the making" because their images are constantly being re-defined and appropriated via technology and the mass media. "This double call of technology and identity complicated our understanding of lesbian bodies as minority bodies," writes Griggers, "-a definition that locates lesbians within the discourse of identity by their differences from the majority bodies of hetero woman and man."⁷⁶

Griggers says that with the popularized images of the lesbian and the introduction of new technologies, lesbians actually have many things in common with heterosexual women including, for example, motherhood. Griggers says (in her reading of Wittig), "...lesbians are becoming nomad runaways *and* becoming the state *at the same time*."⁷⁷

Griggers' comments illustrate, for the purposes of this project on lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, the multiple positionality of lesbian or bisexual computer nerds. They are people who are subverting the dominant heterosexuality of the Internet through the creation and maintenance of women-centred spaced where lesbians and bisexuals are the norm. They are also re-working a technology, the Internet, which was originally developed by the military branch of government which has overtly expressed its hostility and domination over both women's and lesbian's bodies.⁷⁸

Theorists such as Griggers say that body-based identities are increasingly unstable due to the intrusion of biotechnologies and advanced surgical techniques.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Griggers 1994, 123.

⁷⁷ Griggers 1994, 125.

⁷⁸ The Internet started with a computer network designed by the U.S. Department of Defense in the 1950's. It was originally designed to withstand a nuclear attack. (For a brief and lucid history, see Gilbert and Kile, 1996) Quite ironically, during the same decade, Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy launched an investigation of gays and lesbian in both the military and the U.S. government.

⁷⁹ Griggers 1994, 123.

Yet, for women whose identities cannot and should not be altered by a laser or a hormone, the body remains an important site of tension amongst lesbians and bisexuals. A super-sized lesbian, upon revealing that she is large-sized, often faces the same insensitivity, discriminatory attitudes or blatant hatred from other lesbians (or bisexuals) as she does from the heterosexual world at large.

Of course some might argue that the super-sized woman does not have to reveal that she has a body type which is much larger than the culturally sanctioned norm. Imbedded in this partial concealment, is the assumption that a larger-than-average person should hide their size. This assumption is equivalent to the idea that lesbians or women as a whole should also hide their identities because they do not meet the culturally-sanction norm of the heterosexual or the male.

There is something particularly powerful that happens when lesbians and/or bisexuals get together and challenge not only compulsory heterosexuality but other forms of oppression within society as a whole and lesbian and/or bisexual communities in particular. These places can be remarkable centers of personal healing and affirmation for people who are resisting the negative images of people like themselves in the dominant and particularly popular culture. They can also be a means through which like-minded individuals can work together to create and distribute images and ideas which show themselves in a positive light.

Racism

Racism is a particularly important issue both in real time and on the mailing lists. While, certainly, women of color are completely capable of designing and utilizing computers in general and electronic mailing lists in particular, few are able to do so. There are many reasons for this, including a history of racism and colonialization which prevented many persons of color, particularly women of color, from accessing the money and education needed to use the Internet. Also, racial

discrimination against persons of color, particularly Black, Native, and Latino persons⁴⁹ in North America, caused the formation of racially segregated ghettos. Whether they take the form of an urban ghetto or a remote reservation, this spatial segregation often results in a lack of access to computing facilities or access which is not equal to persons who live in white neighborhoods. Partially, this can be attributed to a North American business community which sees white neighborhoods as a more financially lucrative market. As Powell writes about race, "While the new information technologies...represent--like other media developments that came before them--an opportunity to make America's media system as diverse as its 'melting pot' population, the stern realities of America's past business experience mitigate against universality."⁸⁰

E. Conclusion: Permeable Boundaries of Gendered and Sexualized Spaces

Thinking about a sex-differentiated and socially-constructed concept of gender which works equally well for lesbians and bisexual women is particularly important for any Internet project. The main reason for this is that gender and sexual identity both become more elusive in an Internet space than in a "real time" space. Men can pretend to be women as is shown in Van Gelder's article about the male psychiatrist who pretended to be a woman in order to experience the closeness of women's friendships.⁸¹ Van Gelder questions "why a man has to put on electronic drag to experience intimacy, trust, and sharing."⁸² Yet, the reality remains that men can and do pretend to be women, even lesbians, on-line.

Spender says that women who are harassed or put down for speaking as women cannot take on a more masculine way of speaking without being subject to

⁸⁰ Powell 1994, 121.

⁸¹ See Van Gelder 1991.

⁸² Van Gelder 1991, 76.

harassment. "We are all aware," writes Spender, " of the double standard that allows⁵⁰ the same words to be masterful if coming from a man, but are domineering, bossy, aggressive--even castrating--if they come from a woman."⁸³

By changing her name or assuming a pseudonym, a woman can "speak" in a masculine way and also assume a male identity on the Internet. Women can experience the positive aspects of being male, like being taken more seriously in conversation. Spender writes "Gender-blindness at least holds the possibility of being able to leave behind the baggage that goes with being rated as a female speaker."⁸⁴

Yet, Spender asserts that people are now working out ways to identify important aspects of identity on-line. People are starting to use linguistic cues about sex and gender in the same way that people have been using these cues in "real time." In order to use language to assess a person's gender, one must ascribe certain gendered characteristics to either men or women. As was discussed earlier in this section, this kind of essentialized thinking presents problems because there are women who seem masculine and men who seem feminine. Yet, to use the social-constructionists' idea of dividing the world (and possibly the Internet) into the feminine and the masculine does not work for lesbians and bisexual women because lesbian and bisexual women embody a complex combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Also, many lesbian and bisexual women are joining lesbian and/or bisexual women's electronic mailing lists because they are seeking to interact with other females. They are not deciding that they do not want to interact with masculinity because, most likely, there will be some very masculine lesbians and bisexual women on the LIST. Instead, they are seeking places where there are no men.

⁸³ Spender 1996, 243.

⁸⁴ Spender 1996, 244.

Likewise, many lesbian-oriented lists are for women who have relationships with other women whereas bisexual women's lists are places for women to talk about their relationships, regardless of their partner's sex. Although there are mixed feelings on some lists as to whether discussions about relationships with transsexuals are welcome, a sex-differentiated understanding of gender usually applies to these lists—meaning women have female genitalia.

The problem with this sex-differentiated understanding of gender is that there is no way to ascertain the sex of either the person subscribing or their lover. Just as in real life there are no characteristics which prove one's sexual preferences, there are no foolproof methods of determining these via the Internet. Therefore, lesbians and bisexual women on the Internet can never be sure if they are interacting with another lesbian or bisexual woman. The person they are speaking to might be a heterosexual woman "trying on" another sexual identity. The person might also be male.

In order to tell who is who on the Internet, lesbian and bisexual women must rely on an essentialized understanding of sexuality. Like an essentialized understanding of gender which says that men have certain masculine characteristics and women have certain feminine characteristics, an essentialized understanding of sexuality says that heterosexuals have certain "het" characteristics and homosexuals have distinctive "homo" characteristics. The essentialist idea might even be extended to say that lesbians have particular attributes and bisexual women have certain essential traits.

The problem with these essentialized notions of sexuality is that they exclude those persons who do not have the particular ascribed characteristics of a specific group. For example, if a person joins a lesbian list and tells people about the ways they abuse their partner, some people would assume that this is not really a lesbian

posting because lesbians do not abuse other women. The essentialized idea is that lesbian partner abuse does not exist. Therefore, the abusive person who may very well be a lesbian, is not welcome on the lesbian list.

Equally problematic is an essentialized understanding of the difference between lesbians and bisexual women. If a lesbian list subscriber starts a discussion about dildos, that is artificial penis-like instruments that some people use for sex, then some lesbians will get angry and say that women who like dildos must be bisexual. The essentialized idea is that lesbians are not erotically attracted to a phallus. Yet the reality is that there are persons who use dildos or who occasionally sleep with men and yet self-identify as lesbians.

Many of the lesbian and bisexual women's electronic Internet LISTs recognize the futility and the exclusionary nature of trying to police the gender or sexual identities of LIST participants. Therefore, these LISTs base their membership completely on self-identification. If a person says that they are lesbian or bisexual, then they can subscribe. If the person later reveals that they are not who they said that they were, then they might be removed from the LIST. The problem is that this self-identification allows persons who are biologically male to participate in lesbian or bisexual women's spaces. Many women also find the possibility of the male voyeur objectionable because it reinforces the idea that men can have access to women's space. The presence or perceived presence of men could dampen certain conversations. In particular, sexually explicit conversations, something necessary for women who are often deprived of information about lesbian sex, might not happen if the participants think that a straight man might be eroticizing their words. Lesbian and bisexual women should, therefore, be made aware of the possibility that there may be men who call themselves lesbians or bisexual women and who could,

potentially, be very active in the shaping of lesbian and bisexual women's Internet spaces.

The theoretical understanding of gender and sexuality which is advocated for the purposes of this project is a complex combination of sex-differentiated and socially-constructed ideas. Neither understanding can be utilized without considering the other. There are no universal definition of words like "woman" or "lesbian"; people and spaces contest and re-define these words for themselves in specific times and specific places. This is not to say that all persons or spaces are equal in the shaping of this definition. Certain persons have more societal influence due to systemic inequity based on, amongst other things, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, it is important that both the theoretical purposes of the words *gender* and *sexuality* and their attendant power relationships remain a site of critical feminist discussion.

Chapter Three: Methodology for Study of Gender, Sexuality, and Technology

This chapter explores the implications for collecting data based on the theoretical discussion of the previous chapter. This methodology provides a concrete example of how lesbian and bisexual subjects affect the ways in which data is gathered, collected, and analyzed.

Unique methodological challenges were an inherent part of this project. Many of the particular methodological challenges found in this chapter are either Internet-oriented and/or sexuality-based. They are symptomatic of a project which uses the seemingly anonymous medium of the Internet to have a women-centred discussion of sexuality, something which contradicts dominant North American cultural norms which place women as subjects of male sexual desire.

Both lesbianism and bisexuality destabilize the category of gender because they open the possibility that love/sex/desire may or may not require a person of the opposite or the same sex or gender. Yet, in the spaces of the lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists, that destabilization takes a difficult turn because the sex, gender, and sexual identities of the participants matter to the other participants. Therefore, many the methodological problems encountered in this project centred around the ambiguity of the conceptual categories: sex, gender, and sexual identity in the context of the Internet.

This project has been one in which the complexity of lesbian and bisexual women's lives must not just be theorized but must be studied in a way which captures what Rose calls "paradoxical spatiality," which, in the context of feminism, can be a space for "emancipatory recognition of difference."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Rose 1993, 141.

For this project, this has meant the development of a methodology which recognizes the multiple identities of the persons being researched. Critical to the development of the methodology is what Rose writes when she says that the world cannot be mapped solely according to binary concepts like masculine and feminine because recent work by black and lesbian feminists has shown that "...everywhere all women are subject to constitution not only by gender but by sexuality and by class and by race and by religion, and by a whole range of other social relations."⁸⁶

This raises the particular challenge of designing a project which is coherently organized around themes of gender and sexuality and yet doesn't obliterate other aspects of women's lives. For example, the theme for this project is gender and sexuality; therefore, the questions in this thesis focused on sexual identity and its intertwining with race, class, and ability, amongst others.

Appropriate Methodology

The main methodological question to be addressed in this chapter is *What is appropriate methodology for this feminist study of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists?*

Such a question bears in mind that while there might be many different, workable feminist methodologies, a feminist analysis is not limited to the study of gender or sexuality. As Moss wrote "Feminist analysis are not gender studies."⁸⁷

Moss's explanation of a feminist strategy was used to develop the methodological approach for this project which included "a political ethos with a commitment to empower and politicize both the researcher and the 'researched.'"⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Rose 1993, 151.

⁸⁷ Moss 1994, 32.

⁸⁸ Moss 1994, 33.

In this project, gender and sexuality were viewed as important, but not the only, theoretical lenses.

This chapter attempts to do so through a variety of different geographies including that of sexual geographies, gender geographies, and Internet geographies, provide particular methodological challenges both as relatively new and somewhat controversial fields of academic inquiry. It contains the reasoning behind the creation of an electronic survey project which targets the participants of the lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. The limitations of the project, its ethical dilemmas, and structure of the questionnaire are also considered. Electronic management of both qualitative and quantitative data are explained as well as the manual coding, inputting, querying, and evaluation of that information.

This chapter concludes by noting that the unique methodological challenges of this project focus on an element of trust between myself and the researched. The researched had to trust my integrity at least enough to participate in the project. I had to trust the truthfulness of survey respondents. This chapter is divided into two parts and is organized chronologically. The first part, *Using the Internet to Conduct an Academic Survey* contains information about how this project addressed issues such as evaluating potential risk for participants, the content of letters of consent, the verification of identity via the Internet and the difficulty of deciding which persons should be targeted to answer the survey.

The second part, *Technology and Lesbian, Feminist Consciousness*, explains the process of creating a way to electronically manage and utilize both qualitative and quantitative data in a way which is consistent with a lesbian, feminist methodology which would convey a sense of respect toward the unique and important comments of survey participants. The process of setting up such a database and the limitations are also considered.

This section also explains my strategic use of my personal lesbian identity in⁵⁷ order to gain access to the mailing lists. Judging from some of the responses to my call for survey participants, I speculate that I might not have received as many positive responses had I called myself bisexual, heterosexual, or avoided mentioning my personal sexuality altogether.

Using the Internet to Conduct an Academic Survey

The use of the Internet to collect data for research with human subjects presents specific methodological challenges. For example, it was difficult to decide how one might get letters of consent forms "signed" by persons who were participating in an electronic survey where "signatures" were typed instead of handwritten.

From the very beginning of this project, there were many ethical considerations in the use of the Internet for an academic survey. These were mainly in the areas of risk evaluation, letters of consent, and identity verification. While these are considerations for every project, they were particularly important for a project which focused on the sometimes dangerous activity of sexual identities.

Why a Survey?

For the purposes of conducting research for this project, many different factors had to be taken into consideration. Time, money, and practicality were the main deciding factors in choosing to run a survey instead of doing interviews. While the in-person interview was the feminist methodology of choice, it was also expensive, time-consuming, and impractical for Master's research.⁸⁹ Interviews would have required me to either place mostly long-distance telephone calls or to travel to the participants' places of residence. This would have certainly greatly

⁸⁹ The author's desire to use quantitative methods is explained by the words of Jayaratne and Stewart 1991. "...advocacy of qualitative methods as methods which permit women to express their experience fully and in their own terms." p. 89.

limited the project because of my rural location and lack of financial resources.

