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# An Interview with Robyn Ochs

March 11, 2020

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*Robyn Ochs is an educator, speaker, grassroots activist, writer, and editor of [Bi Women Quarterly](#). She has served on the board of MassEquality, and on the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth. She was named by Teen Vogue as one of “9 Bisexual Women Who are Making History,” and she was chosen to represent Massachusetts on the Advocate’s “50 States, 50 Heroes” list. Elizabeth Zwart, a Master’s in Public Policy Candidate at Harvard Kennedy School, interviewed Robyn on her perspectives on the evolution of bi activism:*

### *Zwart: What was growing up like for you?*

I grew up in New York City “BG,”—before Google, and that informs my experience. I was a teenager in the 1970s. I grew up in a left of center, alternative home, but even there I don’t remember a single conversation about LGBTQ+ stuff, ever. Politically, we were active; I grew up going to anti-war, civil rights, and anti-nuclear marches. We’d wake up at 4AM to meet outside the public library to board a chartered bus and drive to a protest in D.C. I stuffed envelopes at McCarthy and McGovern headquarters when each was running for president and handed out campaign literature outside the subway station. When I was 10, I had a poem titled “The Tragedy of War” published in *Broadside*, a folk music magazine. The hippies were 10 years older than me, but as a kid I hung out with them. My mother often had random teenagers living in our basement, and I thought they were really cool.

### *What was the first moment you started to question your sexuality?*

I started college where I promptly fell head over heels in love with this woman on my hall and I had to figure out what this meant and what to call it. I quickly concluded I was bisexual after playing what I call the “20/20 hindsight game” where I looked back and reviewed my past, looking for information and clues. I concluded that my previous attractions to various guys had been real and not performative, so I knew I wasn’t a lesbian. I was most definitely attracted to this woman, and I realized I had earlier crushes on girls that I had not understood at the time as crushes! Clearly, I was bisexual.

### *What was it like for you internally to have feelings for her?*

Having a crush is exciting. It was also terrifying because I didn’t have the skills, self-confidence, or support to integrate my bisexuality into my public identity. I knew who I was, but I didn’t know how to *be* a bisexual person in the 1970s. And growing up BG, I couldn’t pull out my smartphone to seek support or answers to my questions. I was stuck in the space between knowing and being.

## *It sounds like at that point you weren't plugged into the lesbian community either – why?*

Through my friendship with the woman on whom I had a crush, and with the three gay men who were my besties at school, I was structurally immersed in “the community,” but I was not out. Ernesto, Terrance, and Kenny were my tickets to “gay town.” I could enter “gay and lesbian” spaces with them without having to declare my own identity. Looking back, I think I was drawn to them in part for this reason, but I didn't do so consciously. What I heard while listening in these spaces made me feel it would be unsafe to come out. I heard lesbians and gay men say obnoxious and horrible things about bisexual people – “Everyone's really gay or straight” / “Bisexuals are untrustworthy” / “I would *never* date a bisexual.” Back then, “the lesbian and gay community” meant only lesbian and gay, not trans and not bisexual.

## *Was there harassment or unwelcomeness from straight students?*

I never really heard anything specific. I just knew it would not be safe to come out. I cared much more at the time about whether I belonged to the lesbian community, and I didn't, I really didn't. I survived college somehow – and I engaged in some of the coping behaviors associated with minority stress: cigarette smoking, excessive drinking, disordered eating. It wasn't until I finally began coming out to others that I realized how much I had been suffocating in my own silence.

## *After college, you started coming out. During that time, how did the lesbian community view bi women?*

Back then there was much more of a divide between lesbian and not lesbian because it wasn't safe to be out. Bi women were viewed as tourists coming to soak up some lesbian energy before ultimately going back to their heterosexual, safe, validated lives. There was the notion that bisexuals were simply lesbians in denial who hadn't finished “coming out” yet. There was the idea that bisexual women were not trustworthy, bad relationship material – all these tropes were healthy and thriving. Bi women were part of the community, but we were not recognized. In 1983, I went to my first women's music concert to see Cathy Winter and Betsy Rose in Hartford, Connecticut. Women's music was at the time

considered synonymous with lesbian music, and it was assumed that Cathy and Betsy were both lesbians. Years later, I learned that both Cathy and Betsy identify as bi. I think they knew that if they came out as bi, they would lose audience. Anyway, several months after going to that concert, I moved to Boston.

### *How was the move to Boston?*

My very first week in Boston, I opened up *Equal Times*, the local feminist newspaper, and I saw a calendar listing for “Women’s Rap,” a weekly discussion group at the Women’s Center in Cambridge. The listed topic for that week happened to be bisexuality. I was so excited. At the time, I was aware of only three bisexual people in the entire planet (including myself), so this was huge. I had been plastering and painting my new apartment, and I remember scrubbing plaster out of my fingernails and eyebrows and hair trying to get clean so I could go to the meeting. I walked into the living room at the Women’s Center and there were 20 women in the room!

