While emceeing the 1996 Lambda Literary Awards Ceremony, lesbian comic Suzanne Westenhoffer called for a new term to replace the lengthy and cumbersome yet politically correct tag currently used by and for our community: "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Friends."

She suggested "Sodomites."

It's certainly more succinct, and is actually less glib than it seems upon first reflection, for that is what most people assume LGBT&E actually means, anyway. It's worth considering, though it probably won't be embraced any more quickly by those who still feel contentious about using the word "queer."

Only in the nineteenth century did doctors and voyeuristic social scientists began splitting people up according to sexual orientation, drawing boxes around us that many of us later, through our commitment to identity politics, embraced and reinforced. What we have been called has helped to construct who we were, whether the terms were the doctors—homosexual, Uting, "sexually intermediate type" (Sexuelle Zwischenstufen)—or our own: homophile, gay, lesbian, LGBT&E. Even words laced with opprobrium (fag, dyke, queer) have been co-opted and used against the hetero world, serving to bind and configure us in our divergent lives. Once named, language has shaped us, both nurtured and circumscribed our identities.

This constructing, shaping power of language mated
with essentialism—the tendency to ascribe abiding characteristics on the basis of gender, orientation, or some other quality—begat a fractured, fractious community within which queers risked being ostracized if they did things the "wrong" way or with the "wrong" person. No wonder we are and have been so contentious about language, paying attention to and arguing about inclusion and exclusion, the terms we use for ourselves and our communities and the ones which are used about us. No wonder many of us have desired to escape the corral of language completely.

We don't propose that "pomosexual" replace LGBT&E. We're not interested in adding another new name to the slew we already have, though we acknowledge the usefulness of having one name by which all LGBT&Fs might be called, "Pomosexual" references homosexuality even as it describes the community's outsiders, the queer queers who can't seem to stay put within a nice simple identity. We coin the term to situate this book and its essays within and in relation to the LGBT&E community. It is in every way an artifact of, and in many ways a backlash toward, this community—or rather, to certain assumptions widely held within and/or about it, essentialist assumptions about what it means to be queer. We react against these assumptions in the same way that in the art world Postmodernism was a reaction against Modernism.

We write "backlash," "reaction against," but in fact there could have been no Postmodernism without Modernism to serve as its foundation. Similarly, we have been nurtured in the gay; the gay and lesbian; the gay, lesbian, and bisexual; and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities—without them, we would not be who we are, would not be measuring ourselves against their standards.

These communities serve profoundly as our homes, our intellectual and political sources, even as we chafe to make them bigger and even less restrictive.

Postmodernism looks for art and meaning sourced in the mundane, in wacky or arcane juxtapositions, in low as well as high culture. In this it bears some relationship to camp, queerdom's own ironic social theory, which developed to let us criticize (particularly heteronormative) relations of power. Postmodern thought invites us to get used to the Zen notion of "multiple subjectivities"—the idea that there is no solid, objective reality, that each of us experiences our reality subjectively, affected (or influenced) by our unique circumstances. This mode of thought encourages overlapping and sometimes contradictory realities, a life of investigation and questioning as opposed to essentialism's quest for the One Truth, the innate quality, indelible facts on a silver platter, the answer to everything.

What happens to identities based on essentialist thinking when we begin to challenge fixed notions of gender identity, binary thinking, monosexuality? When we want names that acknowledge and help shape how various we are? When gender dysphoria becomes first a sex toy or a way of life, then an inspiration to think about the mutability of everything we have been taught to consider fixed? When we insist on identities that embrace our diversities and refuse to gloss them over?

The problem with any ascribed and adopted identity is not what it includes, but what it leaves out. Indeed, there are so very many ways to live in the world, countless sources of affinity, that our sexualities and gender/identities only go so far in describing, constructing, and supporting us. To combat the "cosmic aloneness" that is integral to
being human, that aching awareness that no one can truly share your experience (paralleling the koan that one can never stand in the same river twice; the water that made up the river at that moment is forever gone once the moment has passed), we form communities and subcommunities grouped around shared history and interests, links of family and ethnicity, religion and sexuality, anything which makes us feel more connected to others and less alone.

Queers have a special aloneness in addition to this universal isolation: our difference from the cultural mainstream, and our general absence from the world and worldviews in which we grow up and live. Hence it is especially important to create space for ourselves in the world and the culture, to feel connected through the names we give our communities. The more communities we overlap in, the more links we feel to other people—and the less isolated. The '70s and early '80s saw a flowering of sub-identification within our communities: gay Mormons, anarcho-lesbian feminists, gay Republicans, lesbian mothers and gay dads, lesbian sadomasochists, gay veterans, gay Sierra Clubbers... a limitless list that continues to grow and expand as we connect and recognize connections with our fellow humans.