Also, with the ever-changing nature of the Internet, it was important to gather the information in the shortest time frame possible in order to avoid major changes in the technology throughout the course of the research. Had time-consuming interviews been done by one person, the current time-span for data collection from approximately one hundred individuals in less than two months might not have been achieved.

The final reason for the use of the electronic survey format is that it is meeting the subject in their own environment. The people who use electronic mailing lists are already participating in forums where the typed word is the most important means of communication.

In the context of the Internet, it was also important that a study could be done on different mailing lists almost simultaneously because there are so many people who are constantly changing their mailing list subscriptions.

Risk Evaluation

The major problem in assessing the risk for potential participants in this project was the insecurity of the Internet, and in particular, electronic mail as a means of communication. The possibility existed that the survey could be intercepted or read by someone else when a person answered the survey and sent it back to me via the Internet. That person could then choose to publicly disclose the contents of the survey and cause problems for the survey respondent.

For example, those who read and posted to lesbian and/or bisexual women's electronic mailing lists from a workplace might experience homophobic harassment from co-workers or supervisors who discovered that company-owned computers

were being used to in such a manner.⁹⁰ This could easily happen if a co-worker innocently looked over the employee's shoulder or it might be the result of a malicious systems administrator who chose to intercept and read personal electronic mail. Such an action would be time-consuming and require at least a moderate amount of technical skill thereby making such an under-taking fairly unattractive to most persons. Yet, the possibility of exposure was considered a possible risk for project participants.

It was reasoned that since this survey was targeting persons who were already subscribing to lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, the participation in a survey would not be introducing a new risk to themselves. It would just be continuing something that these persons were already doing. The only exception to this idea would be that there are persons who read what other people send out to the mailing lists but never post to the mailing lists. These persons, who are called "lurkers" in Internet jargon, might be taking a new risk by choosing to write and send something related to sexuality over the Internet.

In order to avoid the risks of returning something via the Internet, the survey participant had the option of returning the survey via the more secure means of regular mail or facsimile. She could also have a taped telephone interview.

The potential risks, including the possibility of exposure, were outlined for potential project participants in the letter of informed consent sent to each participant along with the survey. She could then make an informed decision whether or not to participate.

Of the approximately two hundred people who initially inquired about the survey, approximately one hundred (fifty percent) chose to participate in the survey.

⁹⁰ In the case of the employee who worked for a lesbian and/or bisexual oriented business, fear of harrassment would most likely be a non-issue.

While none of the people who chose NOT to participate said that their lack of participation was due to the risk evaluation outlined in the letter of consent, perhaps it factored into their decision not to participate.

Of the approximately one hundred people who chose to participate in the survey, approximately fifteen percent returned their questionnaires and letters of consent via regular mail instead of electronic mail. Perhaps, again, some of these participants weighed the risks associated with electronic transmission of confidential information and decided that they were safer with postal systems.

As is the accepted practice in academic research, research participants were assured that all of the information gained from the research project would be kept confidential and would be used anonymously. In particular, it was considered that this project might place its participants in a vulnerable or disastrous position should their lesbianism or bisexuality be disclosed because they participated in this project.

Due to the homophobic violence pervasive in many places in the world, it is especially important that the confidentiality of the participants in this research, as in all research about sexuality, is respected. Yet, what is not considered in this promise of confidentiality is that some lesbian and bisexual women do not want confidentiality. In fact, in order to show that their love for other women is nothing to hide, they want publicity. They want to openly answer questions about their sexuality using their real names. Therefore, it was decided that project participants would be guaranteed confidentiality but they would also have the option of publicity. If they specifically stated that they wanted their real and full name to be used as part of this research project, then it would be. Project participants applauded what many of them saw to be a very radical move in academic research on sexuality. Five

percent of the respondents chose to use their real names. Included in the signature⁶¹ of one such respondent were the words "Call me straight and I'll sue."⁹¹

This approach to the evaluation of risk using informed consent, providing alternate means for communication, and allowing persons to forgo anonymity if they so chose, allows the survey participant to make decisions for herself and to retain a position of power in the survey process.

Letters Of Consent

One of the requirements for research done with human subjects is often a signed, dated release form from the survey participant. This release form often explains the purpose of the project, the requirements of the project, and the right of the participant to quit the project at any time. It explains what the researcher might perceive to be the risks of the project and it seeks the participant's permission to use this information in the form of a thesis or dissertation, publication, or conference paper.

The letter of consent for this project appeared as it does in Figure A of the Appendix. It identified my full name and mailing addresses and that of my academic supervisor so that anyone who might have had concerns or questions about the project might contact either person. This is important because the persons being surveyed needed to know that they had the option to contact my supervisor in case of a problem or misunderstanding.

The letter explained to the participant that they were under no obligation and could quit at any time. It told participants "e-mail systems are not entirely private and sometimes e-mail accounts may be unknowingly monitored" and explained that they had the option of answering the survey via regular mail, facsimile machine, or

⁹¹ Survey respondent.

telephone. Participants were also assured that their responses would be treated in a⁶² confidential manner and that parts of the survey might be used in a Master's thesis, published, or presented at conferences.

Certainly with any project which involves research with human subjects, it is important to have the consent of project participants before studying them or analyzing their words. In the context of the Internet, and in particular the lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists, it would be very easy for anyone to collect the words and messages of people and use them for their own purposes. While it is impossible to monitor what people do with the messages they receive as part of Internet mailing lists, one important custom is that people do not re-send the mail they receive without the permission of the author. Therefore, when people send out messages to the mailing list, or "post" as it is commonly called, they can reasonably assume that the content of their message will not be used or published without their permission. The use of the consent form enables persons to have some measure of control over where their words are being used.

For the purposes of this project, it was determined that an electronic signature or e-mail address typed on an electronic copy of a consent form would be sufficient proof that the person participating in the survey was doing so from a position of informed consent. Before she answered the survey, she had information about the project, the researcher, and possible risks to herself as a project participant.

In addition to asking for the name or the e-mail address of the participant, the name of the participant's parent or guardian was also requested for teen age participants. This measure was taken to protect myself from legal difficulties of doing research on sexuality with minors. Given that lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists are international in scope, the legal age for decision-making would vary

from place to place. I decided that because the English-speaking mailing lists were being studied and because a majority of respondents would probably be from the U.S.A. that it would be appropriate to use the American age of legal consent which is eighteen years of age. Although this legality was provided for, none of the respondents were under the age of eighteen.

Such a lack of response might indicate that there are few teenage subscribers to lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists or perhaps teenage subscriber have chosen to add a few years to their lives. Either case is reminiscent of the space of the gay and lesbian bar, a place where persons were supposed to be of a particular legal drinking age in most English-speaking countries. Yet, numerous gays and lesbians tell of how they, as teenagers, they were allowed to enter the bar as long as they pretended to be of legal age.⁹²

The lack of responses to this survey by young persons might also indicate that teenage LIST subscribers do not want to seek permission from their parents/guardians to answer such a survey. Most likely, this is because such permission might involve a discussion about sexuality, something which many teenagers might not want to discuss with their parents. Marcus, a respected gay educator, wrote "Parents are almost universally upset when they find out their son or daughter is gay."⁹³

In summary, the inclusion of age questions on the consent form might preclude some persons from participating in the project and it might encourage others to be less than truthful about their age but none of the participants, regardless of age, disclosed that they used participation in this survey as a catalyst for discussions about sexuality.

⁹² Marcus 1993, 121.

⁹³ Marcus 1993, 51.

Identity Verification

As was mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis, just as there could be no absolute verification of lesbian or bisexual identity in real life, so there could be no verification of such identity via the Internet. The verification is impossible for three reasons. First, because there are no hard and fast definitions of either lesbian or bisexual identity, it would not be possible to capture the ever-changing nature of these identities through some type of criteria or test. Second, even if the terms lesbian and bisexual could be defined for the purposes of the particular research project, it would be impossible to know if research participants were truthful in their responses to such a definition. Third, many of the words used to describe sexuality are ambiguous and somewhat imprecise therefore could easily be misinterpreted by either the participant or the researcher.

For example, if I had asserted that for the purposes of this particular research project, lesbians were women who have sexual relations exclusively with women, there would be problems with this definition. In particular, the words "women" and "sexual relations" would be questioned. Would "woman" include transsexuals? What actual practices would constitute "sexual relations?" There would also be the difficulty in the interpretation of the word "exclusively." Finally, considering that having sexual relations with men is a pervasive taboo in most lesbian communities, there seems to be a very good chance that a person who self identifies as a lesbian but has occasionally had sex with men will not disqualify herself from the research based on the researcher's more exclusive definition of "lesbian."

In particular, this lack of honesty might be a problem for the lesbian researcher who is doing research amongst people she knows in her local community. While it might be supposed that lesbians would more readily provide information to a

lesbian they know, in fact the exact opposite might hold true in the case of certain taboo practices, like having sex with men.

The context of the Internet presents the specific challenge of communication without visual cues. I could not see the respondents and vice versa. Nor could we respond to the visual cues which take place in a face-to-face conversation between seeing persons. The survey respondent was free to disclose whatever she deemed to be necessary about her identity. She was never asked specific questions about her appearance--only what she chose to share with me. She decided who she was and what she wanted to disclose. Sometimes this took the form of a woman deciding who she was and what she wanted to be but it also allowed for the possibility that a person who thought of himself as male could present himself as a lesbian and I would probably not know the difference.

Certainly some of the newer aspects of the Internet such as the World Wide Web or even some electronic mail programs allow users to view pictures of one another. Yet, for most users of electronic mail, the ability to "see" someone else goes unrealized. That means that people are relying solely upon another's representation of themselves via language (which was discussed in the previous chapter). Therefore, I, like other Internet users, could do nothing more than to accept what people had to say about themselves as "truth."

As was discussed in the previous theoretical chapter, sexual identities are often difficult to define. What one person thinks of as heterosexual, another will think of as distinctly lesbian or bisexual. For example, one woman might have sexual desire and contact with another woman and choose to think of it as similar to the images of two women so often seen in pornography targeted for a heterosexual audience. Conversely, the woman's sexual partner might see her actions, desires, or way of being as a distinctly woman-centred and lesbian. So when this project was

designed, great care had to be taken to consider exactly what I was looking for. For if I were looking for places which contained discussions about or images of woman-to-woman sexual desire and relations, I most certainly could not limit myself to only the lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists. I would have had to explore the many male-oriented, pornographic/erotica sections of the Internet which contain so-called "lesbian" images for heterosexual consumption.

This is not to say that the lesbian and/or bisexual women's spaces are decidedly un-sexual or anti-sexual. Quite the contrary. Sex is often a topic for discussion on many lists. The difference between lesbian and heterosexual pornography/erotica is that lesbian pornography/erotica is women-centred sex; it is about women getting fulfillment from other women. It is not about a male-oriented "lesbian" performance by two women for the pleasure of a male viewer.

Bisexual women's spaces also markedly differ from lesbian spaces in that there may well be discussions about sex with men. Yet, bisexual women's spaces are not heterosexual because men are not necessarily the primary subject of female desire.

Deciding Who Should Participate

It can be difficult to find a methodology which can account for differences and inequity within and amongst lesbians and bisexual women without alienating some part of the community. In particular, in developing a survey of lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, certain ethical and methodological questions must be asked about bisexuality, transsexuality, and the possibility of a male lesbian.

At its inception, this project was to focus on the lesbian electronic mailing lists of the Internet. The first challenge was to get an idea of who was subscribing to the LISTS. A study of the LISTS revealed that many limited subscription to *lesbian*

women and made statements about the definition of a *lesbian*. Some lists are open to⁶⁷ lesbians and to the "lesbian side" of bisexual women; that is, bisexual women are allowed to participate if they refrain from discussing their romantic relationships or sexual activities with men. Other lists were open to lesbians or bisexual women but do not welcome lesbian transsexuals. Other lists were open to lesbians, bisexual women, and post-operative transsexual lesbians. Yet another list was open to anyone who self-identified as either lesbian or bisexual but no definition of either of those two words were provided so potential subscribers were free to define and interpret those words for themselves.

This complete self-identification would make a place for people who did not want to use a specific definition or sexual label. It also made a place for persons with biologically male bodies and generally heterosexual identities to freely try a lesbian or bisexual women's identity.

In considering the methodology for this project it must, therefore, be considered that there are great differences between the lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. They are not a cohesive whole. Some of the lists have moderators or list administrators who go to a lot of trouble to verify the identities of potential subscribers. Others do not. This makes the boundaries of the lesbian and bisexual spaces of the electronic mailing lists highly permeable in some places and impossible to penetrate in others. In fact, it also illustrates that the only thing that all of the lists in this project have in common is that they are targeted toward lesbian or bisexual women.

Because the differences between the bisexual and the lesbian are so difficult to articulate, the survey respondents were asked to define both "lesbian" and

"bisexual" and to identify their sexuality accordingly.⁹⁴ This allowed me to account for how the words "lesbian" and "bisexual" might have different meanings for different people.

Just who a list is targeted toward is not always clear either. As the words *lesbian* and *bisexual* have highly contested meanings, so does the word *dyke*. The word *dyke* is lacking in a fixed meaning but it is certainly a word which refers to lesbians and quite often to bisexual women. It was once a derogatory, slang term for lesbians but in recent years has been revived by both lesbians and bisexual women as a word which has multiple uses. It makes no distinction between the lesbian or the bisexual identities which means that it can be used in situations where either lesbians or bisexual women deem it advantageous to be unclear as to whether they are lesbian or bisexual. It is also a word which has a shock value for heterosexuals who have only heard the term used in a derogatory way. When one deliberately and proudly refers to herself as a *dyke*, the word can no longer be used as defamation by hostile heterosexuals. Finally, it is a way of naming and therefore claiming some of the history of lesbian and bisexual women's oppression. Many women were called *dyke* at a time when they had absolutely no legal recourse for discrimination based upon gender or sexual orientation. To use the word *dyke* in a current sense is therefore to evoke, amongst lesbians and bisexual women, the strength of the women who preceded them. Therefore, for the methodological purposes of this project, it was deemed acceptable to consider electronic mailing lists targeted toward *dykes*.

