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Authenticity, confession and female sexuality: from Bridget to Bitchy

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Bitchy Jones’s Diary (2006–2010) was the pseudonymous blog of a female British blogger, who wrote about her life as a sexually dominant female, and criticised aspects of both mainstream and BDSM culture.1 The blog’s title and the author’s nom de plume were both deliberately adapted from Bridget Jones’s Diary, a popular novel from 1996 which was later followed by a sequel and two films. The views of female sexuality expressed in the blog are to be understood as the antithesis of those presented in the novel. In this article, I take seriously the suggested connection between Bitchy and Bridget Jones, suggesting that these two female diarists have more in common than Bitchy might wish to acknowledge. Both use a variety of rhetorical strategies to create the impression that they are giving an authentic account of a marginalised subject position, and use this ‘authentic’ voice to denounce mainstream and subcultural attempts to exclude as worthless or irrelevant aspects of their sexual tastes, practices and experiences. I investigate the feminist potential and risks of this use of the authentic as a political weapon and conclude that, while claims to authenticity are problematic, the very fact that we debate these varying subject positions opens up new ways of thinking about female sexual subjectivity.

Keywords: Bitchy Jones’s Diary (blog); Bridget Jones’s Diary (novel); authenticity; feminism; post-feminism; female heterosexuality

Introduction

This article explores the relationship between three things: (1) the claim to authenticity in first person (fictional or factual) narration of non-normative female sexuality; (2) the way these authentic experiences invite identification and confession from others who sense that they share some of these experiences; (3) the political usefulness of this call to ‘authentic experience’ in challenging both mainstream and subcultural discourses that would attempt to marginalise or exclude it. I aim to illustrate the wide scope of these narratives that claim to articulate a certain subjective truth concerning female sexual experiences by comparing and contrasting a highly popular novel, Bridget Jones’s Diary and its sequel, Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason with the sex blog Bitchy Jones’s Diary. While Bitchy Jones’s Diary was named to draw attention to the differences between the two characters Bridget and Bitchy, this punning title nevertheless leads me to consider what these cultural products may have in common, and I will argue in this essay that they share the desire to give expression to female sexual identities and experiences that the authors believe are marginalised. Furthermore, they use complex rhetorical devices suggesting the authenticity of their

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discourse, in order to prove that female sexual identities extend beyond vanilla heterosexuality and monogamous coupledom. Their ‘authentic’ voices encourage readerly identification and the creation of a kind of community we could liken to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s which provided ‘a space in which the isolated “I” could, by means of identification, collapse into collective, rescuing “we”’ (Siegel, 1997, p. 68). In this article, I will seek to assess the usefulness of this authentic voice as a tool for harnessing broader understandings of female sexuality and sexual tastes and experiences.

Leah Guenther recuperates *Bridget Jones’s Diary* from frequently dismissive views of its heroine by offering a reading of the text as a feminist confessional (Guenther, 2006, pp. 84–99). Guenther explains that she is interpreting confession here not through an institutional framework in which Bridget is obliged to ‘bear public or private witness against [herself]’ but rather that Bridget ‘circumvents the typical confessional paradigm normally characterised by an imbalance between the power of the confessor and the impotence of the confessant’ (Guenther, 2006, pp. 87–88). Guenther attributes this circumvention to the style in which Helen Fielding writes the novel: ‘humour, parody and ultimate irony [. . . ] work [. . . ] to replace a system of judgement with one of shared response’ which ultimately means *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is part of ‘a community of writers and readers who share the goal of telling [. . . ] stories about women’ (Guenther, 2006, p. 96). Alison Case’s discussion of the novel also considers its style to be one that encourages identification and sharing of experience. She argues that ‘much of the publicity for the novel focused on the “authenticity” of the fictional female voice it offered’ and ‘this claim was loudly reinforced by the large numbers of women who confessed that Bridget Jones’s voice “hit home” for them [. . . and] expressed delight and a kind of rueful identification’ (Case, 2001, p. 176). She goes on to suggest that, rather than (merely) being a matter of verisimilitude, this feel of authenticity comes also from the gendered literary convention of the female diarist which tends to make feminine narrators hapless and passive recorders of experience rather than active ‘authors’. Guenther criticises Case’s account for failing to take account of the specific historical moment in which Fielding’s novel is set, arguing that Bridget’s difficulties in controlling her own life result not so much from a literary convention that emphasises the economic and sexual restrictions in women’s lives but from the cultural imperatives of post-feminism (of which more later). Reading Case’s and Guenther’s analyses of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* together, however, is useful for helping us to tease out the complex way in which the novel encourages identification through the intertwining of an ‘authentic’ female voice and the readerly community that confesses to identifying with the sentiments and experiences that make up its narrative. Through marshalling a narrative mode that uses immediacy and intimacy (the diary) and a style of humour, parody and irony (encouraging sharing and forgiveness rather than interpellated confession and punishment) the novel offers us the impression of an authentic voice that appears to be confessing to transgressions of the norms governing female sexuality. Indeed, it is the very act of appearing to confess, with its implications of intimacy and breaking of taboos, that lends a patina of authenticity to the narrative voice, the sense that the fictional Bridget is authenticating the marginalised experience of other, ‘real’, single women who then identify with her.

