

BisEXUALiTy anGSt

by Shoshana Magnet

Cet article explore les exigences de la bisexualité, ainsi que ses implications. On lira les réflexions de l'auteure sur ce que veut dire (pour elle) la bisexualité.

Initially, when I set out to write this paper, I crafted a carefully worded thesis. I was determined to prove my thesis using the words of exceedingly articulate and verbose scholars (not to mention their research). I was planning to (re)state that bisexuals are doubly marginalized; that they are subject to bi-phobia from both lesbian and heterosexual communities. Realizing that this was hardly an original thought, I still determined to assert that bisexuality is an especially challenging space to inhabit, as bisexuals have few support networks and services and they remain without a unified political movement.

However, after doing extensive reading, I discovered that I had oversimplified a complex problem. In fact, although bisexuals are frequently ostracized by the gay and lesbian communities, there also exists a bisexual movement complete with bisexual politics, conflicts, and activism. Furthermore, there exists a vast literature—both inside and outside of academia—on the subject. In addition, I came to the realization that bisexuality can be about occupying a place of dual privilege. Thus, bisexuals appear to have dual experiences of “rejection and inclusion in monosexual communities” (Tucker, Highleyman, and Kaplan 31).

This forced me to rethink my paper completely. Consequently, rather than try to come up with any sort of “solution,” I have attempted to ruminate on what bisexuality entails,

as well as several of its implications. Therefore, this article consists of a collection of my own reflections about what it means (to me) to be bisexual. It's an opportunity to share some of the thoughts that I pencilled down in my journal as I was reading the seemingly endless stack of books written on bisexuality.

Passing and Other Forms of “Privilege”

There is certainly a part of me that likes the ability to “pass.” When I began reading *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics*, I was only mildly interested. I thought that lesbians should understand by now that bi-liberation is also gay liberation (Rust). When I read about lesbians who were angered by bisexuals who they perceived as sexually indiscriminate, confused, neurotic, and cowardly, I felt vindicated. “Chalk another mark up for intolerance” I thought smugly to myself, “no new argument here.” But I would be lying if I said that I don't benefit (as a bisexual) from heterosexual privilege. I can choose to be perceived as straight. And this choice is not the same as that made by the gay man who chooses not to leave the closet. All I have to do is fuck men. What could be easier?

I sat there in the back of the car while my cab driver spouted the usual homophobic lines. But they were angrier than I was used to hearing. I felt vulnerable. Trapped. Middle of the night and I'm in a car with some man I don't know. “You're lucky you don't see it,” he said. “The stuff they do makes me sick,” he said to me. Wanted to fight

back, didn't know what to say. Said (feebly): “I don't think it's quite like that.” Told him all of my best friends were gay. “That may be,” he said. “But you don't know the kind of stuff that I'm talking about.” I said that I had heard heterosexual men be far more degrading about women than any gay man I knew. He said: “Honey, you don't know. I saw you kiss your boyfriend before you got into the car. I'm an attractive man, I'm the person they feel they can talk to.” I smiled, said nothing. Retreated behind the facade of a male partner, felt better/ safer/safe.

It is easy for me to claim heterosexual privilege.

And I have. Especially when I first came to Hamilton. No group of familial lesbians to support me now. Talk about alienation. I never realized how much I had relied on my mother's lesbian/feminist entourage. No matter

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that I was out in high school and in my first year of university. When I got to McMaster—retreat retreat retract retreat. The first day of class, we all introduced ourselves. Ice-breakers—hurray. Question: what extra-curricular “activities” do you participate in? Answer: the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. HmMMMM.

Is it an attempt to de-emphasize the importance of gender lines, or does it describe a person who appreciates both. Or neither? Gender blindness. This is the Ani Difranco brand of bisexuality, “gender just isn’t real important to me”—so progressive!”

Hate to fall back on those stereotypes, but religion and orientation are a tricky mix if memory serves. The person next to me is speaking; my turn next. What to say, what to say? Panic. So when it got to be my turn this is the story I told:

My first day on campus, I walk all the way up to the GLBT Centre. I say hello to the coordinator (who happens to be in my program). Very nice—he says “Come in, sit down! What’s your name?” So I tell him. And he asks me what program I’m in. So I tell him I’m in his program. And he says “Fantastic—more queer ArtScis!” [Laughter from the group to whom I’m recounting this story—of course I’m not gay—what a funny mistake to make!] But of course, I say. I don’t want to deny it too strongly. [This is said for the benefit of my audience—Don’t be homophobic around me— that I won’t tolerate.] So I just smile and nod. [Laughter] Then he asks me what residence I’m in. So I tell him I’m in an

*all-girls residence. Since there are 69 girls in my residence, I make my usual joke about the number. Only he laughs just a little *too* uproariously. [Laughter] “But I don’t want to say, “Noooo, not in that way.” So now I feel like I have to “come in” to GLBT! [More laughter]*

And during that moment, I feel great. What a clever way to present myself and my volunteering desires! But two years later when I’m reading *Vice-Versa* and Garber is discussing the bisexual disease of hiding behind heterosexual privilege, I don’t feel so clever. It’s fine when you can laugh about it, but I know that I must realize that my laughter is in itself a privilege. When it’s your way of life, and people constantly make the same mistake but in reverse (i.e., assume you’re straight) I know it’s not so funny.