This project was originally conceived as a lesbian-oriented project. As the theoretical information for the project was being gathered, it became apparent to me

⁹⁴ Figure 4, Appendix, Questions 17 & 30.

that the project must somehow address the tension that exists between lesbians and⁶⁹ bisexuals. I looked over the number of electronic mailing lists for lesbians and realized that very few lists did not include bisexual women. Therefore, I determined early in the project that it must be one in which both lesbians and bisexuals could participate. Yet, this specific position of including both lesbians and bisexuals in a project was one which would most certainly be controversial, especially amongst lesbians, the very persons I had wanted to target in the first place!

A methodological strategy was therefore developed which openly recognized the tension between lesbians and bisexual women. It was decided that the advertisement would invite both lesbian and bisexual women to voice their opinions about lesbian and bisexual women's co-operation and co-existence on the LISTs. The advertisement that went out the list is as follows in Figure B of the Appendix.

The advertisement was designed to appeal to as many lesbians and bisexual women as possible including old-guard lesbian-feminist women by the use of an alternative spelling of the word "women." The word "wimmin" was used to convey to the prospective survey participant that I had an understanding of feminist challenges to male-oriented linguistics. It was also revealed in the section "WHO'S COMPILING THE DATA..." that I call myself a lesbian and work in a feminist field.

The inclusion of bisexuals as a main part of this project was designed to appeal to bisexual women, none of whom objected to being included in the same project as lesbians. The very nature of this project which considers both lesbians and bisexual women to be equally important is such a rarity in studies which focus on sexuality that it was hoped that the uniqueness of this project would attract participation by bisexual women. There have been so few published academic projects which include both lesbians *and* bisexual women that it was thought that the

uniqueness of this project might stimulate the interest of bisexual women.⁹⁵ For as ⁷⁰
Hemmings wrote "Interest in bisexuality has rarely been articulated by non-
bisexuals."⁹⁶

It is impossible to ignore the fact that there are lesbian-identified transsexuals and transgendered persons both in the world and on the Internet. These persons can be in one of many different stages of sex change or they might have chosen to retain their male genitalia and take on the outward appearances and mannerisms of a woman. For the methodological purposes of this survey, it was decided that transgendered persons who self-identified as either lesbian or bisexual would be permitted to participate in the survey. This decision was made because of the belief that transgendered and transsexual lesbians or bisexuals were indeed women.

Yet, it was also recognized that a large proportion of lesbians and bisexual women would not like the idea that transsexuals were to be included and therefore might not participate in the survey. In order to avoid a controversy, it was never specifically stated in either the advertisement or in the survey that transsexuals or transgendered persons were either included or excluded from the survey. When transsexuals or transgendered persons e-mailed me to find out if they could participate, I assured them that they were indeed welcome to participate.

This tactic of selective withholding of information about transsexual and transgendered participation does not overtly challenge the widespread trans-phobia of the lesbian and bisexual women's communities but it does, in a more covert way, allow for a small minority of persons to articulate their experiences in a way that might not otherwise be possible.

⁹⁵ Tucker writes in the preface to one of the first academic books on bisexuality Bisexual Politics, Theories, Queries, Visions "We were outraged at the constant, intentional omission of bisexuality in gay/lesbian communities, HIV education, and hip hetero hangouts." 1995, xxiii.

⁹⁶ Hemmings, 1995, 41.

Despite the idea that sexual identity depends completely upon self-identification, it was decided that biologically male persons who would otherwise identify as heterosexual could not be considered a lesbian or a bisexual woman. This precluded male lesbians from openly participating in the survey. Of course, a person might choose to disagree with the definition of the author and go ahead and answer the survey anyway. In the consent form for the survey, the person has to state that they are female but a person could choose to ignore that request or to define female as they see fit.

Part of the reason for clearly excluding male lesbians was political and part was pragmatic. The political aspect required that I decide that for a male to think that he can assume the identity of "lesbian" is just another way in which women are supposed to be accessible and open to males. The closing of this boundary is therefore a political statement which says that this is a woman-only survey and if a person who is biologically male wants to participate then he must choose to omit any mention of his maleness and call himself female.

The pragmatic aspect of the decision to exclude male lesbians was based on the idea that many of the persons being targeted for the survey would not consider men to be lesbian. In fact, they would not even want to consider that there might be persons who are biologically male pretending to be lesbian and enjoying lesbian Internet spaces. Therefore, to articulate that this was a survey only for women validated the perception of those women that they were, indeed, part of women-only lesbian and/or bisexual women's Internet spaces.

One mistake happened in deciding which lists were targeted for lesbian and/or bisexual women. The descriptions of most of the electronic mailing lists used words like lesbian, bisexual women, or dyke to indicate that these lists were for lesbian and/or bisexual women. The description of one list, the list for women who

do sado-masochism with other women, did not specifically state that it was for lesbian and bisexual women. I extrapolated, and wrongly so, that anyone who would participate in female-to-female sado-masochist play, as it is called, was either lesbian or bisexual. For as Golding writes of sadomasochism "Gone are the old identities...For it's a strange kind of spill over, this neither/nor transgression, one which escapes the usual Law of binary divisions like...gay/straight."⁹⁷

While the mistake was not entirely logical because I had recognized that women can have sex with other women without calling themselves lesbian or bisexual, I had never considered that a woman could participate in sado-masochist play without calling herself either lesbian or bisexual. It required one of the few survey respondents who identified as heterosexual to point out that heterosexual women could participate in sado-masochist play with other women. I then realized that it had been a mistake to include the women-to-woman sado-masochist mailing list in a survey of lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists. Yet, it also seemed like a fortunate error because it questioned my naive assumptions about sado-masochism and lesbian and bisexual identity.

Technology and Lesbian & Feminist Consciousness

The first part of this chapter focused on the unique methodological challenges of designing and distributing an electronic survey to LIST subscribers. This part of the chapter will explain how the questionnaires were collected and evaluated.

Recent scholarly work by authors such as Light, Spender and others has suggested that women can use the Internet as a means to resist or subvert male-dominance. Light writes "...technology is a suitable medium to launch a campaign to

⁹⁷ Golding 1993, 148.

confront political problems, and cyberspace can provide a place for feminists to organize."⁹⁸ Spender writes "Where women have made technology accommodate their needs, their success knows no limitations."⁹⁹

Based on the positive outlooks of women such as Light and Spender, the methodology used to collect and evaluate the data for this project utilized technology for decidedly lesbian and feminist purposes. It was a process in which the publicizing of survey respondents' unique and often angry pro-lesbian voices was given precedent over the creation of a uniform data set. So, for example, the survey respondents were encouraged to change the questions asked or omit answers in whatever way they wanted.

Collecting the Data

I relied on informal sources of information in order to distribute and collect the data for this project. In order to decide exactly where the advertisement for participants would be distributed, I gathered contact information about LISTS from electronic friends. I informally asked my cyberdyke community, mostly people with whom I had already built an electronic relationships via LISTS, to provide me with LIST descriptions and contact information for the project. This informal network of women sent me information about their favorite LISTS. Of these submissions, I sent the advertisement to twenty-six lists which were lesbian and/or bisexual women's electronic mailing lists. I simply posted the information to the nine LISTS to which I already subscribed. For those LISTS to which I did not have a subscription, I sent the advertisement to the list owner and asked her to distribute it to her list, if she thought it was appropriate. Many, but not all, list owners/moderators/coordinator agreed to do this and some even completed and returned the questionnaire

⁹⁸ Light, 1995, 143.

⁹⁹ Spender, 1995, xxiv.

themselves. Many of the moderators were also quite complimentary. As one LIST coordinator wrote, "I've seen a lot of surveys over the years and yours was one of the very best."

The support of those active in the LIST communities certainly helped the project to be successful. Many people seemed to "help" me collect information because they "knew" me and they trusted me. As one cyberfriend wrote "In the last few months your posts have helped me in so many ways...the least I can do is get some dykes to do this (answer the questionnaire)."100

I did not subscribe to any new LISTs in order to distribute my survey. As was previously stated, I sent the advertisement for participants to owners of those LISTs to which I did not subscribe. I did this because I thought that it would be unethical to subscribe to those LISTs to which I ethically should not be a member. So, for example, since I am not Black, I did not subscribe to a Black lesbian list for the sole purpose of distributing the advertisement for participants. There were other LISTs which I could have joined without a violation of ethics. Yet, I decided not to do this because I thought that it would not be to my advantage to join a list just to post my advertisement. I thought that the advertisement would gain more credibility if it were distributed by the owner, someone that current subscribers knew and trusted, rather than a new LIST subscriber.

In advertising for participants, I openly acknowledged that participants would be doing me a favor. Yet, I also tried to return the favor to the participants by offering to give participants information about lesbian and/or bisexual resources on the Internet from a lengthy collection I had compiled.

100 Survey Participant.

There are limitations to such a methodology of distribution. The first is that the advertisement for participants was not distributed by every list owner. Therefore, the interests represented by those LISTs were not included. It might also have resulted in the exclusion of persons who belonged to a particular LIST if they did not subscribe to another LIST where the advertisement was posted. For example, if a LIST owner chose not to post the advertisement for participants to the Lesbian Mechanics LIST (a fictitious list), then maybe not as many lesbian mechanics would have seen the advertisement and participated in the survey. Of the twenty-six LISTs which were targeted for participation, it is not certain how many of those LISTs the advertisement was posted to because people did not always tell me where the advertisement was posted.¹⁰¹ However, those who chose to complete the questionnaire often answered the question which asked them to name the LISTs to which they subscribed. Those answers gave some indication of where the advertisement might have been seen. The next chapter will give a more complete report on the findings of that and other questions asked in the questionnaire.

Also, because LIST subscribers often participate in more than one list, the advertisement for participants was often forwarded to LISTs by kind individuals who might have interjected their own personal comments about the advertisement for participants. In this way, the advertisement for participants may have been unknowingly affected in either a positive or negative way by the on-line reputation person who forwarded the survey. So, for example, if one person on the LIST is known for forwarding chain letters or other such forms of junk mail and if she forwarded the advertisement for participants, some people might have deleted the advertisement without reading it. Or, the opposite might have happened. A well-liked,

¹⁰¹ It is recommended that a similar survey ask participants where they saw the survey advertisement.

well-respected person might have forwarded the advertisement and people read and responded because they liked the person who forwarded the advertisement.

The forwarding of the advertisement removes control from the researcher and affects the planned methodology. It also creates the possibility for the researched to create a negative or malicious campaign if they so chose. To my knowledge, no one posted anything negative or malicious about this project. Yet, if someone had found the advertisement, questionnaire, or the project itself to be objectionable, they could have easily sabotaged the project by sending negative publicity to the LISTs. In this way, the informal communication of forwarding the advertisement allowed the lesbian and bisexual on-line communities to discuss and determine when and how to respond to requests for information.

This kind of methodology is preferable to an anonymous study of a particular LIST or group of LISTs because it gives the researched the decision of whether or not to participate. Also, the presence of anonymous, unannounced research and reporting amongst LISTs might undermine the sense of safety and community on those LISTs. While certainly this sense of safety is important amongst many lesbians and bisexuals, it is particularly important on those LISTs where emotional healing is taking place.

Self-Identifying as Lesbian

Feminist geographers have, in recent years, articulated the importance of thinking about the gender, race, class, and power positions of persons doing feminist research. Geographers such as Rose speak about the importance of reflexivity as a way for the researcher to contextualize her work.¹⁰² This strategy, while not limited to overtly feminist projects, has been informed by feminist work which

¹⁰² Rose, 1993, 49.

encourages researchers, authors, and project participants to articulate and reflect upon the working relationship between the researcher and the researched. While in some feminist contexts this exercise takes the form of autobiography or the use of the first person in written communication, it might also take the form of evaluation of the power relations between the researcher and the researched. In particular, the researcher might position herself and her racial, class, and gendered background vis a vis the persons she is researching.¹⁰³

Yet, when it comes to the ambiguous area of sexuality, some researchers openly give themselves a label, be it *lesbian*, *bisexual* or something else. By doing so, the researcher could be violently targeted or sexually harassed as are many lesbian and bisexual persons.

Even if the researcher does not choose to reveal her sexual orientation, she will probably have some particular problems with her research. As Valentine and Bell write, "In the face of subtle harassment and discrimination such as having secretaries refuse to type work on sexuality, exclusion from displays of academic work by staff members, censorship and removal of course materials from libraries, such gaps in equal opportunity policy appears (sic) all the more worrying."¹⁰⁴

In addition to such difficulties, there is the difficulty of lesbian research by both heterosexuals and lesbians. If the researcher self-identifies as heterosexual and studies lesbian or bisexual subjects, she will, most likely, receive criticism from lesbians who accuse her of appropriating lesbian subject matter. Many people, lesbians and heterosexuals included, will also question her heterosexuality or will assume that she is a lesbian.

¹⁰³Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung (1991) write about race and class bias in qualitative research.
¹⁰⁴ Bell and Valentine 1995, 25.

Yet, if the researcher self-identifies as a lesbian and/or bisexual and does lesbian and/or bisexual research, she is placing herself in the precarious position of researching "as a lesbian." It is a position where she can often use her insider status to gain access to information which would not be available to heterosexuals. She then has to make ethical decisions about which pieces of information to write about and which would be better left unsaid.

Despite the difficulties, Munt, a geographer, identifies herself as lesbian in her work. "Brighton constructed my lesbian identity" she wrote.¹⁰⁵ Hemmings also identifies herself as bisexual and contextualizes it by saying "...I am closer to a lesbian feminist than to a male 'swinger' in many cases, yet at times I might ally myself with that swinger in response to biphobia from lesbian and gay communities."¹⁰⁶

Yet, there are dangers to be faced whether the information was gathered with insider or outsider status. "The privilege of 'insider status' is open to abuse if groups are misunderstood or misrepresented," write Bell and Valentine in reference to England, "while the potential for appropriating marginal voices is ever present."¹⁰⁷

As an "insider" to the research, I also had to consider my experiences as what Dyck calls "...part of the 'social reality' of the study in providing situations for observation, in gaining access to interview respondents, in guiding the choice of interview topics and informing the insights of analysis."¹⁰⁸

The problems with an outsider status are that if the researcher articulates her position outside the researched group then the research might be dismissed as less than authentic. There is also the very real problem of heterosexual academics

¹⁰⁵ Munt, 1995, 115.