The work of Feona Attwood, Julie Bradford and Elizabeth Anne Wood on sex bloggers comes to strikingly similar conclusions concerning these processes of authentic voices and the soliciting of readerly identification and confession (see Attwood, 2007; Bradford, 2008; Wood, 2008). Sex bloggers – men and women, but mostly women, who post explicit pictures and videos of themselves online, alongside discussion of their sexual exploits and/or fantasies – construct communities based on sharing stories grounded in experiences
marked as ‘authentic’. As Attwood summarises, new forms of sexual display on the Internet are a form of recreation, self-presentation and community-building. Although sex blogs have been around since the late 1990s, Julie Bradford argues that they have recently reached ‘critical take-off point’ with the best known turned into books and TV series (*Girl with a One Track Mind; Secret Diary of a Call Girl*). (For more on the relations between ‘the erotic memoir’ and sex blogs see Kaye Mitchell’s article in this special issue.) Bradford and Wood assert that these blogs allow access to an ‘authentic female voice’ discussing female sexual experience and are therefore to be welcomed as offering a space to allow the sharing of sexual beliefs and practices (Bradford, 2008; Wood, 2008). Particularly fruitful is the opportunity offered to explore the relationship set up with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* by the punning title of Bitchy Jones’s sex blog, which charts her political beliefs and her enjoyment of kinky, dominant sexual practices. (I avoid the ‘scare quote’ marks here for, as Bitchy herself points out, ‘those double quotes around the word kink – [it’s] like [. . .] holding it at arm’s length in a pair of lead tongs’ (posted 25 March 2009, post entitled ‘Foxy’).)

*Bridget Jones* is the eponymous heroine of a newspaper column in *The Independent* newspaper, which first appeared on 28 February 1995, and the subsequent novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, published in hardback in the United Kingdom in 1996 and in the United States in 1998, chronicling the vicissitudes of a 30-something London ‘singleton’. Whereas Bitchy argues that her particular sexual tastes are relentlessly marginalised, in that female dominatrixes are assumed to be sex workers, and antifeminist in that humiliation is assumed to involve subjecting men to ‘feminisation’, Bridget charts her desire to escape her single state, in which any sign of female authority is a ruse to obtain a boyfriend. Both Bridget and Bitchy feel themselves to be either ignored or attacked by a hostile media that belittles their lifestyles as non-normative female choices. They therefore use their rhetorical creation of an authentic voice for what they characterise as a usually marginalised or excluded female sexual subject position as a way of creating a community of like-minded people who extensively debate and critique mainstream representations of marriage and procreation as ideal and desired choices for (heterosexual) women.

This first part of this article will establish the similar rhetorical strategies employed by Fielding’s character Bridget Jones and by the anonymous blogger’s representative Bitchy Jones. They both deconstruct journalistic articles that make some attempt to represent their lifestyle (as heterosexual single woman, as heterosexual female dom) in ways they find belittling, demeaning and hostile. However, in addition to critiquing mainstream media representations, both also seek to expose how the subcultures in which they operate need to change. In this way, the confessional discourses of Bridget and Bitchy find particular value, as they not only seek to criticise the mainstream representation of female experience, but also to point out the hypocrisies and discriminatory practices of their own subcultural communities. Both Bridget’s and Bitchy’s diaries present readers with the illusion of private intimacy, with a patina of authenticity related to the idea that these texts offer an insight into the real-life experiences of their respective authors. In the first case, the original newspaper column ‘carried a by-line photograph, actually of Susannah Lewis, a secretary at the *Independent* newspaper, which seemed to contribute to the notion that Bridget actually existed, and resulted in fan mail and marriage proposals’ (Whelehan, 2002, p. 12). Although Helen Fielding denies that the column and resulting books were in any way autobiographical, she concedes that two of the characters, Jude and Sharon, are modelled on two of her close friends, TV producer Tracy McLeod and TV director Sharon Maguire. Furthermore, Fielding lobbied for Maguire to film the novel, and *Bridget Jones’s*
Diary (Maguire, 2001) became her first feature film. Bridget Jones’s Diary thus offers the tantalising possibility that the fictional Bridget nevertheless offers readers an authentic insight into the life of a single heterosexual woman in her 30s, one that as Case testifies felt ‘right, convincing and appealing’ to readers (Case, 2001, p. 180). In the second case, Bitchy Jones’s Diary is typical of many sex blogs in that it is written under a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Wood claims that such pseudonymity ‘facilitates self-exposure by creating a distance between writer and audience’ (Wood, 2008, p. 481). More accurately, the pseudonymity gives the impression there will be greater self-exposure, that a real identity needs to be protected, and the reader is therefore simultaneously courted (offered the possibility of access to ‘a secret truth’) and held at a distance (not given the detail of a ‘real-life’ name). Both Bridget’s and Bitchy’s textual personas thus operate on a continuum between the fictional and the factual, suggesting to readers that these texts offer personal insights into a ‘real woman’s life’. Far from the fictional/pseudo-anonymous personas undermining the alleged authenticity of the texts, they may in fact increase them, as they offer the seductive idea that these texts offer a truth that breaks social conventions and that therefore the authors wish to hide behind anonymity and lightly fictionalised accounts in order precisely to be more faithful to themselves.

