

### **Introduction, or Setting the Scene:**

It is a warm night in late March, and the Thursday rehearsal of Born This Way<sup>1</sup>, the Queer Advocacy a Capella group at the large urban research university I attend, is well underway, however, there is no singing going on at the moment. The group members are seated in a circle on the floor, while Dusty, who is majoring in Music Therapy, is seated at the piano. She introduces tonight's Bonding exercise, where she will improvise and play the piano while everyone draws what the music inspires them to draw. Dusty asks the group to draw in a circle and only draw in that circle. She does note that drawing outside is okay, but she is more interested in seeing them draw inside the circle. I am still seated in a chair away from the group and am typing notes on my laptop. Hayley, Born This Way's social media manager, and one of my main contacts with the group, calls out to me, "Come join us!" She and her partner Ariana, who serves as Born This Way's President, make room for me to join them on the floor for the Bonding exercise.

After drawing quietly for ten minutes while Dusty plays the piano, we share what we drew and what it means to us. Ariana has drawn a picture of the group in the sun, pointing out that she has included me, the visiting graduate student ethnographer, with everyone. Benjamin draws the group a house in a Christmas ornament, which hangs on his Christmas tree in his "very Jewish home." Emily has drawn a bagel because it reminds her of "Everything Everywhere all at Once," the only movie that made her cry shamelessly in front of strangers. Amy draws the mountains and snow in Maine, which she loves but does not live there. Dusty thanks everyone for being vulnerable and sharing so openly. She explains that the ability to draw within the circle

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<sup>1</sup> Born This Way is a pseudonym, as are all names given for my interlocutors.

tells her about an individual's comfort with following rules and building their reality. Everyone applauds and thanks her.

While the focus on bonding during an a Capella rehearsal may seem strange to an outside observer who might wonder when actual singing was going to happen, as I did during my first observation of Born This Way in December 2022, the connections built in Born This Way, particularly for students who identify as being multisexual, the blanket term used to describe bisexual, pansexual, and omnisexual<sup>2</sup> individuals, matter just as much as the music. During my year observing and interacting with the current members and two alumni of Born This Way, I found myself saying, "This is not the story I expected to be telling," more than once. While previous literature about multisexual college students' lived experiences (Hertlein et al, 2016; Lowy, 2017; Tavarez, 2020) exists, it mostly paints a grim picture of rampant heteronormativity on campus as well as gatekeeping from monosexual LGBTQIA+ students and organizations.

In contrast, the multisexual students of Born This Way tell a vastly different story. Since their inception in 2014, they have intentionally built a new model of LGBTQIA+ community on campus. While previous scholarship (Vaccaro and Newman, 2017; Lowy, 2017; Tavarez, 2020) about multisexual college students points to the need for specifically multisexual spaces, or LGBTQIA+ spaces free of biphobia or bi-erasure, a sentiment that is echoed in studies that examined the lives of multisexual individuals outside of a university setting (Hayfield et al, 2014;

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<sup>2</sup> I will mostly be using the term "multisexual" to broadly refer to people who experience attraction to more than one gender. The more specific understandings of multisexual identity I am working with are as follows: Bisexual people can be attracted to more than one gender, Pansexual people experience attraction independent of gender, and omnisexual people are attracted to all genders. How multisexual folks experience attraction is highly individualized.

McLaren et al, 2020; Gonzalez et al, 2021; McInnes et al, 2022), no study has looked at what that type of space might entail and what multisexual individuals would specifically gain from participating in such a group. Overall, current and former members happily described to me the impact their time in Born This Way had on their relationships with others – in platonic, professional, and romantic contexts—and the ways in which being a part of the group helped them gain a better understanding of themselves, their identities, and their places in the greater world. Although I began this study interested in how multisexual college students gain a sense of belonging on campus, my findings show that a sense of belonging is only one aspect of their lived experiences. Essentially, while the members of Born This Way perfect their performances, they build relationships and a community that helps them gain social capital that continues to serve them in their lives beyond the group.