The flip side of being bisexual is that I also benefit from lesbian privilege (or by receiving support from the GLBT community).

And when I am with my lesbian friends I talk as if I am a lesbian. Dyke this and queer that. I take ownership of those terms and use them with confidence to show that I am a “member.” After all, they can’t be sure. How should they know? (Although they do, of course, know that I am involved with a man.) “But it’s true,” I say “that I identify much more strongly with women. It’s just that they’re not that easy to find.” They smile, agree. They are pleased to see someone else “batting for their team.” So I am accepted, one of them.

However, it is also true that when I work up the courage to identify myself as bisexual, I am accepted by neither community.

I allow myself to talk about a woman I am interested in with my crowd of most conservative Arts & Science friends. They say nothing, although a number of them smile uncomfortably and one pats my hand. I know they will

talk later, but that it will not be in my presence.

When I bring my partner (male) home to have dinner with my lesbian friends they refuse to talk to me directly. When I bring up political issues, they shoot me down aggressively and I hear one of them remark snidely “She wouldn’t know.”

After “coming out” on stage in front of my entire high school as president and founder of the school’s GLBT club, my high school teacher (the one who is helping me organize it) said to me: “I just don’t understand bisexuals.” A statement, not a question. Then the obligatory “Is the world your oyster, or don’t you care to choose?” Aaagh—the familiar image of the bisexual as an indiscriminating sexual predator.

“Anything That Moves...” Confusion About the Term Bisexual

Bisexuality seems to defy definition. Is it sexual nondiscrimination or “indiscriminate sexual activity with anything that moves” (Rust 60). Is it an attempt to de-emphasize the importance of gender lines, or does it describe a person who appreciates both. Or neither? Gender blindness. This is the Ani Difranco brand of bisexuality, “gender just isn’t real important to me”—so progressive! (qtd. in Papazian 44).

As a bisexual, I’m just not concerned about the gender of a person. I’m interested in what they’re like as an individual. I’m attracted to certain qualities in people, regardless of whether I find them in a man or a woman. (Tucker *et al.* 163)

But does this count? How can it be a movement? It lacks cause, it lacks slogans, it lacks angry punctuation!!!

Still, I must admit that Difranco is the kind of bisexual I long to be. Indifferent to gender. So much nobler: I am attracted to *people*, not genitalia.

It seems like some kind of moral high ground—like people who claim they are “colour blind.” Oh—that person was male? I didn’t even notice his penis!

Instead, I find myself carefully choosing partners based on their orientation, their gender (or transgender), engaging in pluralities, seeking out simultaneity. I infuriate the lesbian community because I forget and say careless things like: “My next partner is going to be a woman.” They say: “I wished for so long I could just forget about women and think about men, and you play your cards as freely as if you were using monopoly money. You act as though it doesn’t count.” Most of the time I agree, but sometimes I think: “Like it’s that easy. Try being a bisexual woman trying to meet women.” You don’t need to see the stats to know that it’s difficult. In a survey investigating lesbian attitudes towards bisexuality, Paula Rust found that the majority (96 per cent) of lesbians said they would prefer to date a lesbian and 74 per cent said their preference “to avoid dating bisexual women is very strong.” Like April Sinclair says in *Ain’t Gonna Be the Same Fool Twice*: “everybody hates bisexuals. Lesbians think that they are just straight women experimenting at the expense of [lesbians]. And heterosexuals see [bisexuals] as nymphomaniacs” (262).

If bisexuals really are nymphomaniacs, think of the (sexual) frustration that is our hair-shirt to wear. Lesbians don’t want bisexual women for friends (let alone lovers).

The majority of lesbian respondents are reluctant to be socially or politically associated with bisexual women. Most even prefer not to become friends with bisexual women, and those who do not mind having bisexual friends usually draw the line at intimate romantic relationships. (Rust 101)

These days, you need to sign on

the dotted line before a lesbian will even sleep with you (Hutchins and Kaahumanu 224). Even bisexual women aren’t interested in you, if they’re looking for women, they’re looking for lesbians. Lesbians are perceived as the most subversive political activists, and even bisexuals will argue that gay and lesbian rights must come first on the political agenda. This means that bisexual needs often fall by the wayside on the queer activist’s itinerary.