In the second part, I will examine the ways in which these texts solicit readerly identification. I will demonstrate that they both argue for the validity of ‘authentic’ experience as a counterweight to dominant ideology and link this to a wider consideration of how the authentic voices of female experience have been marshalled for feminist political ends through the creation of readerly communities that exist beyond the texts themselves. I examine the way these readerly communities function via identification and the uses they make of strategies of authenticity and confessing to experiences which may appear to lie beyond socially sanctioned norms. Rather than seeing these texts as unproblematically reflective of real experience, I am seeking rather to demonstrate that their appeal to authenticity is a textual effect created by various rhetorical strategies (the intimacy and immediacy implied by the term diary; the anonymity/fictionalised persona of the authors; the confessional first-person narration; the use of humour, irony and anger). Therefore, I conclude that although these texts may be of some political validity when it comes to trying to contest normative and narrow views of female sexuality, nevertheless we should be aware that (1) even within the loose definition of confession as used by Guenther and which I am borrowing here, confession is never a neutral activity but is marked with discourses of power, authority and truth; and (2) the voices that we encounter in these texts have only the patina of authenticity, since they do not in fact have unmediated access to an external reality. Rather, we should locate the political valency of these texts precisely in the rhetorical skill with which they create an impression of authenticity in that it allows us to see that any ‘truth’ about female sexuality in cultural discourses, such as that produced through the mainstream media, is also the result of certain discursive strategies rather than any objective reality. Certainly one of the great pleasures in reading both Fielding and Bitchy is the wit, skill and flair with which they debunk certain shibboleths.

Rethinking singledom in Bridget Jones’s Diary and Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason

To turn firstly to the character of Bridget Jones: the novel explicitly works to draw attention to the way in which the mainstream media characterise the experiences of (implicitly straight, vanilla) single women. It creates a community of Bridget and her friends Sharon, Jude and Tom who (often drunkenly) imagine angry and rabid responses to various
stereotyping and dismissive articles. Consider, for example, the following entry, which it is worth quoting at length:

Humph. Incensed by patronising article in the paper by Smug Married journalist. It was headlined, with subtle-as-a-Frankie-Howerd-sexual-innuendo-style irony: ‘The Joy of Single Life’.

‘They’re young, ambitious and rich but their lives hide an aching loneliness . . . When they leave work a gaping emotional hole opens up before them . . . Lonely style-obsessed individuals seek consolation in packeted comfort food of the kind their mother might have made.’

Huh. Bloody nerve [ . . . ] I’m going to write an article based on ‘dozens of conversations’ with Smug Marrrieds: ‘When they leave work, they always burst into tears because, though exhausted, they have to peel potatoes and put all the washing in while their porky bloater husbands slump burping in front of the football demanding plates of chips. On other nights they plop, wearing unstylish pinneys, into big black holes after their husbands have rung to say they’re working late again, with the sound of creaking leatherwear and sexy Singletons tittering in the background.’

Met Sharon, Jude and Tom after work [ . . . ] ‘I’m bloody sick of this arrogant hand-wringing about single life!’ roared Sharon.