### *Were all the women in the group bisexual?*

Nineteen of us. The twentieth was a lesbian named Madge who had come to cruise – true story. We met for two hours and it was life-changing for me. I don’t think I was certain until that moment that there were nineteen bisexual people in the *world*. I thought we were so rare. At the end of that meeting, this woman Marcia Diehl stood up and asked, “Is anyone in this room interested in starting an ongoing support group?” Six women in the room and two more who we added later became the BiVocals, and we met monthly for 10 years. We were eight women who disagreed about lots of things, but it was the one space where our identities were not challenged, and where we didn’t have to defend ourselves all the time. In this space, our bisexuality was unconditionally respected.



*Robyn Ochs (left) and members of the Boston Bisexual Women's Network march at Boston Pride in 1983.*

### *What was your experience starting the Boston Bisexual Women's Network like?*

During our first year of existence, the BiVocals encouraged two more support groups to form. Together, we decided to organize and so we held an open meeting. We expected about 30 women because we were about 20 from the three support groups, and we expected more would show up. Turned out there were more than twice that number. There were women covering every inch of the floor and squeezed onto the chairs and sofas. Some were outside in the hallway, and others outside in the flowerbeds peering in through the windows. The Boston Bisexual Women's Network was born in September of 1983. We started holding monthly meetings. We met at Somewhere Else, a women's bar, and in the basement of New Words Bookstore. And we started *Bi Women*, which is now *Bi Women Quarterly*.\*

## *How was the bisexual women's scene connecting with the broader LGBTQ movement?*

We were not feeling welcomed. As for how we connected with the broader movement: four of the BiVocals were in our mid-twenties and four in our mid-thirties. The “older” women and two of us younger ones had come out of the lesbian or feminist movements.

There had been a wave of bi organizing in the United States in the 1970s that was focused on sexual liberation. The second wave of bi organizing in the '80s arose, to a large degree, out of the lesbian movement. Some of the women who took up bi advocacy had previously identified as – or had been presumed to be – lesbians.

To put this into larger historical context, what I think happened is that there was a point where the “lesbian movement” reached a critical mass such that it could start to acknowledge and engage with its own complexities. Some who had always been there began to speak up and assert their citizenship in this movement: women of color, women with disabilities, bisexual women, Jewish women, working class women, trans women – there was this whole movement of sub-groups saying, “We are here, and we insist on being seen in our wholeness. Recognize us.” If you look back, you will find a wave of anthologies that reflect this trend.

## *In your view, why was there resistance to bi folks in the lesbian and gay community?*

I think that the resistance coming from lesbians was different from that coming from gay men. From gay men toward bi men, it was a dismissal, like, “Uh huh. Sure you are, honey. We all know you're *really* gay.” From lesbians, we were perceived as a threat. There was fear that any woman who identified as bi had not fully committed to the community and the movement and that – when the going got tough – she would go off to the suburbs and find a husband. It was the fear of being abandoned, based on the notion that the privileges of heterosexuality are so great and the benefits of identifying as lesbian so small that anyone who could would ultimately choose heterosexuality.

There was also a perception that lesbian communities' very identities were threatened by these outsiders trying to join our movement and change our culture and asking us to see things differently or use different language. People

thought, “how dare they, and who the hell are they, anyway? They showed up out of nowhere and they’re trying to invade the spaces that we worked so hard to build, and now they’re diluting our movement.”

This is, of course, not factual because some of the women who built those spaces were bi. I was one of those people. In the 1980s, I produced a good number of “women’s music concerts” in the Boston area; I was building this culture.

### *What was the relationship like between bi women and bi men?*

There were some wonderful bi men who were connected to us: friends, friends of friends, partners, and activists doing similar work. Some of these men wanted us to open up and become a mixed-gender group. But there were some men who were showing up in bi women’s spaces or mixed-gender bi spaces in search of sex or a bi girlfriend, and we were uncomfortable with that. We felt predated upon. Also, the atmosphere and the power dynamics are different in mixed-gender spaces. We wanted space to discuss issues that affect women differently than they affect men – like sexism, like socialization. Biversity, a mixed-gender group was started, and to this day we exist here in Boston, side by side. By having both separate and mixed spaces, people can choose what feels most comfortable to them. Both/and.

### *Were there other groups beyond bi women that you all were supporting such as trans women?*

Back then we had little awareness about the experience or existence of transgender people. In the mid ‘80s, a trans woman came to one of our monthly meetings. This led to a policy discussion in our executive committee. I’m very proud to say we came to a very clear decision that trans women were welcome, but the fact that we even felt we had to have that conversation makes me very sad, looking backward. There are many things that are obvious to me now that I did not know at the time. We had to go through our own process of self-education.

## *Did that woman feel included?*

She ended up staying quite involved for several years, and when I asked her this very question a few years ago, she said she had felt welcome. In retrospect, I feel horrible that anyone should have had her welcome open to debate, even for a short while, having been marginalized myself. But we didn't know; we were ignorant. As communities build, they make a lot of mistakes. As the LGBTQ+ movement has become big enough and strong enough and diverse enough to begin to evolve in more complex and intentional ways, there have been a lot of uncomfortable conversations, and a lot of learning and change has stemmed from these.