We’re here to talk today about everybodyexceptyou. We’re working for the rights of everybodyexceptyou. The oppression ofeverybody-except-you has got to end (Carlton 15).

Sometimes, regardless of whether bisexuality is in fact a position of double marginality, it still feels lonely. Defined as unfuckable by other women (alas) and easy by men (horrific), it seems that the most difficult part of bisexuality is feeling alienated from both communities. In this sense, it seems that bisexuality becomes the most,

Friendless cause ... with bisexuals resent[ing] their position of double jeopardy, despised by the straight world ... and dismissed by gay militants as mere ‘swingers’ and ‘jet setters’ ... whose commitment to homosexuality is inauthentic. (Tucker *et al.* 40)

But then I think: who am I kidding. What right do I have to rant, because every time the going gets heterosexist, homo/bi/or lesbo phobic (and it always does), I can just call up some ex and hide behind the patriarchy.

Commitment...

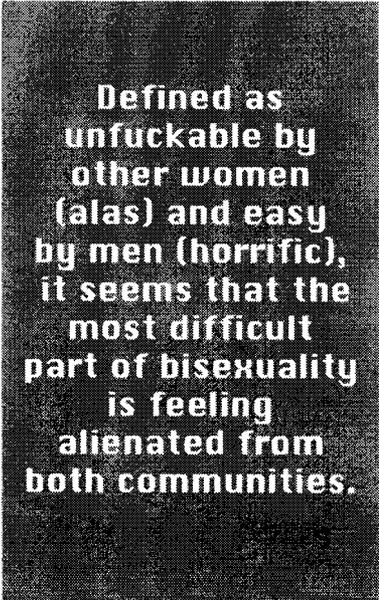
I have been told by lesbians I am a failed feminist, that I fuck anything that moves, (and even if that’s true) is it because I’m bisexual? The assumption is that I am incapable of

monogamy, that I can’t face commitment. Bisexuality by its very definition implies plurality, and the only way to achieve perfect plurality at all times is to jump onto the exciting train of concurrence.

A person attracted sexually to more than one gender must be incapable of sustaining a monogamous relationship since obviously there are too few hermaphrodites to go around.... Bi people, then, must live somewhere on the nether side of monogamy, or so the mythos goes. (Tucker *et al.* 153)

Definitions and Angst...

And what about definitions? Am I just a heterosexual who falls into homosexual relationships once in while, or vice versa? Is heterosexuality a vice? Should I think about becoming a political lesbian? Is it worth ending my latest relationship over? I don’t think so, but maybe. Maybe I should devote more of my time to ensuring that I am a practicing bisexual (simultaneous homosexual and heterosexual relationships). But wait! It’s not like I can always find somebody to date of both genders. The stress! Am I unworthy of being a lesbian,



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am I incapable of being bisexual? Have I fallen (again that word—implying fallen women) into happy heterosexual hell by default? But what about when I'm subjected to lesbo/homo/biphobia? (It never happens when I'm with a man).

Is it true that bisexuality is just a transition stage between culturally normative heterosexuality and politically subversive lesbianism? I don't think I'm a lesbian, but maybe that's just 22 years of heterosexual socialization speaking. After all, given the enormous pressure on women to live heterosexual lives, we cannot say with any confidence that the majority of women are born heterosexual.

Lastly, what is "bisex" anyway? Is it the sexual activity that sometimes occurs between gay men and lesbian women (Garber)? Can a female to male transsexual man and a female to male transgendered woman engage in it? Do all bisexuals have bisex? Or do they have heterosexual sex when they sleep with the opposite sex, gay sex when they sleep with the same sex, and bisex some other time? One thing I know for sure—bisexuals definitely need a plethora of flexible definitions.

Bisexuality is a whole fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we must have "two" sides or that we *must* be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders. Do not mistake our fluidity for confusion, irresponsibility, or an inability to commit. Do not equate promiscuity, infidelity, or unsafe sexual behavior with bisexuality. Those are human traits that cross *all* sexual orientations... Do not expect a clear-cut definition of bisexuality to jump out from the pages. (Editorial statement of *The Advocate* qtd. in Garber. 56)

Acknowledging Benefits,

Monogamy, and their Implications for Bisexuality...

There is no question that I benefit from my heterosexual relationship. I am often tempted to take the guilt that I feel about this out on him; a kind of kick the white male dog type of displacement. I don't have to worry about holding hands, being "seen" in public... I don't have to worry that the ways in which I express my "coupling" will be received negatively by others.

Never so struck by that as when I'm at formal. (God I hate those things, every way that I pull my obscenely tacky sequined dress it seems to turn around and bite me. I pull it up, the hemline is too high. I pull it down, the neckline is too low.) Dancing with a boy, feeling miserable, doing the turning around on the spot barely moving couple waddle. Feel like everybody's staring at me, but in fact, nobody is. Even from my paranoid self-obsessed little world I can see who everybody's watching. It's my best friends Tim and Dave. Tim is the president of our student government. I can hear the gasps of shock even though I know they are inaudible. I can also hear (really) the whispered comments, "I'd heard Tim was gay ... I can't believe he was elected! Who would have guessed about Dave, he's so straight-acting!" Whatever that means.