‘Yes, yes!’ I said. (Fielding, 1996, pp. 244–245)

In this extract, Fielding pinpoints the way in which certain cultural stereotypes concerning single people are propagated within the media, and the way in which (heterosexual) women’s sexuality is not linked to notions of pleasure or desire, but rather to questions of companionship and money (so the reason here why women remain single is linked to ambition, which also leads to loneliness). Bridget’s imaginary riposte shows how journalistic articles are often subjective assertions based on opinion and anecdote masquerading as truth (her reference to ‘dozens of conversations’), and exaggerates the ways in which marriage could also be critiqued. This extract demonstrates Fielding’s skill at constructing an authentic voice for her (fictional) Bridget with which to contest a discourse that marginalises (heterosexual) single women. The diary format is underlined through the telegraphic style which condenses her writing and the easy reference to a friendship group to whose conversation we are privy. In such a way, Bridget’s implied lifestyle as a single woman has far more verisimilitude than that depicted in the quoted newspaper article.

The novels also chart the way in which heteronormative patriarchy directs women’s attitudes towards childbirth and motherhood and creates specific cliché tropes concerning childbearing. In the following extract, the novel lightly and humorously draws our attention to the contradictory way in which women are exhorted to both have children and yet maintain youthful bodies, and the complex and problematic way women negotiate their relationship to their own and other women’s bodies:

‘I’m a re-tread. That guy said women over thirty are just walking pulsating ovaries’.

‘Oh for God’s sake!’ snorted Shaz, reaching for the Chardonnay. ‘Haven’t you read Backlash? He’s just a moral-free hack, recycling women-bashing, Middle-England propaganda to keep women down like slaves. I hope he goes prematurely bald.’ [ . . . ]

Wish Jude would not talk about biological clock in public. Obviously one worries about such things in private and tries to pretend whole undignified situation isn’t happening. Bringing it up in 192 merely makes one panic and feel like a walking cliché.
Happily, Shazzer was off on a rant. ‘Far too many women are wasting their young lives having children in their twenties, thirties and early forties [. . . ] Look at that woman in Brazil who had one at sixty’.

‘Hurrah!’ I said. ‘Nobody wants never to have any children but it’s the sort of thing you always want to do in two or three years’ time! [. . . ]

Just then Magda walked in [having given birth a month before]

‘It just takes a bit of time to . . . you know . . . deflate. Also, you know I had mastitis . . .’

Jude and Shaz flinched. Why do Smug Married girls do this, why? Casually launching into anecdotes about slashings, stitchings and effusions of blood, poison, newts and God knows what [. . .]

There was a stunned pause [. . . ] Jude seemed suddenly to have cheered up, sleeking down her Donna Karan crop top, which revealed a beguiling glimpse of pierced navel and perfectly honed flat midriff while Shazzie adjusted her Wonderbra. (Fielding, 1999, pp. 39–41)

Although it may seem perverse to argue for any kind of progressive feminist agenda in Bridget Jones, given the novel’s and (especially) the film’s characterisation as quintessentially post-feminist texts with their interest in consumer culture, fashion and beauty, neurotic anxiety about body weight and obsession with heterosexual romance, there is patently a desire to criticise the utter dismissal of the experience of single, childless women as worthless, or the complete idealisation of childbirth and motherhood, as is evidenced by the extracts above. Equally, however, we may argue that the post-feminist politics of the novel are clearly on display here, with the careful naming of branded clothes (Donna Karan, Wonderbra) and the implicit approval of Jude’s ‘perfectly honed flat midriff’ as against Magda’s attempt to talk about her experiences of childbirth.

A more politically generous reading, however, is available, in which this extract (and Bridget’s anxiety about bringing together her different groups of friends) could be said to draw our attention to some of the paradoxes and hypocrisies of the post-feminist cultural landscape. It implicitly criticises the way in which women themselves judge each other, in ways that may in fact replicate the mainstream media they are so eager to criticise. In other words, Bridget senses the way in which the subculture of single women in which she lives also needs to change, if there is to be a more satisfying and fair culture for women, and the novel is at this moment bleakly accurate in its portrayal of women simultaneously rejecting the beauty myth while congratulating themselves for being able to conform to it.

The discontents of domination: critiquing representations of female dominance in Bitchy Jones

Just as we can sense a complicated positioning within the single female subculture in Bridget Jones’s Diary, in that the book seeks both to rescue it from utter dismissal but also to criticise some of its practices, so Bitchy Jones constructs a complex and paradoxical position concerning her chosen sexual practices. Just as Bridget critiques mainstream media representations of single women, so Bitchy critiques mainstream representations of female domination. Alongside this, she also criticises the politics of the BDSM subculture in which she trenchantly analyses underlying misogyny. She argues that female dominance is commodified and reified by the mainstream media, but that the BDSM community also marginalises the experiences and desires of the female dom, associating humiliation with penetration and submission with femininity.