Twenty years ago, identity seemed self-evident: There were men, and there were women. Some were gay and some were straight. Bisexuals and transsexuals were suspect because their position on the sexual spectrum implied transition, disloyalty, or kinky hedonism; because their position on the gender spectrum implied permeability of a membrane we were all raised to see as solid; and because, when all was said and done, even homosexuals and women mostly believed that biology was destiny. The dissent had only to do with what that destiny might be.

But bisexuals never shut up and went away. Omnisexuals and pansexuals began to dot the landscape. Women who had been born with penises sought to attend the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and, slowly, other dykes began to agree they ought to be there. Men born without cocks and balls fought doctors for permission to get gender reassignment surgery even though they intended to begin new lives as gay men. The practices and language of S/M began to move out of the dungeons and into the discourse. Lesbian butch/femme reassessed the erotic of gender in what was supposed to be an androgynous future, keynoted by what de Beauvoir called "the miracle of the mirror." Phrases like "butch bottom" began to dot the personals. Anyone with eyes and a brain could see categories breaking down, assumptions rupturing, clear-cut identities going the way of the Berlin Wall.

Hence the "pomosexual," who, like the queer s/he closely resembles, may not be tied to a single sexual identity, may not be content to reside within a category measurable by social scientists or acknowledged by either rainbow-festooned gays or by Ward and June Cleaver.

Pomosexuality lives in the space in which all other nonbinary forms of sexual and gender identity reside—a boundary-free zone in which fences are crossed for the fun of it, or simply because some of us can't be fenced in. It challenges either/or categorizations in favor of largely unmapped possibility and the intense charge that comes with transgression. It acknowledges the pleasure of that transgression, as well as the need to transgress limits that do not make room for all of us.

The anthology is an especially postmodern sort of book, making space between its covers for many writers of
diverse points of view. This book, in particular, is concerned with analyzing and making cultural space for our individual sexualities, gender identities, and lack of identities. We share an identity within the *uber*-LGBT&F community without letting our allegiance to these communities or identities serve as shorthand for all of our political or personal opinions—or our sexual practices, explorations, and mores. We neither can nor seek to cover in appropriate depth all of the many issues and questions this book raises (not to mention those it merely glances at in passing, or those it does not, due to restriction of space and time, address at all); nor do we attempt to create a "canon" of transgression or have the last word in the discussions we hope to provoke.

We do hope this book makes people question and rethink their own identities—not necessarily with the intent of changing them, but of better understanding other identities. We hope it pushes people who live more or less nonproblematic lesbian and gay lives to look more clearly and compassionately at their neighbors for whom things are not as simple. We hope this book makes some people feel less alone.

We learn and live through our stories; when something wonderful happens in our lives or we arrive at some profound revelation, our impulse is not to hoard it but to share the story with our friends and families, with our communities, so they can recognize themselves—and know us better—in the telling. This book shares some stories of investigations, of assumptions overturned, within our communities and our lives. We hope these stories inspire and entertain, that they make you think, that they raise questions.

We pomosexuals are the queer’s queers, the ones who will not stay in the boxes marked “gay” and “lesbian” without causing a fuss—just as we all burst out of the boxes the straight world tried to grow us in. At bottom, we want our communities (whatever they are or are not called) to embrace and support more of us.

*Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel*
Alfred Kinsey, author of the famous Kinsey Scale, refused to use any of the terms describing sexual orientation—words we use as nouns, as if they describe something indubitably defined—in any way except as adjectives. To him, sexual behavior could be described; sexual identity was not fixed.

But the charged building blocks of sexual identity politics, while integral to essentialist ideas about who we "are," are not the only words that are open to contentious interpretation or which threaten to shape our experience or understanding. As Greta Christina notes in "Loaded Words," what we think a given word means may differ a little or a great deal from what you think it means. When our interpretations, colored by elements too varied to count, don't match, what effect does this have on our conversations, our identities, our politics?
I have an ongoing argument with my best friend about the word "bisexual." She claims, quite vehemently, that words are useless unless they have a specific meaning that is generally understood by everyone using them, and therefore we need to agree on a single definition of bisexual and stick to it. (Not surprisingly, she feels that her definition is the one we all should use.) I claim, equally vehemently, that everyone has a right to define and name her- or himself, and if that means that there are four hundred million bisexuals with four hundred million definitions of the word, then we'll just have to live with that. (Naturally, I still think my definition is the one that makes the most sense.) I think I understand what she's getting at, and I think she understands what I'm getting at, too. But we have yet to come to an agreement.