¹⁰⁶ Hemmings 1995, 52.

¹⁰⁷ Bell and Valentine 1995, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Dyck 1993, 54.

"treating gay neighborhoods as some kind of exotic place, for example, and thereby depicting lesbians and gay men themselves as exotic," which "is very disempowering as are homophobic comments coming from other students (and staff)" write Bell and Valentine.¹⁰⁹

Johnson wrote that there were so many risks in "building a feminist geography upon my lesbianism" that she thought "...the risks as too great, the stakes as too high in a homophobic culture and discipline."¹¹⁰ Munt also noted that "career progression within the academy is limited for those with non-conforming sexual identities."¹¹¹

Despite these risks, I specified before, during, and after this project that I am a lesbian. I also highlighted the fact that I am open about her sexual identity, and that I am "out" in my academic field of geography.

There are three main ways in which my gender and sexual identity were utilized in this project. First, the fact that I self-identified as female and lesbian allowed me to subscribe to many different lesbian and bisexual women's mailing lists. Had I not been female or a lesbian, this subscription process would not have been possible without lying, which is generally accepted to be a violation of academic ethics.

Second, in publicly revealing my sexual identity along with my name, address, and telephone number, and supervisor's name and contact information, credibility was created for me because any potential survey participant could verify my identity at any time. It allowed potential participants to "ask around" about me to verify that I was indeed who I said I was.

¹⁰⁹ Bell and Valentine 1995, 25.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Bell and Valentine 1995, 25.

¹¹¹ Referenced in Bell and Valentine 1995, 25.

I also revealed my experiences and long-term goals in the field of lesbian geography. Revealing these things about myself allowed survey participants to see that I was indeed an active participant in academic discussions about sexuality. This gave potential participants information about my past practices and future intentions for myself and the survey data.

It would be impossible to make a causal connection between survey participants' responses and my self-disclosure. Many of the respondents did not mention it in their correspondence with me but a fifty percent response rate and quite a few positive comments (see Appendix, Figure C) indicate that it probably encouraged participation. As one respondent said "Saw your post on euro-sappho list. I would be willing to participate - no problem! Anything for a future lesbian geography professor ;-))!"¹¹²

Furthermore, there were certainly many potential survey participants who chose not to participate, perhaps based upon some of the information I revealed about myself. Yet, there were a significant number of women who seemed to appreciate knowing a bit about me.¹¹³

The methodology for data collection on gender and sex determined what locational information should be excluded from this thesis. As Bell and Valentine state " ...there is always a danger that making people and places visible can work against the interests of both the researcher and the researched."¹¹⁴

In undertaking the research for this project, I used my identity to enter into lesbian and bisexual women's spaces but what I chose to bring out of those spaces and into mainstream academia rested entirely with my academic and political

¹¹² Respondent.

¹¹³ See Figure 4 of the appendix to read some of the responses to the initial advertisement for research participants.

¹¹⁴ Bell and Valentine 1995, 26.

judgment. As Peace wrote about the serious methodological problems that a lesbian⁸¹ geography seems to pose, "At best, lesbians might occupy a marginal place, at worst, a confidential place that denies them a place in the real world."¹¹⁵

Peace states that lesbian geographies such as those written by Valentine, Addler and Brenner often do not identify the locale of their research in order to protect the privacy of lesbians living in those places. Such work is often criticized by those in mainstream geography. "Confidential subjects," writes Peace, "are more properly the subjects of the sociologist than the geographer."¹¹⁶

In the context of this research on lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists, I decided that it was not necessary to include the names of the mailing lists in the same way that other authors have chosen to omit the locale of their research.

These are methodological questions because to make the location of a lesbian geography confidential might challenge assumptions that a geographical inquiry must be situated in an identifiable locale if it is thought to be a valuable piece of geography. Implicit in this omission of locale is the assumption that places developed by the minority members of society can remain secret, inaccessible, or invisible to those of the majority, namely heterosexuals. This is important for as Rose writes, "this contradictory gaze is not sexually neutral."¹¹⁷

"The particular dominant gaze constructs access to knowledge of geography as a white bourgeois heterosexual masculine privilege" writes Rose.¹¹⁸ Therefore, this project has sought to add to that body of feminist thought which challenges the

¹¹⁵ Peace 1994, 9.

¹¹⁶ Peace 1994, 9.

¹¹⁷ Rose 1993, 103.

¹¹⁸ Rose 1993, 109.

current understanding of knowledge by stating that there are some pieces of information which are better left unwritten.

Limiting Personal Risk

Considering that there are still some places in the world where a person can be legally jailed, beaten, or executed for being a homosexual, it is important to recognize that this project would have been a far riskier project had I not been located in a fairly tolerant environment. The geography department and Carleton University's acceptance of lesbian and bisexual women's space as a serious and viable topic of study is in and of itself, quite possibly, a change of past practice. To my knowledge, at the time this research was started, there had been no Master's thesis completed and defended at Carleton University's Department of Geography which focused specifically upon some aspect of homosexuality. Therefore, I knew that I would be organizing many aspects of my thesis and, in particular, my survey research according to my own guidelines. One of the specific things I had to do was to limit my personal risk in completing the project.

In order to protect myself from real-life harassment, I had an unlisted telephone number but, at the time the surveys were distributed, I lived in such a small town that anyone who knew I lived there could have easily located my residence. Despite that danger, I placed my home address on the questionnaire due to the financial difficulties of travel between her home and the university in order to collect mail.

Since I lived outside the local calling area to the university computing system, I had to use my local, non-academic Internet provider to access the questionnaires. Since there was no way of creating absolute security for her electronic mail, I had to trust that the administrator of my local Internet provider would not access my survey data as it was being transmitted via electronic mail.

Despite the fact that the advertisement for survey participants reached an estimated one thousand LIST subscribers, I had no negative experiences with this project. I received quite a bit of e-mail, all of which was positive in tone and contained a range of comments from generally supportive to useful pieces of constructive criticism.

Data Management & Queries

Within hours of the first advertisements going out to the LISTs, requests for the questionnaire began to flood my mailbox. Some people asked for more information or asked specific questions about the research but most responded with a short one line responses like "Send it on!"¹¹⁹

I sent the questionnaire and the letter of consent via electronic mail, fax, or snail mail—whichever the respondent requested. Within the next two months, over one hundred completed questionnaires were received, of which one hundred were deemed usable because at least some information was completed and they included a "signed" letter of consent.

Each day, I downloaded my electronic mail messages to my personal computer and then deleted them on my mail server. This was done as a measure of protection against someone breaking into my account and reading the messages. Yet, it did not completely destroy the messages because most certainly they were recorded on the mail server of my Internet Service Provider.

For approximately two months, I had respondent-initiated follow-up conversations about the questionnaire responses and myself, my field of study, and my research. During that time, I collected completed questionnaires and letters of consent. It was not uncommon for me to receive at least fifty pieces of research-

¹¹⁹ Response to advertisement.

related electronic mail per day. This process could have carried on for a long time so⁸⁴ I decided to set a two month limitation on formal data gathering. I did this because I wanted to complete the research project and, more importantly, I wanted to get back to being a "regular" member of the LISTS.

During the time shortly before, during, and after I collected my data, I refrained from sending out personal posts to the LISTS because I did not want my personal posts to negatively affect my research. I refrained from posting and communication not because I believed that I would somehow bias the research; I knew that the methodology, the research questions, and my previous electronic reputation would shape the responses received. Instead, I wanted to appear academically professional and I did not want to confuse responses to my personal posts with responses to my research. Yet, after approximately three months of being quiet on the networks, I started participating in opinionated electronic conversation once again. I noticed that I resumed participation with more confidence and enthusiasm than before I conducted the survey.

Once the survey responses and the follow up conversations were completed, I read them and then set up an electronic database to record the variety of information. I created an electronic database which allowed me to do the three most important tasks: 1) Query the qualitative responses for key words and ideas. 2) Calculate percentages and cross tabulations for the quantitative responses. 3) Maintain each completed questionnaire as a complete and unique individual record.

Due to financial and technical limitations, I was not able to electronically convert the mixed qualitative and quantitative data into a usable database format. Instead, I designed a user-friendly database using Filemaker Pro. The quantitative responses and the manually-coded qualitative responses were then entered by

hand.¹²⁰ The quantitative responses were consistently entered with single letters or words. For those quantitative questions which the survey respondent had altered, the changes to the question were noted by placing an additional category for irregular responses. 85

For responses to qualitative questions, the coding process involved the use of particular keywords to identify the main ideas of a person's responses. This sometimes involved extracting a particular word or group of words from a response. At other times, it involved summarizing the response with a word that the respondent did not use but which matched the main idea or ideas of the response. All the keywords were then recorded for each question so the database might then be queried for particular ideas. When the database was queried for a particular keyword response to a single question or a group of questions, individual, numbered records for each survey respondent would then appear. This allowed me to then read and sometimes quote the full responses instead of just key words.

The main difficulties in creating and querying such a database is that there were often many keyword responses to particular qualitative questions; therefore, the creation of a cohesive summary of responses for particular questions was sometimes problematic. The second, and equally difficult problem, was the coding of qualitative responses when participants altered the questions or drew pictures or diagrams as responses. These were coded as irregular and had to be manually checked with each query.

Conclusion: Subject Shaped Methodology

The methodology used for this project was one which relied heavily on my position as a member of the group being researched. Because of this insider status, I

¹²⁰ Strauss (1987), whose examples were considered for this methodology, writes about coding for qualitative analysis.

was given information I might not have otherwise accessed. Yet, with this information came the responsibility to think about the greater good, and often the security of the LIST communities and individual participants. Therefore, a methodology of informed consent was used to allow participants and list owners to evaluate the risks involved with participation in this project.

The use of electronic mail to collect the majority of the data appropriately reflects the subject matter. As well, the use of a database to query both qualitative and quantitative questions was reflective of a feminist methodology which allows both anecdotal evidence and statistics to co-exist. As Moss wrote

"Research techniques must be consistent with feminism and feminist goals of social science and can include a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods often permit contextualization of a social phenomenon within wider societal processes. Qualitative methods, such as unstructured interviews and participant observation, are often favoured because of the intersubjective communication between the researcher and 'the researched.'¹²¹

Jayaratne and Stewart write that the combined use of both qualitative and quantitative methods is a powerful form of research. They wrote "Whenever possible, we should use research designs which combine quantitative and qualitative methods."¹²²

In particular, the use of such a mixed qualitative and quantitative database allowed me to query both general ideas and direct quotes; the former allowing for generalized ideas about the survey responses and the latter capturing the subtle nuances and pro-lesbian (or bisexual) experiences found in many of the LIST spaces.

Finally, in thinking about an appropriate lesbian, feminist methodology for this project, it can be determined that while distinctly pro-lesbian and pro-woman values

¹²¹ Moss (1993) 49.

¹²² Jayaratne and Stewart 1991, 102.

underpinned the project, the method for data collection is not unique to such a project. Certainly, insiders of many groups of people use their connections to develop questions and make sense of the responses. While the methodology used for this project is one which could most certainly work well for a range of minority groups, it is particularly amenable to lesbian and/or bisexual research because it allows for a wide range of expression on behalf of the participants. It also places a considerable amount of control over the self representation of lesbians and bisexual women--something which is not too frequent in the homophobic society of the late twentieth century North America.

Chapter Four: The Survey Says!

This chapter summarizes the information gathered via an electronic survey of LIST participants. This survey included both a questionnaire and, in some cases, follow-up conversations. Approximately one hundred women responded to the survey; some replied with pages of text, others with one word answers. Some agreed to on-going personal correspondence on subjects of interest generated by the survey. All the respondents had one thing in common; they participate in the distinctly pro-lesbian and sometimes, pro-bisexual virtual spaces of the Lesbians and Bisexual Electronic Mailing LISTS. The majority of those who responded to this survey were white, well-educated, North American lesbian and bisexual women between twenty and fifty years of age. They were, generally, women who knew a lot about computers and the Internet. Unlike the general female population, many were university students or were employed in the computing, scientific, and technological industries. There were few manual, domestic, or unpaid household laborers and very few retail or service workers. While certainly a privileged group of women, they were using their privilege to access technology as a way to communicate about sexuality and thereby subvert the dominant forces of patriarchy and heterosexism which so often silence such conversation.¹²³

While this one survey of approximately one hundred LIST participants could provide no comprehensive knowledge of the ways in which the entire population of LIST subscribers are employed, it does indicate that a technical privilege, a comfort with computers, existed *before* they joined the LISTS. It also clearly indicates that many of these women had the skills, resources, and confidence necessary to utilize other Internet technologies but, as they reported, they were choosing not to do so.

¹²³ Light 1995 discusses her vision of women as proactive, empowered users and creators of Internet technologies.

Most did not regularly use any other form of Internet technology except electronic mail and the LISTs. Approximately half of the respondents said that they did not subscribe to mixed-gender gay-lesbian-bisexual mailing lists.¹²⁴ Therefore, the information gathered from those who participated in this survey is particular to women's LISTs. Certainly, it may or may not be representative of LIST subscribers as a whole; that is impossible to determine given the lack of comprehensive data about lesbians and bisexuals either on the Internet or in real time. Yet, since many of those who participate in the LISTs do not regularly participate in other mailing lists or in other aspects of the Internet communication, the information gathered from these LIST subscribers is unique to lesbian and bisexual women's LISTs.¹²⁵

This chapter highlights the importance of lesbian and/or bisexual women's electronic spaces and explains why almost every survey respondent stated explicitly that the women-only spaces of the LISTs were important aspects of their lives. Through the comments of LIST subscribers, discrimination and oppression in lesbian and bisexual on-line spaces is also considered in order to demonstrate that while the LISTs are important to many women's lives, they are not entirely equitable spaces; the LISTs have many of the same problems as real time lesbian and bisexual spaces.

How does an on-line space function? In order to answer that question, this chapter is divided into five sections, each of which will report on the information gained from the survey participants. The statistical information presented in this chapter is summarized in tabular form in section E of the appendix.