I shall turn firstly to the criticism of the mainstream media’s representation of domination, in which we can detect similarities with Bridget’s fury at the ‘patronising article’
detailing single women’s lives quoted above. In a post entitled ‘Foxy’, Bitchy dissects at some length an article from the Fox News website entitled ‘how to become a female pro-dom’. In her sarcastic and angry response, we can sense faint echoes of the rant that Bridget prepares in Bridget Jones’s Diary in response to the article discussing ‘The Joy of Single Life’. Just as Fielding’s novel uses anger and humour to satirise lazy, patronising and inaccurate accounts of social groups that operate outside of a narrowly defined norm, so here Bitchy uses similar rhetorical weapons. Furthermore, the question of money in relation to female sexual agency is implicit in the two articles discussed by Bridget and Bitchy, respectively. In the article analysed by Bridget, female singedom is linked to what is judged to be excessive female ambition: ‘they’re young, ambitious and rich’; sexual pleasure is here held to be at odds with economic independence. In the Fox News article, analysed by Bitchy, female sexual domination is divorced from notions of sexual pleasure for women: the only reason women would choose to be dominant is, it is assumed, to earn money. In both these cases, female earning power is thus placed in direct opposition to female sexual pleasure. Both Bridget and Bitchy are thus fighting against the commodification of female sexuality in an attempt to document its potential pleasures that fall outside of economic considerations: Bridget through asserting that women can have successful careers and marriage, should they so desire; Bitchy through disputing the constant association of female sexual domination with prostitution.

The article is purely about my sexuality as a way to make money. Not one single nod is given to the fact it [sic] might be something a woman would ever do for the sheer blissy hot of it. Nah, nah, nah, nah, NAH! In fact, in this context, that would probably be beyond horridious.

And isn’t that kind of weird. Dominatrixing something for money is far more okay (and even kind of family friendly) than dominatrixing for sexual kicks. And you’ve got to wonder why that might be (really – I have no idea here, nothing clever to offer as per) – it’s certainly not the case in vanilla sex, where doing it for fun is – while not morally okay – is usually morally better than doing it for money. Well, maybe things flip at the sluttier ends of the scale [...] And, you know, if anyone really still wonders what the fucking problem is with femdom, why everyone is so unhappy and dissatisfied and writing ass-grumping blogs about it rather than exploding in a frenzy of desire and whip-crack-away – well, isn’t thing just the pip? Men get told how to find women for sex, women get told how to charge men for sex.

Sex? Men demand and women supply. That’s it.

My desires? Ha! obviously as a dominant woman I don’t want sex. I want money so I can buy shoes and chocolate. And, well, toys, but not for any kind of sexy fun for me – the toys are to expand my business so I can increase my earning of shoes and chocolate potential. (‘Foxy’)

In this extract from the blog, Bitchy deploys several rhetorical devices that position her experience as more authentic than that deployed by the Fox News article cited, demonstrating how authenticity functions as an important tool for both Bridget and Bitchy to contest representations they find hostile and demeaning of their subject positions. The first-person narration is used forcefully with repetition of the first-person pronoun, and there are also moments of second-person address, assuming a sympathetic community of readers, at least implicitly. Sarcasm and anger demonstrate a personal investment in deconstructing the mass media stereotype of the female dominatrix. All of this works in tandem to authenticate Bitchy’s voice and her experiences of domination and challenge a mainstream discourse that would utterly exclude her. Alongside this criticism of the way in which female domination is automatically assumed to be a ‘career-choice’, rather than a choice related to sexual pleasure (‘mind-buzz’, as Bitchy describes it), many posts work to
draw our attention to the way in which the scene itself denies female sexual pleasure and associates penetration with humiliation, as in, for example:

Having to strap a phallus to myself to be a dom? Empower me backwards!

Listen carefully and you'll hear the oh so subtle message of strap-on play: You need a cock to be on top, you need a cock to be a dom, you need a cock to fuck.

I mean really, seriously really, does no one else think that it is "fucked" up that scenes of a woman dominating a man often culminate in her doing a more politically dubious drag act than your average forced fem session.

A culture where femdom sex puts more value on strap-on up arse than cock in vagina it is saying that the person on top, doing the fucking, intrinsically has more power than the one on her back getting soundly pounded. Which really isn’t true. (posted 24 March 2007, post entitled ‘Fuck Me’)

Although the topic seems far removed from Bridget’s consideration of the discussion of childbirth between Magda, Sharon and Jude, both passages highlight the way in which certain dominant meanings and expectations are ascribed to the female body. Bitchy explicitly calls our attention to the way in which vaginal penetrative intercourse is associated with powerlessness (and certainly not with expectations of sexual pleasure), and emphatically states that this ‘really isn’t true’. The rhetorical strategy here is worthy of note – by listing things which ‘really aren’t true’, issues of authenticity of experience are brought again to the fore, and Bitchy posits her own subjectively truthful experience as a means of contesting totalising truth claims. She addresses the question of empowerment, dismissing the idea that sexual power is linked to the ownership of a penis or its substitute. Bridget catalogues the ways in which the female body is subject to the beauty myth, and the pressures this creates for women. Although she does not explicitly address the question of female sexual pleasure through vaginal penetrative intercourse, she does refer to the way in which the beauty myth expects women’s bodies to be simultaneously youthful and childbearing, another appropriation of the vagina away from questions of female sexual agency and which leads either to their sexual objectification or their use as procreative entities.