## *How has the conversation around inclusion progressed over the years?*

As non-binary identities have come to the fore, we've had to discuss how to adapt language to be inclusive. For example, when I used to describe who *Bi Women Quarterly* is for, I would say it was a publication for bi women. But now I say it's for women and also non-binary people comfortable under that umbrella who identify as bi or with any other non-binary sexuality. It's a lot of words, but they're inclusive words. We very intentionally and explicitly don't police who belongs.

## *How have you thought about the boundaries of the space? If someone doesn't feel comfortable in the space, when is that a moment you think about changing the space to be less exclusive, and when do you suggest they find a different space?*

I don't have a simple answer to that. Back then when we were first doing this work, there were few spaces. A given space might have been the *only* space, and so exclusion was more consequential. Now there are many more spaces, and technology has made it easier to create them – for example, MeetUps. It's a hard question. We do what we do, and we do it in the way that's the most affirming and open that we can figure out how to be. We're not a space for men. Beyond that we're a space for anyone who opts in. There are some trans women who are at the beginning of their own gender journey, and I want them to feel welcome too. If they feel that they belong, then they are welcome.



*How do you think about people who join your organization when they are identifying as women if they were to transition to identify as men?*

I would let them decide. When you feel that it's not your space anymore, then move on. Most of the newly identified men for whom this is a question or conversation have a long history in the community. They've helped build this community and they've lived in it a long time. Moving on can be a hard choice.

*How do you think about the role of allies? How do you think about the difference between people who grew up with queer parents, queer siblings, queer friends?*

For queer spawn – kids who grew up with LGBTQ+ parents – queer culture is their native culture. They're not visitors. In many respects, they're queerer than those of us who grew up with straight parents and immigrated to the community as adults. Queer spawn, no matter how they identify, are part of us.

I've come to differentiate between support space and community. Support space is a specialized, specific space for people to come together to find validation and support and to talk about the experience of that particular aspect of who they are. If there's a gay men's support group, I wouldn't crash it. Or a queer Latinx group – I'm not Latinx. I think support spaces are important spaces. They do an important job, but these support spaces should not be confused with our larger community. When I think of community I think of a much broader lens, a community more based on shared or overlapping understandings and values than on identity.

*How do you view the evolution of the Boston Bisexual Women's Network?*

We're both a support space and a community. We're a hybrid. Inclusiveness is a prime value of our group. When people are marginalized and experiencing the pain of oppression, it's easy to fracture and engage in horizontal hostility, casting out our less normative members or criticizing our members who are "too" normative. We are stronger together.

An example of horizontal hostility is the bisexual v. pansexual debate – there is contentious debate over which one word all people with non-binary sexualities

should use, and fear that each of these identities in some way harms the other. I believe that all these kinds of conversations and tensions come from a place of pain. They come from oppression. When people are experiencing oppression, they often take out their pain on each other. What if we took all the energy that we spend debating which word everyone should use and instead use that energy to hold non-binary space for all of us?

*Some of the feminist writing, especially in lesbian separatism, has a somewhat unified political ideology to it. In the way you talk about the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, it seems there's more of a sense of community and community as politics and community as a radical act.*

When I think of a radical space, I think of a space that can hold disagreement and different choices and different perspectives. I think of coalition space, which is by definition an uncomfortable space. Being okay with ambiguity, being committed to diversity and difference, choosing to surround yourself with people who don't share a single party line. For me, there's also the aspect of minority stress and its impact on our health, and I really think that identity policing and political policing are toxic. When we get into these debates and try and shut each other down and enforce some universal dictate, it's toxic. Hard as it is, I want to be comfortable being uncomfortable. I used to think that safety lay in sameness, of finding a group of people like me. I don't think that anymore. When you apply an intersectional lens to everything, you realize there's no sameness, anyway. And difference is not a bad thing, it just is. We are stronger together.

*Do you have any closing thoughts?*

I would like for us to recognize the positive impact of respecting each other's strategies and decisions about what kind of activism to do, and how best to do it. There is so much work to be done, and LGBTQ+ and other people are under tremendous stress – especially in the current political climate. So let's not tear each other down. There is so much work that needs to be done. As far as I'm concerned, if you are engaged in some sort of social justice work, you are on my team. If you're doing nothing, then I want to call you in. Come on. We need you!

\* Issues from 1983-2010 have been digitized and are available at Harvard University's Schlesinger Library. This resource is available to researchers and to the general public through Harvard's [catalog](#) and [directly on the web](#). More recent issues are online at *BiWomenBoston.org*.

Featured photo showing Robyn Ochs at North Shore Pride, taken by Marilyn Humphries.

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 **IMAGE CREDITS:** June 25, 2016. Salem, MA.

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