This piece isn't about bisexuality, though. "Bisexual" is only one of the words that provokes this sort of conflict—the inability to agree on terminology, the angry, defensive vehemence that arguments over the terminology stir up. Other words leap to mind as well: racist, sexist, feminist; Christian, family, community; pornography, censorship; gay, lesbian, transsexual, transgender; dyke, faggot, queer, whore, slut, pervert, nigger (Christ, I can barely even bring myself to write that last one, much less say it). Forget about deciding whether or not we like the words, or whether we like the ideas and/or people they represent. We don't even know what they mean. And yet we use these words, and we use them the same way we use the rest of the language—as if we knew what the hell we were talking about.

So why is it so hard to come up with language that everyone agrees on?
on? Why can't we agree that the definition of, say, “bisexual,” will be such-and-such, and if there are people and ideas left out by that definition, simply agree to use a different word to describe those people and ideas? Nobody gets their knickers in a twist about what we mean by the word “blue.” Nobody writes angry letters to the editor because the word “laundry” doesn’t include bookshelves—or does include bed sheets. And the only people who have heated debates about the definition of the word “fish” are linguists and ichthyologists and people who are really stoned. (I have, in fact, had long weird discussions about what exactly constitutes a “salad,” but these discussions certainly didn’t have the life-or-death quality that the bi debates have had.)

Some words are loaded. And because they’re loaded, coming up with definitions for them doesn’t have the quasi-random quality that other words have—that sense that we call it this, but could easily have called it something else; that it doesn’t really matter as long as we all call it the same thing, and if we find another thing that doesn’t have a name, we’ll just give it one. In the words that they’ll probably carve on my gravestone—it’s not that simple.

Loaded words are...well, loaded. They come with value and judgment attached, sometimes positive, sometimes negative and, very frequently, a muddled and weird combination of the two. At least some of the heated quality that these words carry has to do with the value attached to them. Pro-porn and anti-porn feminists attack one another by saying, “They’re not really feminists”; progressive and fundamentalist Christians condemn one another by saying, “They’re not truly Christian.” Heavy players in the S/M community put down lighter players by saying, “Oh, she’s just into bondage—she’s not really a sadomasochist,” and progressive gay activists dismiss conservative or apolitical people in the community by saying, “He may be homosexual, but I wouldn’t call him gay.” People place a high positive value on certain words when they hear them used to describe people they ridicule or despise, the words themselves seem devalued.

Of course, a negative judgment can also contribute to making a word loaded. When a woman who sleeps with both women and men says she isn’t bisexual because bisexuals are flaky and confused and don’t care about anything but sex, her decision to call herself a lesbian instead is clearly influenced by—as well as contributing to—the negative weight ascribed to the word bisexual. If the word bisexual weren’t so loaded, if it were a more neutral word, like Midwesterner or coffee drinker or brunette, she might be more likely to use it, and she might be more comfortable with her own behavior. For the record, I think she has the right to call herself a lesbian if she wants, like Miss Manners, I believe it is polite to address people in the way they wish to be addressed. But I suspect her choice of words is, at least partly, motivated by biphobia, by her belief that the word bisexual means “a bad person to be scorned and feared.”

Even more complicated and heavily loaded are the words that carry both positive and negative weight. There are derogatory words, like queer and slut and whore and the notorious N-word, that some people want to reclaim, even wear as a badge of honor, a Purple Heart for survivors of intolerance. There are words, like Christian or lesbian, that carry a different value judgment depending on who is speaking and who is listening. And there are words like sex and power and anger and pride, words that carry mixed judgments in themselves almost regardless of who says or hears them.

But the debates around these loaded words aren’t just about whether or not we value the particular idea or type of person the words represent. I would argue that when we fight about the definitions of these words, often what we’re actually fighting about is the hidden and unexamined concepts that underlie the language.

For example, when people debate the definition of the word bisexual, I believe that they are really debating other questions, questions that are complicated and messy and difficult to think about directly. Such as: Which is more important, you have sex with or who you don’t have sex with? Is sex more important than romance? Is sexual activity more important than sexual attraction? (Or the more universal version of that
question: Is identity defined by feeling or behavior?) Is fantasy the same as desire? Is desire the same as intentions? Is gender born, or learned, or both?

Look at the word “racist.” There are huge, heated debates about whether it’s possible for people of color to be racist, whether it’s possible for white people not to be racist, whether certain opinions and beliefs and practices are racist by definition. When you boil them down, many of these arguments come down to a question of how the opponents define the word racism: as personal prejudice or as systematic oppression.