Anger and irony: feminist and post-feminist rhetorical strategies

Having established their rhetorical similarities, it is also important to note the ways in which Bitchy Jones’s Diary and Bridget Jones’s Diary differ in style and tone, and how this different construction of the authentic voice maps onto wider cultural enunciations of feminist and post-feminist agendas. The distinction between a ‘feminist’ and a ‘post-feminist’ era is fraught with definitional difficulty, and post-feminism itself is a slippery conceptual category. However, one approach we could take to differentiating feminist from post-feminist politics lies precisely in the area of rhetoric, illustrating the importance of how political claims are made about women’s lives as well as their content. In a special issue of Cinema Journal dedicated to questions of post-feminism, Charlotte Brunsdon analysed feminist and post-feminist texts concerning female domesticity and cooking, drawing our attention to the way in which strikingly similar subject matter (the reappraisal of women’s relationship to food preparation) differs widely in rhetorical presentation between feminist and post-feminist texts. Brunsdon compares Martha Rosler’s short videotape Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975) with Nigella Lawson’s Channel 4 television programme Nigella Bites (2000–2001). She argues that Rosler’s text is ‘a classic second wave feminist text
in its anger’ but that it is also ‘very funny, as each piece of equipment is rendered expressive and sometimes threatening’ (most notably a rolling pin as a weapon). In contrast, Lawson espouses ‘sensual enjoyment of her cooking’ and uses a ‘semi-ironic, sometimes wittily flirtatious mode of address’ (Brunsdon, 2005, pp. 111–113). We can map a similar difference between Bitchy and Bridget. With her use of short, staccato sentences, her rhetorical question ‘does no-one else think it is fucked up?’ and her inventive swearing, often inserting swear words into the middle of nouns, Bitchy is angry as well as funny: she characterises her blog as a ‘tale of sound and fury’. She reports back on her attempts to address questions of misogyny within the BDSM community and, given the structure of her blog, readers can follow the results of correspondence alongside Bitchy’s stinging asides (see e.g. her entries from February to March 2009 concerning the Bondage Awards). She asserts the need for anger to be retained as a response to offensive and derogatory cultural products that may attempt to defend their sexism with recourse to the idea that they are being ironic. Discussing the film Lesbian Vampire Killers (Claydon, 2009), she states:

[T]he, um, joke here essentially appears to be that kind of ironic sexism thing [. . .] The thing whereby it is okay to be sexist or stupid or lame or all of them – let’s face it, it’s always all of them – because we were sexist in the past, it makes it some-fucking-how okay to be sexist now. In fact the reason we are all allowed to be sexist now is because sexism is now over and we live in some kind of post-patriarchal u-fucking, shitopy [. . .] WHAT?’ (posted 9 March 2009, post entitled ‘Jesus Wept’)
Modes and moments of identification

Given this key difference in their textual positioning between second-wave and post-feminist presentational styles, it may seem unlikely to argue for Bridget Jones offering a similar feminist potential to Bitchy, despite the parallels in some of their discussions of female experiences outlined above. However, the debate concerning the status of the single women and attitudes towards marriage and female heterosexuality in the mainstream media is also extra- and paratextual to the Bridget Jones’s novels and films, and this is where I think we can most convincingly argue for the feminist worth of *Bridget Jones*, and where its link to the Bitchy Jones blog is in some ways most self-evident. When *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* was published in 1999 it came with an unusual dedication: ‘to the other Bridgets’. With this dedication, Helen Fielding used the paratextual apparatus of her novel to draw attention to the way in which *Bridget Jones’s Diary* created a kind of community of identification – a discourse that other single women of a similar age bracket felt resonated with their ‘life, aspirations and cultural tastes’ (Whelehan, 2002, p. 13). Of course, the dedication also revealed the very reason why this sequel had been written in the first place: by this point in time, the original novel had been a huge success, had been translated into 33 languages and a second film was already being planned. As the fictional character Bridget Jones moved across various media (from newspaper column, to novel and sequel, to translations of the novels, to film adaptations), so she came to be seen as representative for readers who aspired to ‘what was, in the 1990s, at least, a singularly desirable way of life’ (Whelehan, 2002, p. 15). Bridget offers the possibility of an aspirational lifestyle (meals out with close female friends at Café Rouge in 1995, 192 in 1997; shopping trips to Whistles and Nicole Fahri; mini breaks and holidays). She also however ‘struggles to control the chaos of her own life’ and therefore ‘many women readers recognize themselves in it’ (Whelehan, 2002, pp. 15–17).