¹²⁴ Calculation based on survey response.

¹²⁵ Forty-seven percent of the survey respondents said that they did not subscribe to mixed gender gay and lesbian mailing lists.

The first section provides a basic picture of who participated in this survey by⁹⁰ summarizing the demographic data of the participants. It contains information about the sexual identity, age, race, education, occupation and incomes of the participants.

The second section considers the participants' relationships to the LISTS, including how they first became involved and how the LIST environment compares to their home and working environments. It does this through reporting on the degree of homophobia in their home and working environments and their degree of openness about their sexuality identities in their everyday lives.

The third section explores life on the lists; the on-line experiences of survey participants. The Internet as a space is contrasted to LIST spaces. Through survey participants' experiences, various types of LISTS are explained and the strengths and weaknesses of those lists and the spaces they create are considered.

The fourth section focuses on the interface between the on-line and real time lives of LIST participants. In this section, real time meetings and on-line romances are discussed. As well, the similarities and differences between on-line and real time discrimination and intolerance are outlined.

The final section is a critique of LIST spaces. While at first it might seem that LIST spaces provide an ideal space for lesbian and bisexual women, there are still many problems including discrimination, and a lack of equity on the LISTS which is very similar to the discrimination and lack of equity many lesbian and bisexual women experience in real life.

Sexual Identities Varied amongst Respondents.

Since this survey focused on LIST subscribers, but not exclusively on those who self identify as either lesbian or bisexual, the questionnaire asked the

respondent to choose a word or words which best described her sexual identity.¹²⁶⁹¹ Since this questionnaire was distributed to lesbian and bisexual women's electronic mailing lists (LISTs) it is no surprise that approximately seventy five percent of the respondents described themselves as either lesbian or bisexual. Approximately one-third thought of themselves as dykes and/or queers. Six percent said that they had no label and two percent were heterosexual. Thirteen percent suggested alternatives to the sexual identities given.¹²⁷ Of that thirteen percent, self-description varied from those persons who wanted no labels to those who described themselves with very specific labels such as "les-bi-dyke-queer-trans-gender bender."¹²⁸ Some included combinations of lesbian, bisexual or dyke such as "bisexual lesbian" and "dyke to bi and back." Others included specific information about the respondent's politics such as "leftover 70s dyke separatist" or "leather, pro-s/m, pro-trans."¹²⁹

It might be supposed that with the range of sexual identities described by the survey respondents, a range of definitions would be given for the words "lesbian" and "bisexual". When asked to define these words, some survey respondents wrote pages of text, others used a few sentences and a couple decided not to answer the question. Most of the respondents chose to define the words "lesbian" and "bisexual" as contingent on one of the following categories: 1) sexual and/or erotic attraction; 2) combinations of emotions and sex; 3) love and romance; 4) politics and culture; 5) sex of partner; and 6) self-identified.

¹²⁶see Appendix, Figure 4, question 30.

¹²⁷ These percentages total more than 100% because survey respondents could describe themselves using more than one sexual identity. Quite a few survey respondents commented that they appreciated a survey which allowed them, as one said, "more than one box to check or the option of not checking any boxes at all."

¹²⁸ Survey Respondent. This is a person who considers her/himself lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgendered, and into "gender bending" which is subverting or challenging gender norms and conventions.

¹²⁹ Survey Respondent. A "leftover 70's dyke separatist" is a someone who believes in a 1970's version of lesbian separatism in which lesbians avoided any contact with men or heterosexuals. For more information see Frye 1993.

Approximately twenty-five percent of the respondents said their sexual identities were based on sexual experience and/or erotic attraction. They said that lesbians were women who had sex and/or erotic attraction to other women while bisexuals had sex and/or erotic attraction to either men or women. Some of the respondents said that one did not have to have sex in order to determine their sexual identity. As one bisexual woman wrote "Lesbians (are) women who are solely attracted to other women whether or not they act on it."¹³⁰

Twenty percent of the respondents said that the differences between lesbians and bisexuals were both emotional and sexual. Lesbians have emotional and sexual relations with women while bisexuals have emotional and sexual relations with women or men. There are no sharp definitions around what constitutes emotional and sexual relations. As one lesbian wrote, "A lesbian is a woman whose sexual and emotional interests are primarily toward other women. I don't believe that if a lesbian sleeps with a man, she's not a lesbian anymore."¹³¹

Approximately fifteen percent of the survey respondents, most of whom identified as lesbian, considered the words lesbian and bisexual to be descriptors of two distinct political, sexual, and cultural groups. "A lesbian is a woman who responds exclusively to women and whose political life revolves around other women." wrote one survey respondent who also said that "bisexuals cannot be lesbians."¹³²

The remainder of those surveyed were divided almost evenly, with seven percent each, amongst three groups. There were those who believe that sexual identity is based upon solely self identification; that is, if someone declares that she

¹³⁰ Survey Respondent.

¹³¹ Survey Respondent.

¹³² Survey Respondent.

is a lesbian then she is a lesbian. There was also a group of survey respondents who⁹³ thought that the sex of a person's primary partner--the person with whom she maintains a marriage-like relationship--determines her sexual identity. If her partner is female, then she is a lesbian. If her partner is either female or male, she is bisexual. The final seven percent of those surveyed either misunderstood the question or did not answer the question.

The survey respondents' differing definitions of the words "lesbian" and "bisexual" indicate that there are many differences amongst those who self identify as lesbian and/or bisexual. There was also quite a significant number of survey respondents who did not identify with either the word lesbian or the word bisexual. The only consistent part of the lesbian and bisexual definitions offered by the survey respondents was that they involved some sort of love, sex, political identification, or partnering between women.

From this analysis of survey data, it can be concluded that the survey respondents have many differences amongst their sexual identities. The common thread which unites them is an interest in lesbian or bisexual spaces. The only perimeter of sexual identity amongst the women surveyed is that they are all frequenting the LISTs as *spaces* where women discuss love, sex, partnering, politics between and amongst women.

Such spaces of sexuality can be thought of as places where women can discuss, re-define, and passionately debate the many different meanings of female sexual identity.

Almost all of the Respondents Were between the Ages of Twenty and Fifty.

Almost all of the survey respondents were between the ages of twenty and fifty. Approximately thirty five percent were in their twenties. Forty percent were in their thirties and fifteen percent were between the ages of forty and forty-nine. Two

percent of the respondents were under the age of nineteen and five percent were between the ages of fifty and fifty-nine. No one over the age of fifty-nine participated in this survey.

A few survey respondents mentioned *ageism*, which is discrimination based on age, as a problem on the LISTS. Sometimes ageism is perpetuated by younger people against older people. As a lesbian in her fifties wrote, "It's hard when the average age is 22 and a 40 year old is thought of as old."¹³³

For a younger person, the experience of ageism on the LISTS might seem entirely different. A younger person might see ageism perpetuated against older people or she might notice that it is the older people who have age-ist assumptions about younger people. As a lesbian in her twenties wrote, "...a lot of the dykes on the lists to which I have/do subscribe are in a, shall we say, more chronologically advanced stage...and have devalued the experience/happenings that have been posted to the list(s) by younger dykes."¹³⁴

Over all, less than five percent of the survey respondents mentioned ageism as a problem on the LISTS. This does not indicate that ageism on the LISTS does not exist but probably instead reflects the relatively young age of most of the survey participants. Few of the survey participants have probably experienced age-ism in real life; therefore, it makes sense that few would see it as a problem on the LISTS.

There was an interesting correlation between the age and the sexual identity of the survey respondents. The younger the survey respondent, the more likely she was to call herself bisexual while the older the respondent, the more likely she was to call herself a lesbian. Approximately seventy-five percent of the respondents over the age of forty and sixty percent of respondents ages thirty to thirty-nine called

¹³³ Survey Respondent.

¹³⁴ Survey Respondent.

themselves *lesbians*, while *bisexual* was used by less than five percent over the age of ⁹⁵ forty, and ten percent between ages thirty to thirty-nine. The respondents under the age of thirty answered quite differently in that approximately thirty-three percent identified as *lesbian*, thirty-three percent identified as *bisexual*, and thirty-three percent chose another signifier. These differences might indicate that women in their teens and twenties are less willing to identify as *lesbian* than women over the age of thirty.

In the same way, younger women are more likely than older women to call themselves *dykes* or *queers*. Fifty percent of women in their twenties but only one-third of women over the age of thirty self-identified as a *dyke* or *queer*.

The correlation between age and sexual identity indicates that statements about the definitions and differences between lesbians and bisexuals are implicitly referring to the differences between women of different generations who may have different words or labels for their experiences.

Most of the White Respondents Did Not Identify Racism as a Problem.

When asked about their racial identity, approximately ninety percent of the survey respondents identified as White. Eight percent identified as Black, seven percent as Native, two percent as Asian, zero percent as Hispanic and eight percent identified as "Not listed" with the majority of those saying that they were Jewish.¹³⁵

The majority of the respondents to this survey were white and considered "race" to be a non-issue in their experiences on the LISTS. Most of the women of color had a different experience, one in which race was, indeed, important.

"I can see why," wrote a Black lesbian, "a group of mostly white, educated middle-class women wouldn't see racism. Race itself doesn't come up until one of 'us' walks in the room. I also believe, based on

¹³⁵ The percentages total more than 100 because biracial and multiracial survey respondents could identify with more than one race.

experience, that people--especially articulate folks--are presumed white until proven otherwise."¹³⁶

And yet, if a person of color does decide to identify themselves as such on the LISTS, they face the same kind of racism as in real life.

"What I've experienced is a discounting of black womyns' experience within the community of womyn-loving womyn--both on-line and in the hardworld."¹³⁷

Therefore, faced with the racism prevalent on many of the LISTS, women of colour choose to create their own separate lists as places where they can connect with women with similar experiences, as bell hooks says, perhaps to create a space where black women's rage against white women can be expressed. "...for transforming internalized anger into constructive, self affirming energy."¹³⁸

Electronic connections can also create a black community for those persons who live in white neighborhoods or cities. Wrote one black woman,

"(I) needed to communicate with other African American L/B/T (Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual) women. Hey, I'm the only out black dyke in this white city of 44,000." ¹³⁹

While certainly there is racism directed toward Black lesbians and bisexuals, there are also positive aspects of multiple identities. As Houston writes, "Women of color view their ethnic cultures as sources of joy and pride, not simply as sites of sorrow and agony."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Survey Respondent

¹³⁷ Survey Respondent

¹³⁸ hooks 1994, 109

¹³⁹ Survey Respondent

¹⁴⁰ Houston 1992, 50.

High Levels of Education, Low Levels of Income.

The survey respondents were, generally speaking, women who knew a lot about computers and the Internet. Unlike the general female population, quite a few were students, educators or were employed in the computing, scientific, and technological industries. Also, quite unlike the general female population, there were almost no manual, domestic, or unpaid household laborers and very few retail or service workers.

Eighty percent of the survey respondents had at least one university or college degree; thirty percent had more than one university degree. Almost all of the survey respondents had some form of post-secondary education at either college or university. The educational background of these women put them in unique positions; they had either accessed the Internet through their educational institutions, or through their educational experiences, and had gained the skills they needed to create their own Internet access.

When asked about possible barriers to LIST participation, sixty percent of respondents said that there were no barriers. Most of the remainder said that money and time were their only barriers to participation. Less than five percent of the respondents said that their lack of computer skills had presented a barrier to LIST participation.

Of the sixty percent of persons who had no difficulty in accessing the LISTs, there was no correlation between education and the difficulty of access. The main barriers faced by LIST participants—lack of money, computer skills, or time—are faced by women of every educational level, occupation, race, and age. However, income is the only factor which affected some more than others. Approximately eighty-five percent of those persons who listed lack of money for a computer as a barrier to LIST participation earned less than fifteen thousand U.S. dollars per year.

The high level of formal education amongst the respondents and the fact that⁹⁸ very few were unemployed or worked in the service industry did not translate to higher-than-average incomes. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents had a yearly income of less than fifteen thousand U.S. dollars per year. Twenty-five percent earned between fifteen and thirty thousand per year. Eighteen percent had a yearly income of thirty to forty-five thousand per year and seventeen percent had a yearly income of over forty-five thousand U.S. dollars per year.

It is not possible to know how this compares to an average U.S. or Canadian lesbian and/or bisexual's income because comprehensive statistics have not been gathered on the subject. Certainly, sexist and homophobic employment practices might cause lesbians and bisexual women to be paid less than men or heterosexual women with equal qualifications. Also, since thirty-eight percent of those surveyed consider themselves either students or educators, perhaps quite a few were working part-time. It could also be that the relatively young age of the survey respondents indicated that many had not been working long enough to hold a well paid senior position. Almost none of the survey respondents said that they were unemployed.

While this one survey of only one hundred LIST participants could not definitively describe the ways in which the entire population of LIST subscribers are employed, it does indicate that those who participate in the LISTs were probably comfortable with computers before they joined the LISTs.

Most of the Respondents were from North America.

The majority of LIST participants were located in North America with approximately seventy five percent being from the United States and fifteen percent from Canada. The remaining participants were from Europe and Australia.

Of those from the United States, approximately thirty-three percent of the participants were from the West Coast states of Washington, Oregon, and California.

Of the Californians, the majority were from the San Francisco Bay area, an area with 99 many lesbians and gays.

Amongst the Canadians who participated in the survey, approximately thirty-three percent were from Ontario and thirty-three percent were from British Columbia with the majority of those persons being from Toronto and Vancouver, also cities with many lesbians and bisexual women..

The majority of the survey participants, regardless of country, were from medium and large sized cities. Only a few were from small towns or rural areas where, on the whole, there is less public presence of lesbians and bisexual women than in cities. This information about the location of the survey participants indicates that the majority most likely were able to access public, real time lesbian and/or bisexual spaces like a women's bar, coffee shop, or softball field.

When asked where they accessed the LISTS, almost all of the respondents said that they read and/or posted to the LISTS from either their home or office computers. Sixty-six percent accessed the lists from home while thirty-two percent used workplace computers. The remainder used a friend's computer or a public access terminal.

Many of the respondents found the LISTS by searching on the web or reading Usenet posts. Once they found one LIST, they used it to find more LISTS. Twenty percent of the respondents also got the information from either real time or on-line friends. The remainder got the information from a family member, a co-worker, a classmate, or from a book.

