

Review: Bisexuality

Michael William

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Biphobia | 4 |
| Gender and Identity | 5 |
| Bis and other Sexual Minorities | 7 |
| The bi Milieu/Movement | 8 |
| Anthologies | 10 |
| Journals | 10 |
| Organizations | 10 |
| Directory | 11 |

“There seems to be some sort of war going on that I’m not invited to, but everyone wants me to take a side.”

— Alyx J. Shaw

We first appeared in print primarily in specialized medical and psychiatric texts. Then, during the seventies, a brief, media-generated “bisexual chic” phase took place. Elton John and David Bowie were in the spotlight; gender bending was in.

But as Gary North notes, in the nineties “bisexuality is not chic — not in this age of AIDS.” A perception that the disease is spreading to the het population from us is most people’s single impression of bis. Invisible, except as propagators of a fatal disease — a more sinister reputation is hard to imagine.

Invisible to others, “We are just becoming visible to ourselves,” in one bi’s phrase, and in the last few years several anthologies edited by bis have been changing the ways we see each other and the ways others see us — *Bisexuality: A Reader and Source-book*; *Bi Any Other Name*; *Closer To Home*. I devoured these books, like many other bis no doubt. Appropriately, many of these pieces are personal histories and coming out stories. Some are the double coming out stories of people who came out initially as gays or lesbians and subsequently as bisexuals. There are also longer, theoretical pieces, which are found mainly in *Closer To Home*. Personal experiences are interwoven in some of these texts as well.

Most bi activists and writers are women, and the new bi milieu/movement on the whole is specifically queer and specifically feminist. Outlooks in the bi women’s milieu can be outlined and contrasted much more readily, in effect, than in the comparatively intangible and less theoretically developed men’s milieu.

Many bi texts discuss the often-tense relationship between bisexuals and the lesbian and gay milieux. In the ferment of the beginnings of the Gay Liberation Movement in the sixties, bis participated and apparently were generally welcomed. Theorists such as Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg actively promoted bisexuality; Gore Vidal, anarchist sexologist Alex Comfort and others proposed that all people are bisexual. From a point in the seventies on, however, being bi became decidedly uncool. Carol Queen “got more grief from my lesbian family for coming out as bi than from my heterosexual one when I came out as a dyke...” Anne Schneider comments: “...no bi woman I know has escaped the pain of being ostracized by some elements of the lesbian community.” Surveying 400 participants at a woman’s event, Paula Rust found that, as well, fully one out of three lesbian identified women questioned believed that bisexuality does not exist, giving responses like the following:

- I think either you’re a lesbian or you’re straight.
- I was born [homosexual]; some are born heterosexual. I find it hard to believe that people can be bisexual.
- It does not exist.

Some were prepared to accept the existence of bisexuality, but only as a transitional stage:

- I feel people who think they are bisexual are confused about it or in transition.

- My experience of women who define themselves as bisexual suggests that bisexual women are either (a) really 'lesbian' but using the bisexual label to preserve their heterosexual privilege in society, or (b) on their way to becoming lesbian and using the bisexual label as a 'safe' transition stage, or (c) experimenting with lesbianism but not in a serious way.

Some did not hesitate to classify bisexuality as a mental illness:

- Bisexual is still heterosexual unless it is pathological.

It is hardly surprising in this kind of climate that some gays and lesbians are banking on science for the ultimate proof of the non-existence of bisexuals. "There ain't no such animal, as I'm confident will be finally proven by the study of genetics," according to an anonymous letter-writer in response to an article on bisexuality by Michael Szymanski in *Genre*.

Brenda Blasingame outlines accusations she encountered, and which have frequently been directed at other bis: "...that I am sitting on the fence, that I am experimenting, that I am not really gay but straight, that it is wrong for me to want to be with a man, or that it is just a phase." Rebecca Schuster lists other common perceptions and accusations: "profiteers of heterosexual privilege, indecisive, untrustworthy, exotic, incapable of committed relationships, promiscuous, and responsible for the spread of AIDS. [Bisexuals are] accused of harboring loyalty to the enemy, or worse, of being traitors." Bisexuality, in Paula Rust's description, becomes a "badge of political cowardice, and social pressure is brought upon those who identify as bisexuals to 'make up their minds'."

Eridani controversially contends that anti-bi sentiment in the gay and lesbian milieux is an "almost exclusively female phenomenon."

"In 1990, the organizers for the annual gay pride celebrations in Northampton, Massachusetts, added the word 'bisexual' to the event title. A group of lesbians packed subsequent meetings and voted to remove it. A similar fight against adding 'bisexual' to the New England Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychologists was led by women. In San Francisco, when the Bay Times added 'bisexual' to its masthead, all the letters objecting to the new title were from women. Why is it that women, and not men, think that the gay community is being contaminated by the presence of bisexuals?"