Indeed, this notion of a community or generation of Bridgets has been argued by Kelly A. Marsh to have wider political ramifications which link closely to the carefully delineated 1990s setting of the books (given their original form as a newspaper column, it is perhaps unsurprising that the books carefully chart various events, both political and cultural, that take place in the years they are set in, 1995–1997). Marsh argues that the way that Bridget’s diary records her insecurities, her mistakes and her failures – as well as her pleasures, her friendships and her successes – constitutes a rejection of a (particularly American) dream of the perfected self (to be achieved via self-help books, diets and ‘other imports from American popular culture’) in favour of ‘[Tony] Blair’s emphasis on community, which captures the salutary blend of individuality balanced by mutuality and interdependence which he considers the core of socialism’ (Marsh, 2004, p. 56). Certainly, Bridget’s diary does record a certain affinity with the New Labour project. During a Law Society dinner, Bridget is shocked to discover that ‘I might have been sleeping with a man who voted Tory. Suddenly I felt I didn’t know Mark Darcy at all’ and she goes onto argue that voting Labour involves ‘vot[ing] for the principle of the thing, not the itsy-bitsy detail about this percent and that percent. And it is perfectly obvious that Labour stands for the principle of sharing, kindness, gays, single mothers and Nelson Mandela as opposed to bossy braying men’ (Fielding, 1999, p. 64). In others words, Bridget senses a kind of communitarian continuum that, while rather caricatured here in summary form, nevertheless positions a positive association of sharing experience in order to counter hegemonic discourses that shore up patriarchy (and other forms of social inequality).

Elizabeth Anne Wood argues that although women have not classically controlled their own sexuality, there is a long tradition of female control of dissemination of sexual information through oral tradition, social networks and media such as the ‘agony aunt’
advice column. ‘Medicalisation and a culture of expertise removed much of that control, and the consciousness-raising movement of second wave feminism used social networks to reclaim it’ (Wood, 2008, p. 81). In *Bridget Jones* we can see links to these kinds of networks, in the way that Bridget documents confessional conversations and asserts the desirability of ‘sharing [and] kindness’. Furthermore, this sharing was felt to move beyond the text into a mutuality and interdependence in which individual readers and film viewers identified with Bridget’s experiences. However, Wood goes onto conclude that, ‘through sex blogs [. . . ] women are once again reclaiming control over the transmission of their sexual knowledge’, privileging the Internet and blogs as a key way that women can transmit sexual knowledge (Wood, 2008, p. 81). Wood sees many beneficial aspects to women’s sex blogs, such as the way an online community forms by means of comments on posts; by helping to challenge assumptions concerning who does what and to whom (the example she gives is Tess of *Urban Gypsy* who self-identifies as a middle-aged suburban housewife and mother and who narrates some very intense BDSM fantasies, some of which she acts out); and because, being anonymous and immediate, they allow people to access and share information with relative ease and security. (Of course, as Wood points out, the anonymity does not preclude attacks by unfriendly readers.) Wood’s evaluation of sex blogs emphasises the ways in which, as with the examples cited from the *Bridget Jones’s* books, shared experience and interaction create alternative vocabularies to explore female desire within the context of a community.

Particularly pertinent here is the discussion that ensued in the comments when Bitchy Jones announced her decision to stop blogging, which underlines the way in which the blog became a site that enabled discussion. For example, Sebastian writes that, ‘I’m sorry you’re bringing this to an end. I only just discovered it. I love your writing style, and you made me as a gay man think about issues that I haven’t had to explore before’, an entry that attests to the way in which sex blogs speak to varying communities and enable the exchange of ideas. Sebastian goes onto draw parallels between the blogosphere and earlier gay liberation movements, a manoeuvre he justifies in the following terms:

Gay men were forced to hide as straight men and made to feel profoundly broken just for being different. But in the end (insofar as anything ends), we won. We kept fucking the guys we wanted to fuck, and started insisting that the way everyone looked at us was wrong, and we’ve won. We’ve forced society to accept us, and we carved a space for ourselves in the world. And we are profoundly indebted to the pre-Stonewall trailblazers, the ones who stuck their necks out in the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis and risked arrest and ridicule to start the process of carving out a space for ourselves. So maybe femdom is broken, Bitchy (not being into femdom, I can’t personally say, but your arguments make a whole lot of sense). But if people like you keep making these arguments, things will come around. You and your sisters will carve out a new kind of femdom, one that represents a more authentic female dominant sexuality. (comment left 2 February 2010)