Seventy-six percent of the survey respondents described their usual place of¹⁰⁰ access as a friendly place for lesbians or bisexuals. As one respondent explained her lesbian friendly atmosphere "I live alone and my cats are dykes."¹⁴¹

Sixteen percent said that while it was not a friendly place, it was not hostile. One percent said that their usual place of access was hostile and the remainder either did not answer the question or described their environment in another way. One respondent said that she had not experienced any difficulty yet but that she attended "...a conservative Baptist school which could potentially be very hostile."¹⁴²

These figures indicate that very few respondents were accessing the LISTs from places which were overtly hostile for lesbians and bisexual women. For the most part, the respondents were using computers located in lesbian and/or bisexual positive spaces. They were not using the LISTs to escape from a hostile environment but were, instead, using the LISTs to enhance an already positive environment.

This is further supported by the respondent's degree of "outness" in their everyday lives. Approximately seventy percent of respondents said that they were "out", that is they were open about their sexual identity. Approximately twenty-five percent said that they were only "out" to the people closest to them. The remainder were "out" to themselves and/or a partner. Therefore, the majority of the survey respondents accessed the LISTs from lesbian and/or bisexual positive environments where they could be open about their sexuality.

Minority Respondents said "Same Shit, Different Medium!"

One of the reasons why the LISTs are so important to many subscribers is that the LISTs can be seen as a refuge from the male dominated, heterosexual world. The majority of the survey respondents mentioned that they saw the LISTs as such.

¹⁴¹ Survey Respondent

¹⁴² Survey Respondent.

Yet, for a minority, notably for persons of color, fat women, older women, women with specific religious beliefs, or women who have controversial views on sexual practice, the LISTS re-inscribe the often discriminatory and usually intolerant practices of the rest of the world. "Same shit, different medium!" said one survey respondent who self-identifies as a "fatdyke" and who had experienced discrimination both in the real world and on-line because of her larger than average size.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents said that they had not experienced any form of discrimination on the LISTS. Twenty-five percent reported that they had experienced discrimination. This discrimination included racism, anti-Semitism, religious intolerance, ageism, sizism, ableism, biphobia, transphobia, and lack of tolerance for certain practices such as sadomasochism. Some said that they were discriminated against because they are polyamorous while others said that they were discriminated against because they are monogamous. One respondent mentioned that she often has to bring up the issue of accessible space. She said,

"Though folks try, they still do not particularly understand that I might not elect to go to an event that necessitates carrying me and my wheelchair in--as much as I'm loved by the carriers!!"¹⁴³

Transgendered lesbian and bisexual respondents to the survey expressed a general frustration with the lack of knowledge about transgendered lesbians and bisexual women. Wrote one male-to-female transsexual lesbian, "Individuals have occasionally expressed intolerant attitudes, or mere cluelessness, about transsexual identities and issues."

Many bisexual women reported that they had experienced biphobia on the LISTS. As one respondent wrote, "My big issue, as a Bi woman is biphobia--e.g. the

¹⁴³ Survey Respondent.

blithe assertion that Bi women single-handedly unleashed AIDS on the 'pure' Lesbians."¹⁴⁴

Another bisexual respondent wrote "There are many bi-friendly lesbians but they seem to be a minority on the Internet. As was once said in a poem 'I'm sick of lesbians who say they love women when what they REALLY mean is they only love other lesbians.'¹⁴⁵

Considering this biphobia, the next section reports on responses to the question of whether lesbians and bisexuals can co-exist on the same LIST.

Can Lesbians and Bisexuals Co-exist on the Same LIST?

It could be asserted that reluctance to call one's self "bisexual" is particularly strong amongst lesbians in environments or organizations which are hostile to bisexuals. As an unidentified bisexual woman recorded by Armstrong says, "No bi woman I know has escaped the pain of being ostracized by some elements of the lesbian community."¹⁴⁶

The question of how lesbians and bisexual women can co-operate or co-exist is one which is important for this project. When asked what they thought about co-existence on the LISTS, there was a very mixed response amongst the survey respondents, of whom over half self-identified as "lesbian" and approximately twenty percent identified as "bisexual." Almost all of the bisexuals said that they could easily share the LISTS with lesbians but approximately twenty percent of the lesbians did not want to share the LISTS with bisexual women.

One lesbian said that she did not think that lesbians and bisexuals should co-exist on the same list. She wrote, "Lesbians and Bi's have different agendas and

¹⁴⁴ Survey Respondent.

¹⁴⁵ Survey Respondent.

¹⁴⁶ Anonymous bisexual woman in Armstrong 1995, 199.

some if not all lesbians are offended especially when the Bi's talk about their male¹⁰³ partners."¹⁴⁷

While certainly many bisexual women agree not to talk about men on lesbian lists, that is not easy. "The lesbian-focused lists," wrote one bisexual woman, "do require some self-censorship for bisexual women, since we know that our romantic/other involvements with men are not discussions that are welcomed."¹⁴⁸

Although there is no singular bisexual identity, many bisexual women believe that love and sexual attraction is not contingent on the sex of a person. These bisexual women say that the traits they seek in a person are socially-constructed and can be found in men or women. Most of the bisexual women surveyed indicated that they had a distinct preference for women and quite a few stated that they were in committed relationships with women yet, by self-identifying as "bisexual" they are acknowledging that they have been or could possibly be attracted to persons of either sex.

One of the strategies that some bisexual women use to cope with biphobia is to say that they are lesbian. One survey respondent who thinks of herself as bisexual said that she publicly identifies as lesbian because she does not want to deal with "rampant biphobia." Another survey respondent says that the lesbian community in her small town is very unaccepting of bisexuals so she finds her only solace amongst the other bisexuals on the LISTS.¹⁴⁹

"There is this myth," wrote a respondent, "that all us bisexuals are cruising the Internet for sex."¹⁵⁰ The bisexual women who responded to this survey were no more likely to have real-time meetings, sex, or relationships with women they met on

¹⁴⁷ Survey Respondent.

¹⁴⁸ Survey Respondent.

¹⁴⁹ Survey Respondent.

¹⁵⁰ Survey Respondent.

the Internet than those respondents who identified as lesbians, dykes, or any other¹⁰⁴ sexual identity. On the whole, very few of the respondents, regardless of sexual identity, reported that they had found a long-term friendship or partnership, sexual or not, via the LISTS. Seventeen percent of the respondents said that they had tried to start relationships or have long distance love affairs but most of them said that the relationships did not work out. Three percent of the survey respondents said that they had started a fulfilling relationship, of any sort, via the LISTS.

Place of Refuge and Replication of Real-time Discrimination

Many of the LIST subscribers joined the LISTS in order to find a place where they could make a connection with other lesbians and/or bisexuals. Of the women who responded to this survey, the majority reported only very positive LIST experiences. They had found electronic friends with whom they could discuss politics, sports, sex, and a host of other subjects. A few had even found partners via the LISTS. Yet, there were also respondents who said that they experienced the same kind of discrimination and lack of consideration on lesbian and/or bisexual lists as they did in real-time lesbian spaces and in the heterosexual world at large. These persons noticed that due to systemic inequity based on, amongst other things, race, class, gender, and sexual practice, certain persons have more societal influence and power in lesbian and bisexual real time and on-line communities.

While the LISTS allow subscribers to decide what they will and will not reveal about themselves, there are still racist, classist and sizist assumptions, amongst others, on the LISTS. Therefore, on most lists, when a list subscriber chooses to reveal certain aspects of their identity, they might be subject to the same lack of understanding on the LISTS as in real life.

Yet specific LISTS can subvert discrimination by focusing on specific issues including race, size, and sexual practice. These specific spaces can be places of

refuge, strengthening, and political organizing for those working against discrimination of all sorts, both in real time and on the LISTs. The LISTs provide a place where people can get the strength to cope with and to fight against specific oppressions. So, for example, a lesbian woman-of-size can join a LIST of fat lesbians and get some fat-positive support. She might also find information from other LIST subscribers about how to fight against fat oppression.

The space of the LISTs is defined by the majority who are young, well educated, white lesbians and bisexuals. It is a space that meets their needs for refuge from homophobia and misogyny but that does not preclude other kinds of discrimination. Many lists do not include areas of acceptance for non-dominant groups such as women who are old, fat, or persons of colour. There was also tension amongst lesbians and bisexuals, especially amongst those lesbians who preferred not to interact with bisexuals.

Conclusion: The Interface Between Real-time and On-Line Spaces

When asked why they subscribed to the LISTs, many of the respondents replied that they were seeking a connection with a lesbian or a bisexual women's community. They wanted to have discussions with other women and to learn about the lives of others. Some said that they were seeking support because they felt isolated or because they were in the process of "coming out." In these ways, the on-line spaces of the LISTs brought LIST participants a sense of connection with a lesbian and/or bisexual community which was lacking in their real-time spaces.

The data gathered for this project indicates that while some of the survey respondents were accessing the LISTs because they lived in places where they knew of no public lesbian or bisexual spaces, the majority of the respondents lived in cities where, most likely, there were public lesbian and or bisexual women's spaces such as a bar or a coffee shop. This implies that the majority of the survey respondents

had the option to participate in both real-time and on-line lesbian and bisexual spaces.

All On-line Spaces are Not Created Equal

Respondents also said that they found the LISTS because they were unhappy with the other forms of communication available via the Internet. The vast majority of those surveyed for this thesis said that they used electronic mail and read and posted on the LISTS far more frequently than they used other aspects of Internet technology. Most of the survey respondents said they might occasionally do a search for information. Almost none of the respondents said that they chatted on local Bulletin Board Services (BBS's) and only a couple had ever "talked" via Internet Relay Chat. Quite a few people said that they had looked for lesbians or bisexual women on Usenet newsgroups but felt that they were male dominated, not lesbian-oriented. Wrote one lesbian, "I was looking for other lesbians on the net. I was fed up with the gays on soc.motss."¹⁵¹

In reference to other Internet technologies, another respondent wrote "Mailing lists are much friendlier because you get a feel for who is there and a lot less clueless hetboy nerds."¹⁵²

Another lesbian preferred the technological aspects of Usenet but valued the protection that the LISTS provided. She wrote "Usenet 'lesbian' groups are full of men and discussion about men...if it were possible to have a lesbian-only Usenet group I would MUCH prefer it...but since men will stick their dicks in wherever they can, I'm stuck with the lists."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Survey Respondent. soc.motss is a Usenet electronic bulletin board for gays. Usenet is according to Gilbert & Kile 1996 "A rather anarchistic-seeming global network of public discussion groups called newsgroups, or Usenet news." p. 24 (Author's note: Anarchistic does not translate to pro-lesbian or bisexual.) For a more in-depth study of Usenet and soc.motss, see McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith, 1995.

¹⁵² Survey Respondent.

¹⁵³ Survey Respondent.

Comments such as these indicate that the survey respondents thought that the LISTs were distinctly different from other on-line discussion spaces. Whereas other on-line spaces could be easily infiltrated by males or heterosexuals, the LISTs could be better protected as lesbian and/or bisexual positive spaces. While many of the respondents did not identify as lesbian or bisexual per-se, almost all of the respondents seemed to value the LISTs as spaces where lesbians and/or bisexuals were in the majority. Most of the survey respondents, regardless of what they called themselves, were participating in on-line LIST spaces created by women who took the sexual label *lesbian* or *bisexual*. Because most of the survey respondents did not use other aspects of the Internet, this suggests that subscribers perceive more tolerance for sexual diversity amongst the LISTs than in other on-line spaces.

There was only one problem associated with the fact that many of the respondents rarely used other aspects of the Internet--some of the LIST participants did not know the basics of Internet etiquette. One experienced Internet user expressed frustration with the lack of knowledge most of the LIST participants seemed to display about Internet etiquette. She wrote, "(I'm) not interested in 100 messages a day of one-line flirts (not directed at me:-)."154

Approximately ninety percent of the respondents said that women-only lists were very important to them. "We live in a totally male-dominated world," wrote one respondent, "Women need as much space with each other as we can--to recover and survive, as well as to try to come up with new ways of being which actually work for us."155

Many respondents said that they wanted to spend their time and/or energy interacting with other lesbians and/or bisexual women. One respondent wrote,

154 Survey Respondent. The :-) is a symbol which conveys that the comment is meant with a smile.

155 Survey Respondent.

"Women-only space is important to me in general. Mixed space causes energy to be spent on men and I do all the work."¹⁵⁶ 108

Quite a few respondents also clearly stated that they were not interested in spaces which include either male or female heterosexuals. "We don't have to get stuck in justifying our sexualities to hets!" wrote one respondent.¹⁵⁷

The remaining ten percent either did not answer the question or said that mixed-gender lists, particularly gay-oriented lists, were equally important to them. A few would be happy to subscribe to mixed gender lists for people of all sexualities. As a respondent writes "If one **could** subscribe to a mixed-gender list where the men behaved themselves and didn't come on to the women constantly, then it would be wonderful—but I have yet to find that—must be something about testosterone."¹⁵⁸

Such anti-male comments were not uncommon and indicated that many of the respondents thought that neither homosexual males nor heterosexuals of any sex were conducive to a lesbian (or bisexual) positive on-line environment. It is particularly interesting to note that the majority of the survey respondents placed great importance on the LISTs because they were spaces where they could avoid interacting with men and heterosexual women. It was perceived that interacting with lesbians, bisexuals, or other same-sex oriented women, even arguing or passionately debating, was a positive use of time and energy while to do the same with men or heterosexuals was a futile expenditure of effort. While there were men and heterosexuals lurking in the spaces of the LISTs, because they were hidden and were not allowed on most LISTs to identify themselves as male or heterosexual, most of the survey respondents perceived the LISTs as exclusively lesbian and/or bisexual.

¹⁵⁶ Survey Respondent.

¹⁵⁷ Survey Respondent.

¹⁵⁸ Survey Respondent. * —* creates an emphasis similar to italics. It is commonly used on e-mail since italics are not often possible on standard e-mail software.