In Carol Queen's opinion, gay men "seem more likely to cite personal antipathy or simple stereotypes about bisexuals as a source of their chagrin," whereas the reaction of lesbians has been more a question of an ideological rejection, an outlook echoed by Eridani. However, there is clearly considerable hostility to bis in the gay men's milieu, as accounts in *Bi Any Other Name* and elsewhere make clear. And in an article in the June '92 "Queer Issue" of the *Village Voice*, former *OutWeek* editor Gabriel Rotello demonstrates that he's no slouch when it comes to laying the theoretical basis of a new, more sophisticated anti-bi agenda which distances itself from the more outrageous bi myths while erecting even more watertight barriers between bis and the gay and lesbian milieux.

Biphobia

Bis have offered a variety of theories to explain biphobia. For Brenda Blasingame, "Biphobia emerges from the belief in the dichotomy of gay and straight, with no in-between. Therefore bisexuals are not seen as part of the gay community but apart from the community." Gabriel

Rotello's alarmed comment that bis challenge "the most cherished assumption of the lesbian and gay movement: that it's by and for homosexuals" is an illustration. Amanda Udis-Kessler sees biphobia as part of a deeper identity crisis:

"Lesbians and gay men have been able to define themselves as other than heterosexual; bisexuals challenge that definition regardless of our intention to do so. Behind the painful lesbian and gay biphobia which we have experienced is a poignant cry for self; 'you don't exist' means 'I do exist.' And, too, the rejection as a group ('go form your own communities; you're not welcome in ours') is a way for lesbians and gay men to claim a group identity, to say 'we exist, not just as individuals but as a community'."

Eridani, on the other hand, links her contention that biphobia is more widespread in the lesbian milieu to what she believes are fundamental differences between men and women. Basing her analysis on Kinsey studies and other observations she inverts the usual identity-as-an-affirmation stance, positing that "women, compared to men, tend not to have sexual orientations." Therefore, she continues, "most women have some degree of choice about their sexual orientation and most men don't." This thesis, for Eridani, helps to explain the 'political lesbian' phenomenon of the seventies, as exemplified by the statement "feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice," a quote cited and reacted to many times in these books. "Many of the women who preferred the solidarity and support of the new women's communities," Eridani continues, "did not have sexual orientations. A few even had heterosexual orientations, which they suppressed. A clear difference in the prevalence of sexual orientations is apparent here. Who ever heard of a heterosexual male who decided to become gay on the grounds that he didn't like being around women most of the time? Men like this become batterers and rapists instead." According to Eridani, "It is mainly lesbians without sexual orientations who are hostile to bisexuals as well. The old standard 'any woman can be a lesbian' is true for the large number of women who don't have sexual orientations. Therefore becoming a feminist implies to some women that, on ethical grounds, women should choose to have a relationship only with women [...] I don't see how this attitude differs from that of Phyllis Schlafly, who thinks that I should choose a heterosexual relationship in order to be a good Christian reactionary." According to Eridani, "The phenomenon of 'hasbians' in the eighties, i.e. women who first became aware of their sexuality in the lesbian-feminist matrix and later took up with men, indicates again that there are a lot of lesbian feminists who really don't have sexual orientations." Eridani's provocative formulations are not without their internal coherence, but ultimately leave me wary. When a couple of people who had read the article mentioned it among some local bis, those present did not seem to have definitive verdicts. Perhaps readers would like to comment?

Gender and Identity

Central to many of these texts are questions of identity, a concept which "bisexuals have alternately clung to and shrunk from," in Kathleen Bennett's words. Many bis locate themselves on a continuum between straight and gay. A point which, for some, is not fixed: during a lifetime one's same or other sex attraction can increase (having gone from het to bi in middle age, this has been the case with me). This fluidity is itself seen as threatening by 'essentialist' outlooks

which are common in the gay and lesbian milieux, theories which posit identity as an innate, unchanging essence from which many of us are said to be alienated; to become whole, we must rediscover our lost essence, our true identity. Concerning sexual orientation this easily leads to dismissing 10 years of pleasurable het sex as a state of false consciousness.

Some bis say that they are not part straight and part gay but “all bi.” Others refer to distinct straight or gay sides of themselves, or like Victoria Woodward, to “my lesbian self” and “my heterosexual self.” For Rebecca Schuster, on the other hand, bis are “100 percent lesbian or gay *and* 100 percent hetero-sexual...we are simultaneous full members of both groups.” In Dvora Zipkin’s experience, however, “many bisexual women share a general sense of not belonging to either the lesbian or heterosexual world.”

Personally I feel apart from and a part of both the straight and gay milieux.

Also coloring questions of identity are divergences between bis for whom a dichotomy of genders doesn’t seem to exist, or is secondary, and those who see differences between the sexes as fundamental. For Karin Baker, “Women and men are actually more alike than different, and most of our differences are social creations.” For Alyx Shaw, in an article in *Angles*, “Love is not a gender-oriented experience.” In a letter to *Gay Ottawa Info*, Cathy Moreau says, “After all, I not only fall in love (and lust) with a person’s body, but, more importantly, with his or her beliefs, attitudes and behavior. In short, the person as a whole. And what is a body, anyways? Just a carrier for the brain and/or soul.”