Although my coupling with a man may be frowned upon, (the lesbian community certainly has issues with my being involved with a man, and understandably so), the censure that I experience does not come in the form of street homophobia, violence, or discrimination and public censure. If the question is not whether I benefit from being involved with a man, what is it? The question for me is whether being involved in a committed (and, alas, monogamous) relationship with a man still allows me to be a bisexual woman, or does this mean that I am now occupying the space of the "true" heterosexual?

Women who call themselves

"bisexual," not because they are in transition or are afraid of their lesbianism, but because they choose to relate sexually to both women and men, are the only women who are really heterosexual. They are the only women who choose to relate to men after having known and experienced a non-compulsory alternative. (Murphy 88)

This would mean that there is no category for me, there is no place for people "like me."

You don't exist. He used to say it to my face: You don't exist. (Carlton 14)

Well, at least this way I'm not in transition:

I went through that phase too. It lasted 2 minutes 2 months 6 months 2 years 10 years, but I saw the light eventually. (Carlton 15)

Or a nymphomaniac:

You just take it wherever you can get it, don't you? (Carlton 14)

I guess I wouldn't have to be incapable of commitment:

You can't ever be monogamous/get married/have kids/ have a stable relationship can you? (Carlton 15)

It's hard to say what I find more painful: the notion that bisexuality is just a purer form of heterosexuality or that it's a confused form of lesbianism.

But you're one of us. You can't be one of us and one of those, too. (Carlton 15)

Or that bisexuality is just a way of ensuring that my privilege as a heterosexual woman is protected.

You're a fence-sitter. We're all waiting for you to come out come down. We're all waiting for you. (Carlton 14)

I guess, in retrospect, it's the notion of this last opinion that I find the most bitter pill to swallow, although I would be lying if I said it didn't resonate to some degree.

Sometimes I think I'm only bisexual in that "not lesbian enuf" kind of way. (Crago 15)

Conclusions?

If only I had come to some conclusions, I could articulate them here in a clear and concisely written paragraph whose topic sentence would begin with "Therefore, it has become clear that blah blah freakin blah." Instead, I find that I have come to no conclusions about bisexuality. The only belief which has become clearer for me through the course of doing these readings is that bisexuality is a separate identity/orientation with a distinct political agenda and a separate sexual life. At least for me, it is *not* two separate orientations: sometimes I live my life as a lesbian, sometimes as a het, but never as a bisexual. I cannot compartmentalize my life so neatly. While there may be an overlap between sex between two women and sex between two lesbians, it is clear that they are also different in a number of ways. Greta Christina says it best:

So when you have sex with men, you are straight, and when you have sex with women, you are a lesbian. As a bisexual woman, this is what I hear; again and again, this is what I hear. Your sexuality comes in compartments, like Tupperware, your heart has two chambers and you cannot feel with both; your soul is like Berlin before the wall came down. And the truth of my experience is this:

my sexuality is whole. I am not straight with men and lesbian with women; I am bisexual with both. (qtd. in Pramagiorre and Pramagiorre 161).

So I am in a monogamous, committed relationship with a man. "Not much of a bisexual you say" (Yoshizaki qtd. in Hutchins *et al.* 25). However, for me I am. More than being about the "*au courant*," bisexuality has allowed me to better understand my potential. Even if I am still clutching (hopelessly/helplessly?) to labels that stay firmly "within the box," this notion of bisexual "possibilities" has allowed me to understand that being bisexual can have more to do with potential than reality.

In all honesty, I don't know if bisexuality is a political "cop out" because it allows me to hide behind heterosexuality. Yes, there is definitely some truth to this view. Still, I refute the notion that bisexuals are safe from discrimination. After all, homophobia is sometimes nothing more than the umbrella term that includes biphobia. I realize that I have failed to prove that it is either easier or harder for bisexuals. In all honesty, I'm still not sure.

Shoshana Magnet is a third year Arts and Science student at McMaster University. While she may draw her inspiration from her mother and their mutual (brave, bold, courageous) friends, she owes her most radical side to the confidence inspired by her partner, also a pretty fantastic feminist.

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LEA MURRAY- MACFADDEN

rose of thorns

A wise man once told me
every rose has it's thorn
and for every thorn that
pricks
a heart will break
and for every petal that falls
a tear will also fall
I've been pricked and lost
a lot of petals
but I finally found
my rose that holds no
thorns

Lea Murray-MacFadden has been writing poetry since she was a small child. She has been happily married for 13 wonderful years.