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Despite the survey participants' preference for the LISTs, if asked by a friend to help her find lesbian and/or bisexual resources on the Internet, only half of the survey respondents said that they would encourage their friend to post to a LIST. An equal number of people said that they would encourage their friend to search the World Wide Web; many also said that they would send their friend to a specific web page such as Amy Goodloe's lesbian-oriented homepage.¹⁵⁹

Such a response indicates that many of the survey respondents were familiar with another Internet technology and were able to utilize it to find lesbian resources. The fact that half of the respondents said that they would send their friend to the World Wide Web instead of a LIST also states that approximately half of the survey respondents thought that the Web was a better place to gather information.

LISTs Change Real Time Lesbian and/or Bisexual Women's Spaces

Unlike a bar where women gaze at each other across an often smoky room, the space of the LISTs de-emphasize the visual first impression and replace it with a verbal first impression. For some, on-line spaces might replace social meeting places such as bars, pubs, or dances. For others, the LISTs extend the network of friends. These friends can often decide to have a real time meeting. In these ways and others which follow, on-line space might change real time lesbian and/or bisexual women's spaces.

One change which on-line spaces might make to real time spaces is that the real time space will have an on-line extension. This, for example, might take the form of a LIST and a web page for a lesbian community group. The on-line extension can function as a source of information for those persons who are not able to attend the real time meetings. It might also replace the need for real time meetings especially

¹⁵⁹ Amy Goodloe is an extraordinary lesbian LIST wrangler, web page designer, and owner of a woman-oriented, Macintosh-based Internet training business. She can be reached at <http://www.best.com/~agoodloe/home.html>.

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for geographically dispersed groups who do not have the money for travel or long distance calls. An on-line extension of a real time space might also advertise the real time space. So, for example, if a women's bar has a LIST of its patrons, it can inform them of upcoming events and it can also solicit input from current or potential customers.

As was stated earlier in this thesis, minority groups on the Internet often create specific LISTs targeted toward their individual needs. These spaces can be places of affirmation and healing for those women who do not have the opportunity to interact with similar women in their daily lives. They can also be tremendous sources of information for women who have difficulty finding information or role models in mainstream lesbian books or magazines. Such a forum has the ability to give its subscribers the confidence, support, and information they need to fight real time discrimination.

While such forums can indeed be empowering, as the Internet population increases, so might the necessity for specific minority LISTs. This could create hundreds of LISTs, each with a different focus. Such a large number of LISTs could benefit minority groups but they might not challenge, and therefore change, intolerant or discriminatory attitudes on general lesbian and/or bisexual lists and in real-life.

Chapter Five: The Interface Between On-line Spaces and Real-time Identities for this and Future Projects

In the first chapter, it was stated that the purpose of this thesis was to study the interface between the on-line and the real-time lives of LIST participants. In particular, the question was raised as to how on-line experiences might affect real-time lives and vice versa. In order to create an opportunity for asking such questions, a questionnaire was developed, distributed, and evaluated according to theory and methodology outlined in chapters two and three. This chapter will explain how the project data, as reported in chapter four created information for further research and answered the initial objectives which were to ask how their lives on-line have affected the respondents' real time lives and vice versa.

On-line and Real time Lives

In the spaces of the LISTs, there seem to be a few different areas in which the interface becomes most apparent. On-line spaces affect real-time identities when LIST participants meet in real-time or when they provide support for each other during real-time life events such as the coming out process. Even when lesbians and bisexuals from different countries are comparing and contrasting experiences, unprecedented cross-boundary communication is happening. In this way, the LISTs are allowing people to ask questions and to learn things they might not hear about elsewhere.

Real-time identities affect who and what is being communicated in on-line spaces. The real-time information gathered for this project, while not a comprehensive picture of lesbians and bisexual women on the LISTs, provides a starting point for asking questions about LIST accessibility and usefulness for lesbians and bisexuals. For example, survey respondents said that their real time environments were, for the most part, friendly or at least not hostile places. This

indicates that perhaps lesbian and/or bisexual-positive real time environments enable¹¹²
LIST subscribers to access lesbian and bisexual-positive on-line spaces.

This is an important political question because perhaps the on-line spaces of the Internet are not helping to improve the lives of those who might need it most—those who might access the LISTs from hostile environments. Instead, maybe the spaces of the LISTs, and perhaps other on-line spaces are accessible only those who are fortunate enough to already live in a lesbian or bisexual positive environment.

Future of LIST Spaces

There seemed to be a few things missing in this project. These might have been captured through asking different questions, using a different methodology, or targeting specific groups. Many research ideas were discovered which were beyond the scope of, or tangential to, this project but are mentioned in this chapter as areas for further research.

Many people seem to be concerned about the future of Internet technologies such as the LISTs and, in particular how such rapidly changing technology might permanently change lesbian and/or bisexual communities. Therefore, the final section of this chapter contains speculations of ways in which spaces of the LISTs might change real time lesbian and/or bisexual women's spaces. Will they continue to be spaces of subversion?

Asking Different Questions

This survey was missing a specific question about gender within lesbian and/or bisexual women's communities. In particular, the presentation of theoretical information about masculine women and, in particular, butch lesbians would have been enhanced by an understanding of the survey respondents' opinion about masculine women and butches. As it was, a few women, namely those women who subscribe to a particular LIST dedicated to butch lesbians, mentioned the topic but

none of the respondents gave any in-depth information about their opinions of masculine women.

Another question which might have been asked was where the participant found the survey advertisement. This would have given me an indication of which LISTs ran the advertisement and, therefore, which groups of women were more likely to have responded to the advertisement.

It would have been interesting to know how the survey respondents have access to electronic mail. Is it provided at no additional charge by their employer or university? Was it a service they purchased privately? Or were they using a community-based Freenet account? Answers to these questions would indicate how much LIST access was costing this fairly low income group of people. Along the same idea, it would have been interesting to know how the subscribers chose an Internet Service Provider for their electronic mail and/or Internet service. Was it, for example, run by a lesbian or a gay man? Was it advertised in a gay, lesbian, or bisexual publication? Was any lesbian or bisexual Internet information provided when they first went on-line? Answers to these questions might have indicated how or if the survey respondents were supporting gay, lesbian, or bisexual Internet-oriented businesses.

Using a Different Methodology

There were strengths to the methodology used in this project. It was, for example, respectful of the respondents and it did not intrude onto LISTs where it was not wanted. It was also a methodology which heavily relied on cooperation and help from the on-line LIST communities. While this helped me to collect approximately one hundred completed surveys, it is suspected that this is actually a fairly small number, perhaps one or two percent of LIST subscribers and, therefore, it could not be considered a representative cross section or even a random survey of LIST

subscribers. Yet, there were enough responses that I was not able to have on-going¹¹⁴ discussions with every respondent.

In summary, it seems as if there were too many respondents for an in-depth profile of each—something which might have been able to explain the respondents' individual experiences. Also, there were not enough respondents and not enough information about the lesbian and bisexual women's populations on the Internet to get an accurate, broad based sample.

Targeting Specific Groups

As was previously stated, the LISTs are important for some because they provide places to meet like-minded women. For others, the LISTs are important because they provide opportunities to explore and develop ideas about identity. Yet for others, the LISTs, or at least a specific LIST, can be an important space of refuge from a lesbian or bisexual world which can sometimes be as hostile as the rest of the world.

One of the criticisms which might be given to this thesis is that it describes a diverse group of Lesbian and Bisexual women's LISTs in very general terms. A more in-depth focus on one of the specific minority or specialty groups, such as fatdykes, black lesbians, or lesbian academics might have given a more broad based picture of how particular LIST subscriber feel about different LISTs. So, for example, if just one LIST had been studied, then more in-depth data might have been gathered about the specific nuances of that LIST. The history of the LIST could have been discussed as well as the LIST owner's motivations for starting and/or maintaining the LIST.

Suggestions for Further Research

In researching for this thesis, I came across topics which would provide beneficial knowledge of lesbian and/or bisexual communities. These include profiles of specific LIST owners and/or moderators, a study of the geographical location and

security of the LISTs' Internet Service Providers, and profiles of lesbian and/or bisexual couples who met on-line.

A profile of specific LIST owners and/or moderators would be very interesting because these are the persons who make the LISTs happen. They are women with the technical expertise to set up and maintain the LISTs. They are also the women who often pay out of their own pockets for an Internet Service Provider to host the LISTs. Without dedicated LIST owners, many of whom donate upward of ten hours per week of their time to moderate the list, the lists would not be the woman-controlled, lesbian and bisexual positive spaces. In particular, it would be interesting to know why LIST moderators decided to start spending their time and money this way.

With governments around the world drafting or already passing legislation to control what is transmitted via the Internet, it would be interesting to know which governments' new laws, or enforcement of current laws, against electronic transmission of lesbian and or bisexual information might destroy or censor conversations on the LISTs. In particular, as Internet surveillance technology becomes more and more sophisticated, lesbians and/or bisexuals who live in places where homosexuality is against the law might choose not to affiliate with lesbian and bisexual on-line spaces. Even in those places where accessing the lesbian and/or bisexual conversations of the LISTs would not be breaking the law, the transmission of certain information such as explicit sexual information or images might be a violation of law. The surveillance of such transmissions might also be embarrassing to persons in public positions.

While many of the survey respondents indicated that they had not had much success in finding a partner on-line, it was and is certainly a topic of conversation on many LISTs. Since there seem to be so many isolated lesbians or so many lesbians who have exhausted their network friends and ex-lovers, it makes sense that many

are looking on-line for potential romance. It would be interesting to know how those¹¹⁶ who are successful actually went about meeting each other. Did they post an electronic advertisement? Did they casually start e-mailing? Were they introduced by mutual cyberfriend? How did it happen? And in what way does such a relationship, particularly a long-distance or international relationship, differ from more local or real-time relationships?

If different groups such as lesbians and bisexual women learn to co-exist on-line, then maybe each will learn more about the other and there will be more co-operation amongst lesbians and bisexuals in real time. In particular, if a plurality of sexual identities can become more widely accepted, then there will be fewer conflicts, both on-line and off-line, over what is, for example, authentic lesbian identity.

As the number of LIST subscribers increase, it will remain to be seen if individual LIST owners and their Internet Service Providers can financially support the creation and maintenance of the LISTs. Therefore, corporations, governments or non-profits might take over the financial responsibility for the LIST. Those institutions would then be able to distribute whatever information they wanted. Lesbian and bisexual-oriented businesses such as book sellers might soon realize that LISTs are an excellent way to reach a young, educated group of lesbian and bisexual women. They might create, for example, a lesbian book discussion LIST which is funded by a particular publishing house and where information and discussion about lesbian publications, especially publications from the sponsoring publishing house, can take place.

Conclusion: Translating This Research to Other Projects

It should be remembered that whatever the weaknesses of this project, it did gather concrete information that the spaces of the LISTs are certainly very important

to one particular group of LIST subscribers. Questions were asked in this project which gave the LIST subscribers opportunities to explain their experiences and voice their opinions. This created a set of data which, to my knowledge, has a unique subject matter. As the Internet gains more and more users, it should be expected that lesbians and/or bisexual women's spaces on the Internet will be the subject of future research projects. It is hoped that this project, and the data gathered therein, will inform the theoretical framework of future research in three ways.

The first way in which this research informs future research on the subject is that it determined that on-line and off-line lesbian spaces were inextricably linked through the life experiences of the LIST subscriber. Therefore, in designing future Internet projects, it is hoped that neither space will be considered without considering the other. That means that lesbian and/or bisexual Internet research should consider how on-line experiences often mirror off-line realities especially in terms of racism and harassment.

It is also hoped that the information gathered in this research shows that while lesbian and bisexual women's spaces are important meeting places for lesbian and bisexual women, there are a substantial number of people who are participating in these spaces but do not call themselves lesbian or bisexual. While these findings are not unique, they underscore the importance of remembering the diversity within lesbian or bisexual spaces. This is not just diversity amongst lesbians and/or bisexuals but a recognition of the methodological difficulty of making sharp spatial divisions between lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexual women.

The third hope for future projects, in particular feminist geographical projects, is a hope that the conceptual categories of *sex* and *gender* will be refined to consider the possibility of the masculine female. For with such a possibility, the experiences of many lesbians, gay women, bisexuals, and other sexual minorities can be told.

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Appendix A, Letter of Consent for Survey Participants

LETTER OF CONSENT

I agree to participate in lesbian and bisexual wimmin's electronic list research being conducted by K. Celeste Wincapaw, Master's student, Geography Department, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6 Canada. This research is being supervised by Dr. Fran Klodawsky, Geography Department, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6 Canada.

I understand that this research will focus on my opinions and perceptions of LESBIAN and BI-WIMMEN'S INTERNET LISTs. I know that my participation in this study is voluntary and I may withdraw from this study at any time.

I understand that participation in this research will involve:

-The completion of 30 questions (38 questions for list moderators) which may be submitted via electronic mail or regular mail. If the questionnaire is returned via e-mail, I understand that e-mail systems are not entirely private and sometimes e-mail accounts may be unknowingly monitored. While I know that Celeste will do everything within her control to keep the questionnaire private, I understand that there is risk involved in sending confidential information via e-mail.

-If I wish, I may request a survey be sent via FAX or snail mail. I may also decide to get the information via e-mail but to return it via snail mail. I understand that if I choose to return the questionnaire via snail mail, Celeste will, upon request, reimburse me with a Canadian or American stamp. (Celeste apologizes for the North American centred-ness of this project.)

-If I wish, I may consent to a taped telephone interview instead of a questionnaire. I can e-mail Celeste my phone number and the best time to call and she'll call me.

-Complete confidentiality. Only Celeste and her direct supervisor, Fran Klodawsky will have access to the questionnaires.

--Protection of my identity. My name, e-mail address, and any other personal identifiers will be omitted or changed before the research is presented to anyone other than the researcher. I understand that if I don't want to use my real name, I can "sign" the consent form with my e-mail address.

I understand that parts of this research may be used for a Master's thesis which will be available at the Carleton University library or electronically from the author. The research may also be presented at conferences or published.

I know that if I am under the age of eighteen, my parent and/or guardian must consent to my participation in this survey.

Name (or e-mail address) of survey participant:

Name of parent or guardian (if participant is under the age of 18):

Date:

Appendix B, Advertisement for Survey Participants

Make your opinions heard!

Participate in the Lesbian/Bi-Wimmins' List Survey, 1995.

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT...