To say that a problem centers on a language barrier does not mean the problem is trivial. The differing definitions of the word “racist,” for instance, point out seriously different ways of looking at the problem of racism. If you define racism as the systematic (if not always conscious) economic, political, social, cultural, and spiritual oppression of one race by another... well, that says something very different about you than if you define it simply as discrimination on the basis of race. It means you see the problem differently; it means you have a different sense of how important the problem is; and it probably means you see different responses and solutions.

There is often a circularity, a chicken-and-egg quality, to the definitions of loaded words. The way you perceive racism, for instance, will certainly affect the way you define the word; but the way you define the word will also affect how you perceive the concept. If you’ve always believed that racism is when one person treats another badly because of their skin color, you may have trouble even conceiving of a more widespread, insidious, class-oriented type of racism. But if you can’t conceive of systematic racism, you probably won’t see it when you look around you; and if you don’t see any systematic racism around you, you’ll probably keep on defining racism as personal prejudice... and merrily around the circle we go. Your definition of the word filters the way you see the world, and the way you see the world, filtered through your definitions, reinforces the way you use the word.

This circular nature of loaded language can have some very creepy, Orwellian effects. A friend of mine was in a primarily gay/lesbian/bi/trans/queer/whatever-the-hell-you-want-to-call-it AIDS activism group that got into some very nasty bi wars. When the question of who got to define the word lesbian arose, one of the bi-phobic lesbian separatists came up with this solution: “The lesbians will define who is a lesbian.” Now, in a purely semantic sense, this is a meaningless statement, even an absurd one, the sort of thing you might see in a lesbian version of Alice in Wonderland. But the sentence is not, in fact, meaningless. The implied meaning is crystal clear: “Women who do not and will not ever have sex with men will decide whether women who do or might have sex with men may be defined as lesbian.” Or to put it another way, “The people who fit the most narrow definition of the word will decide whether or not the definition is to be expanded.”

To me, this says a great deal, not only about how this woman defines the word lesbian, but also about how she perceives the community in general. It is a substantial dividing point in the gay/lesbian/bi/trans/queer/whatever community. Is it a public or private club? Does it include anyone who says s/he wants to join (and who pays their dues and brings cookies to the bake sale), or does it only include people who get recommended by current members?

These are not trivial, “how-many-angels-can-dance-on-the-head-of-a-pin” semantic debates. For one thing, the definition of a word determines who gets to be included in the activities of people defined by that word. If you’re a transsexual woman attending a women’s event, the definition of “woman” becomes much more than a question of semantics. It determines whether you’ll be accepted and welcomed at the event or kicked in the ass and shown the door. Words have real-world consequences; it may seem like abstract quibbling to debate the definition of family, but when you look at adoption laws, and surrogate mothers, and kids being taken away from their queer parents, the question of who gets to be called family becomes very real indeed.

So when I hear the words, “The lesbians will define who is a lesbian,”
the meaning I hear is, "This is a private club. We have to maintain our high standards, or the place will be overrun by riffraff. Get a recommendation from two club members in good standing, and we will consider your request for admission at the next annual meeting." And that, folks, is not my vision of our community. My vision is that of a public club. If you say you want to join, if you show up and work and pay your dues, then you're a member, and you get to vote on the bylaws. That is my vision—and that is how I try to use the language.

When I look at the public vs. private club conflict, I begin to understand part of the reason these words are so loaded. The words aren't just about identity, or positive and negative value judgments. The words are about danger. The words a community uses to describe itself do more than just define the community; they define the perceived dangers to the community.

For instance, when anti-porn feminists say, "Susie Bright isn't really a feminist," or when pro-porn feminists say, "Andrea Dworkin isn't really a feminist," part of what they're arguing about is what they consider to be dangerous to women. Both groups might define a feminist as someone who sees women being injured by a sexist society and who fights to defend women from those injuries. But there are fierce arguments over what constitutes danger and threat and injury to women; degrading pornographic imagery that perpetuates objectification and violence against women, or fascist and repressive censorship that silences the free expression of women's lives (to boil down just one of the debates to an oversimplified dogmatic summary). And when we argue over which of these dangers is most valid and most important and try to determine where and what we should be fighting, too often the discussion turns into a quarrel over who is or is not a feminist. The way the danger is perceived determines—at least partly—the way the word is defined.

And when lesbians argue over the inclusion or exclusion of bisexual women, the argument's focus, usually, is not on what would be good for the lesbian community, but on what might be harmful to it. The anti-bi lesbians fear pollution and betrayal, the pro-bi lesbians fear intolerance