Furthermore, Imp Lee comments that reading Bitchy’s blog enabled her to think through her own sexuality and begin to question hegemonic discourses (comment posted 2 February 2010). Through the act of sharing knowledge, opinions and information, then, Bitchy Jones’s blog has created an online community that counters the commodification of kink culture that challenges the association of femininity with docility, that asserts the existence of female sexual pleasure through dominance and that expands female heterosexuality beyond its normative associations with procreative intercourse. While it would be inaccurate to argue that the author of *Bridget Jones* has a similar political mission, the books reveal a shared frustration and disillusionment. Here, the frustration is with the way in
which women’s lives are constrained by the obligation to attempt to achieve ideal standards, even though we will, necessarily, constantly fall short of them. Both Bridget and Bitchy contest a narrow and restrictive view of female sexuality through widening the kinds of stories that get told by and about women. They do so with recourse to their own personal experience – ‘this is what it’s like for me’. The narratives locate a feminist politics which contests the marginalisation and exclusion of certain subcultural groups through the framing of a voice of experience which proves a rallying cry for a self-selecting community that identifies with it.

*Bitchy Jones’s Diary* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* attest through this recourse to authenticity to some kind of subjective truth statement about, respectively, dominant female sexuality and the experience of heterosexual single women. We should bear in mind, however, that this writing is poietic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pretextsual truth. As Rita Felski effectively summarises:

> [T]he ‘authentic self’ is itself very much a social product, and the attempt to assert its privileged autonomy can merely underline its profound dependence upon the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constituted. The more frantic the search for an inner self, for a kernel of meaning untouched by a society rejected as oppressive and alienating, the more clearly subjectivity is revealed to be permeated by and dependent upon those very symbolic constraints from which it seeks to liberate itself. (Felski, 1998, pp. 87–88)

We can see that Bridget and Bitchy are both, to a certain extent, caught in this self-defeating dialectic: both return again and again to the same dilemmas and issues in which the attempt to construct an authentic voice is dependent precisely on naming and defining oppressive others (mainstream media representations; family and societal pressures to conform; one’s desire to fulfil some of these expectations even as they are contested). The confessional’s dependence on the revelation of an authentic voice is here shown to in fact shore up relations of power (confessing to transgressions of norms can indeed reinscribe these norms). Given that *Bridget Jones* is a comic novel, her solution is a pragmatic and amusing one: she simply forgives herself for her sins, without recourse to higher authority, and carries on, depriving the act of confession of some of its more punitive aspects (so, e.g. despite her resolutions to the contrary, she carries on smoking, drinking and sometimes eating excessive amounts of food, and visits the gym only to buy a sandwich). Given that *Bitchy Jones’s Diary* is arguably a more serious enterprise, the solution is equally more dramatic: to stop blogging. Bitchy writes that ‘I’m more delicate than you know. More broken. More weak. I can’t keep trying to put these pieces together anymore. Not with so many people trampling over them in their boots. And I wouldn’t be the first, you know, to say it’s too hard, to say it’s not worth it ...’ (posted 1 February 2010, post entitled ‘Some Kind of Climax’).

The authentic voice as a way of opening up the representation and construction of female sexual subjectivity is not without its problems then. Bitchy’s retreat to silence suggests a different form of resistance in which not to speak perhaps allows the subject to create a space of greater strength rather than being ‘trampled over’. Yet, silence hardly seems an adequate feminist response to the oppressive forces of mainstream ideology in its restrictive and sexist views of female sexual subjectivity. Can we square this circle? The answer may lie not so much in the production of the singular authentic voice, but rather in a dialogic view of feminism in which multiple authenticities debate meaning. It is in their encouragement of community creation through confession, as in second-wave feminism, that these works have an impact, as the writely ‘I’ collapses into the collective ‘we’. 
I would like to suggest not, as with more conventional accounts of confessional communities, that this results in perfect identification, but rather that it may decen
tre the subject (in both senses of the word), precisely through its multivocality, its calling up of multiple discourses. This is particularly likely in the case of the blogosphere where one can navigate between and around many different blogs. It is through an excess of meaning concerning female sexuality, not all of which can fall within the conscious control of either Fielding or Bitchy, that fissures, contradictions and cracks rather than a monolithic truth are revealed. Ironically, then, Bitchy and Bridget are at their most radical not when we read them, but when we talk about them; when they fall silent, and we debate their meanings without necessarily resolving the issues they raise.

Note
1. The compound acronym denotes the activities and identities involved in the following: Bondage and Discipline; Dominance and Submission; Sadism and Masochism.

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