It's an electronic survey of subscribers and owners/administrators of lesbian and bi-wimmins' lists. I am particularly interested in what you, a subscriber and/or list administrator, have to say about your experiences with les-bi lists. How often do you read or post? Who have you met? How do you think lesbian and bi-wimmin are co-existing on les and bi lists? Who should be considered "lesbian" and what is "dyke-only" electronic space? These are the kind of questions I would like to ask you as part of a multi-list survey.

HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT REQUIRE...

Probably 30 minutes. It might take more if you have some really juicy stories to share and it might take less time if you choose not to answer some of the questions. There are 30 multiple choice and open-ended questions to answer. (38 for list administrators). Plus a consent form to read and "sign."

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU...

Well, to be honest, you are doing me a tremendous favor by participating. I can only offer the following to you: 1) If you are interested in finding particular lesbian resources on the 'Net, I might be able to help. 2) If you are interested in the results of the survey, I can send a summary of the data (upon request) to any study participant. 3) If you have a story you want to tell and you WANT your real name on it, I'll publicly cite you as the official source. (That means you'll get some publicity when I (hopefully) publish.) 4) Unless you specifically ask for publicity, the identity of all participants will be kept COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL.

WHO'S COMPILING THE DATA...

Just so you know a bit about me, I am an "out" lesbian graduate student in the Department of Geography, Carleton University, Ottawa. My paid employment is as a researcher in feminist geography and I'm also a rural-book-geek-lesbo-dyke. My dream is to be a lesbian studies/geography professor so I've been busy presenting at conferences and I facilitate a queer studies collective. I use my Internet accounts (all four of them) almost everyday and I'm currently teaching myself to write a homepage.

WHO'S SUPERVISING THE PROJECT...

My advisor is Dr. Fran Klodawsky, Department of Geography, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, K1S 5B6 Canada. The project has also been approved by the Ethics

Committee for Research with Human Subjects, Carleton University.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED...

If you have any questions or if you're interested in participating in this study, please e-mail me A.S.A.P at:

"kcw@host.cnwligs.net" or via snail mail at: K. Celeste Wincapaw, P. O. Box 24, Martintown, Ontario K0C 1S0, Canada.

I hope you feel comfortable typing to me. I welcome your comments and constructive criticism. All inquiries will be answered with respect and discretion. I hope to hear from you soon!

i. Some made comments about what respondents had in common with the researcher.

>> WHO'S COMPILING THE DATA...

>> Just so you know a bit about me, I am the only "out" lesbian
>> graduate student in the Department of Geography, Carleton
>> University, Ottawa. My paid employment is as a researcher in
>> feminist geography and I'm also a rural-book-geek-lesbo-dyke.
cool sounds a bit like myself

>> My dream is to be a lesbian studies/geography professor so I've
>> been busy presenting at conferences and I facilitate a queer
>> studies collective.

1) Right on.

2) Another Canadian dyke!

ii. Some persons offered to help the researcher with the project.

1) i'm a south asian queer woman in the department of english at the
university of XX. cultural geography is quite the thing here..i've just returned from a
south asian conference where someone talked about cartography and its mapping of
south asian queers. so, count me in, and do send me the survey. i'll post your request
on the
south asian lesbian listserv.

2) Please send me your survey. Let me know any other ways in which I can help too.

3) Please forward a copy of your survey to me. If it is okay, I would also
like to forward the copy on to my honey. Thanks in advance!

iii. Some people made statements about how much they'd appreciated a particular
mailing list.

1) Hey there Celeste - I'd be happy to participate in your survey - lord knows the
women on dykenet have been my salvation at times over the last few months.

iv. Some people discussed their identities.
celeste,

1) i'm a 25-yr-old lesbian (in transition from a bi identity) law student
who read your ad concerning the survey for les/bi womyn. i'd love to
participate in it, so feel free to mail me any materials you wish.

2) Oh yeah, about me. . . I'm a midwestern attorney. I'm mid 30's, femme and it's real
hard out here.

Take care!

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3) Be happy to help out :-)

You are welcome to use (or not) my name. I've been "out" a long while and have been well known and not so well known. No matter.

v. Some people were supportive of the idea of a lesbian geography professor.

Hi Celeste,

Saw your post on euro-sappho list. I would be willing to participate - no problem! Anything for a future lesbian geography professor ;-))!

vi. Other researchers sympathized with the need for participants.

1) Read your post on Lesac-net. I'll fill out your survey! As a grad student in social work and a research assistant, I have an appreciation for research and the need for participants.

2) I'd be more than happy to participate in your survey. I'm a researcher myself, but of a different type. I'm a social work grad student

vii. Some people asked questions about the research.

1) I already sent you a reply that I'd participate, but I have one question. Where do transgendered people fit? Thanks.

2) Well, what interests me most, as a scientist, is: what is the main, or underlying question? Why do you want to know all of this, how will you go about generalising your data etc.

Don't misunderstand me, I don't question your sincerity, but I question the validity & value of such enquiries through the net.

Appendix D, Survey Questionnaire

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SECTION II, LESBIAN AND BI-WIMMIN'S LIST SURVEY

(30 questions for list subscribers and administrators)

Note: Be sure to read, understand, and "sign" the attached consent form before you complete this questionnaire.

Directions: Questions may be open-ended or multiple choice. For the multiple choice, please make an "X" in front of your chosen answers. For example, in the sample question my answer was "C" so I typed an "X" in front of it.

Sample Question: Does a cat sit with you while you use your computer?

- a. no
- b. yes, and it does not touch the computer
- Xc. yes, and it tries to swat the pointer on the screen

ACCESSING LESBIAN AND BI-WIMMIN'S LISTS

1. How did you find your first electronic les-bi list?

(Please "X" one)

- a. from a friend
- b. from someone at home
- c. from someone at school
- d. from someone at work
- e. from somewhere on the Internet
- f. other (please describe)

2. Why did you access your first lesbian or bi-wimmins' list?

3. What (if anything) made it difficult for you to access les-bi lists? (Please "X" as many as needed)

- a. lack of computer skills
- b. lack of money for a computer
- c. lack of time to learn
- e. nothing was difficult
- f. other (please describe)

4. Which lesbian or bi wimmins' lists do you subscribe to?

5. Do you subscribe to any other same-sex lists? If so, which? (gay, glb, queer, etc.)

6. Where are you most often accessing your e-mail account(s) where you subscribe to lesbian lists?

(Please "X")

- a. at home
- b. at work
- c. at a public terminal
- d. at school or university

e. other (please describe)

7. Is your usual place of access (home, work, etc.) a les-bi friendly place? (Please "X")

- a. It's a les-bi friendly place
- b. It's not a les-bi friendly place but it's not hostile
- c. It's a les-bi hostile place
- d. other (please describe)

8. Have you ever experienced any harassment from someone who knew you from a lesbian list? (Please "X" as many as necessary)

- a. no
- b. yes, I complained to the harasser's postmaster
- c. yes, I ignored the harassment
- d. yes, I quit using the list
- e. yes, I publicly re-posted the harasser's mail.
- f. yes, I did something else (please describe)

9. If you have ever had hostile comments (or flames) directed to you because of something you posted on a les-bi list, what was your WORST experience? (Please describe)

10. Have you ever had a real-time meeting with anyone from a les-bi list? (Please "X")

- a. no
- b. no, but I plan to meet someone
- b. yes

11. Have you ever had a relationship (interpret that as love, romance, or sex) with someone you met via a les-bi list? (Please "X")

- a. no
- b. no, but I'd like to...
- c. yes

12. If you have had a relationship with someone from a les-bi list, how has it worked out? (Please explain)

USING YOUR INTERNET ACCOUNT TO ACCESS LES-BI RESOURCES

13. For what LES-BI PURPOSES do you use your Internet account? (Please "X" as many as are applicable and indicate the frequency of your use)

- a. e-mail personal correspondence with other lesbian and bi-wimmin

times per week _____

b. e-mail business/academic correspondence on les-bi issues

times per week _____

c. READ about les-bi issues on Usenet bulletin boards (like lesbian.feminist.poetry)

times per week _____

d. POST about les-bi issues on Usenet bulletin boards

times per week _____

e. READ mail from a les-bi listserv

times per week _____

f. POST mail to a les-bi listserv

times per week _____

g. search for les-bi information (via gopher, library connection, World Wide Web, etc.)

times per week _____

h. use IRC to talk on a les-bi channel (i.e., Sappho)

times per week _____

i. "talk" on a les-bi BBS's

times per week _____

YOUR ADVICE AND OPINIONS

14. In what way has your experiences on les-bi lists differed from your experiences on Usenet bulletin boards for: a) lesbian and bisexual wimmin, and b) queer or gay people?

15. If another les-bi came to you for advice on how to find lesbian and/or bi wimmin on or through the Internet, where would you tell that person to begin?

16. Do you think that lesbian and bi wimmin's listserves should be well publicized so other les-bi wimmin can find them or do you think they should keep a low profile to minimize problems from (usually)

straight harassers?

17. In your own words, please define the words "lesbian" and "bisexual."

18. Do you think lesbians and bi-wimmin should co-exist on the same lists? What has your experience been?

19. Are wimmin-only lists important to you? why or why not?

20. Have you "come out" while subscribing to les-bi lists?

a. no

b. yes (If so, how do you think the lists affected your "coming-out" process?)

TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF...

21. Where do you live? (only include City, Province/State, Country):

22. Your age? (please "X" one)

a. younger than 19 years old.

b. 19-29

c. 30-39

d. 40-49

e. 50-59

f. 60-69

g. 70 plus

23. Your race? (Please "X" more than one, if suitable)

a. Black

b. Asian

c. Native

d. White

e. Hispanic

f. Not listed (please describe)

24. Do you have a disability (or difference of ability)? If so, has electronic communication helped you overcome any barriers?

25. Your educational background? (Please "X" one):

a. Have not completed high school

b. Have completed high school

c. Have completed some college or university

d. Have technical college diploma

e. Have one university degree

f. Have more than one university degree

26. Your occupation? (Please "X" more than one if you have dual occupations)

- a. domestic labourer
- b. student or educator
- c. office work (clerical or professional)
- d. retail or service work
- e. health care professional
- f. manual laborer
- g. unemployed
- h. other (please specify)

27. What is your personal annual income in U. S. dollars?
(Please "X" one)

- a. less than \$15, 000
- b. \$15,001-30,000
- c. \$30,001-45,000
- d. \$45,001-60,000
- e. \$60,001-75,000
- f. \$75,001-90,000
- g. \$90,001 plus

28. Have you experienced discrimination (specific incidence or general attitude) while using les-bi lists? (ie. racism, able-ism, etc.)
If so, what happened?

29. How would you describe your degree of "outness" about your sexuality? (please "X" as many as apply)

- a. I'm "out" to everyone.
- b. I'm "out" to almost everyone
- c. I'm "out" to people who are close to me.
- d. I'm "out" to my partner
- e. I'm "out" to myself
- f. other (please describe)

30. How would you describe your sexuality?

- a. lesbian
- b. bisexual
- c. dyke/queer
- d. heterosexual
- e. I defy description
- f. other (please describe)

Thank you, thank you, thank youuuuuu
for taking the time to answer these questions.
I welcome any questions, comments, and
constructive criticism about this survey or my
research.

Remember to return this survey to me at
"kcw@host.cnw.igs.net" or snail mail it to me at:
K. Celeste Wincapaw, P. O. Box 24, Martintown,
Ontario, KOC 1S0, CANADA

Appendix E: Summary of Quantitative Data in Approximate Percentages

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Returning the Questionnaire

Approximately 200 people requested a copy of the questionnaire.

Approximately 100 people returned usable questionnaires and letters of consent.

15 % returned their questionnaire via regular mail

95% asked for anonymity.

5% asked that their real name be used.

Sexual Identities

75% self identified as either lesbian or bisexual.

33% self identified as either dyke or queer.

6% refused to label their sexual identity.

2% self identified as heterosexual.

13% suggested alternative identities.

In Explaining Differences between Lesbians and Bisexuals

20% described them as a combination of emotional and sexual differences.

15% described them as political, sexual, and cultural.

7% as a difference of self-identification.

7% as contingent on the sex of a partner.

7% described it differently or did not answer the question.

The Ages of the Survey Respondents

2% 19 and under

35% in their 20's

40% in their 30's

15% in their 40's

5% in their 50's

0% over the age of 59

Age/Sexual Identification

75% over the age of 40 called themselves lesbians.

60% of respondents in their 30's called themselves lesbians.

33% under the age of 30 called themselves lesbians.

Less than 5% over the age of 40 called themselves bisexual.

Approximately 10% in their 30's called themselves bisexual.

33% under the age of 30 called themselves bisexual.

33% of women over the age of 30 called themselves dykes or queers.

50% of women in their 20's called themselves dykes or queers.

Race (totals more than 100% due to biracial and multiracial responses)

90% White

8% Black

7% Native

2% Asian

0% Hispanic

8% Not listed (mostly Jewish)

Education

80% had at least one university degree.
30% had more than one university degree.

Barriers to Internet Usage

60% had no barriers.
Less than 5% said that lack of computer skills was a barrier.

Income

37% had a yearly income of less than \$15,000 U.S.
25% had a yearly income of \$15-30,000 U.S.
18% had a yearly income of \$30-45,000 U.S.
17% had a yearly income of over \$45,000 U.S.

Location

75% U.S.A
15% Canada
10% Europe and Australia

Places of Internet Access

66% home
32% work
2% friend's computer or a public terminal

Degree of Homophobia at Place of Access

76% friendly for lesbians and/or bisexuals
16% not friendly but not hostile
1% hostile
7% other

Degree of Openness About Sexuality

70% out to everyone or almost everyone
25% out to people close to them
5% out to only themselves and/or partner

90% of respondents said that Women-only LISTs were very important to them.

If asked by a friend to locate lesbian and/or bisexual resources on the Internet,
50% would refer their friend to the LISTs,
50% would refer their friend to the World Wide Web.

Discrimination

75% had not experience discrimination on the LISTs.
25% had experienced discrimination on the LISTs.

Almost 100% of bisexual women would willingly share LISTs with lesbians but 20% of lesbians did not want to share LISTs with bisexual women.

Finding Real-time Relationships

17% tried to find real time friends or lovers via the LISTs.

3% had found a fulfilling relationship of any sort via the LISTS.