Anne Fox, on the other hand, describes her relations to men and women as “simply (and complexly) different.” For Karen Klassen, “there are parts of myself, ways of being which I just don’t experience with men.” Diane Anderson states, “I don’t think a man can match the depth and intimacy that you can find with a woman.” And in Susie Bright’s opinion, “Intellectually, we always favor those of our own sex, even if they’re not our sexual partners. Bisexuals are the same as everyone else in this regard.”

Transsexuals add another dimension to questions of gender and identity. For John, a pre-operative bi interviewed for an article published in *Tapestry* and *On Our Backs*, “It’s my genitals that are dishonest. The truth is that I am a man.”

For Karin Baker, because “bisexuality blurs the supposed duality of sexuality” it “has the potential to go beyond gender.” If homosexuality explodes the complementarity of “opposite sexes,” bisexuality further challenges institutionalized gender polarization itself — opening the door to a more androgynous mix which could even abolish the male/female split as we know it. But the example of John and others cited above indicate that, even when considerably bent, gender categories easily spring back to resemble familiar male/female forms. Baker acknowledges, undermining the “beyond gender” thesis, that some bis “are attracted to women for the qualities culturally associated with this gender and to men for qualities identified as masculine.” Clearly, bisexuality does not automatically challenge gender roles. Rebecca Kaplan’s warning: “If we wish to deny that women are ‘innately weak’, we cannot also say that women are ‘innately peaceful’” highlights problematic essentialist assumptions which are also present in some bi discourses.

The meaning of the often politically charged word lesbian and how bis relate to the question of lesbian identity has also been complex. “Is being a lesbian about being attracted to and falling in love with women, or about not being attracted to and falling in love with, or at least getting involved with, men?” asks Elizabeth Rebe Weise. For some, becoming bi signifies leaving behind the label lesbian. “I fell in love with a man,” says Lani Kaahumanu, “and that did not make sense

to me as a lesbian.” Stacey Young calls herself a “feminist and formerly-lesbian bisexual woman.” However others retain a lesbian identity, using the term “lesbian bisexual,” for example.

Though sleeping with men, others reject a bisexual identity, raising the recurring question of a disparity between identity and behavior. Holly Near, for example, says she “doesn’t feel like a bisexual,” and that her lesbianism is “linked to [a] political perspective” rather than “sexual preference” — causing Beth Elliot to ruefully remark, “unlike, presumably, her bisexuality.” These identity clashes are typically set out in the contrast between Sheela Lambert’s statement: “I feel that everyone should have the right to define their own identity” and Elizabeth Rebe Weise’s approach: “You’ve got Rita Mae Brown, Jan Clausen, Jill Johnson, Holly Near, June Jordan, pillars of the lesbian community, who all turned out to be bisexual, however they choose to define themselves.” For *Voice* writer Gabriel Rotello, this kind of attitude represents an “Invasion of the Orientation Snatchers” which will “decimate the ranks of gay history.”

Bis and other Sexual Minorities

In a seventies-eighties lesbian feminist climate in which “the personal is political” was often interpreted in the most literal way — no “sleeping with the enemy” — bisexuality inevitably challenged orthodoxies which proposed that, in Stacey Young’s description, “desire can and should be subordinated to a narrowly-defined, politically correct version of sex.” “But desire will out,” as Elizabeth Rebe Weise puts it in her introduction to *Closer To Home*: “We chose to acknowledge our desires and then find a way to live with them as feminists and as thoughtful human beings.” In a clash-between-desire-and-PC-sex sense, bisexuality is linked to the trajectory of other sexual minorities and to what has become known as the “sex wars” which began in the late seventies over porn, S/M, butch/femme, transsexuals, using dildos, etc. Accusations of being dupes and traitors levelled at bis in effect are strikingly similar to accusations other sexual minorities have encountered. In a letter to *OUT/LOOK*, Lyndall Mac-Cowan says, “I was glad to see the ‘Bisexuality Debate’ in your Spring ’92 issue. The articles and the cover art made a connection for me that, as a Kinsey scale 5-1/2, I’d never considered. The fears embedded in biphobia — that ‘some lesbians’ are *really* straight, or might be contaminating lesbian space with *heterosexual* values — are some of the same accusations and fears that have been directed at me as a femme for twenty years.” For John, the pre-op transsexual, “the lesbian community is the only place where I encounter hostility. They think I’m a woman, so they think I’m a traitor.” And in feminist Robin Morgan’s unforgettable accusation, a lesbian S/M practitioner is “a lesbian copy of a faggot imitation of patriarchal backlash against feminism.”

Some bis are enthusiastic about the appearance of a broader, more inclusive ‘queer’ milieu in which bis and other sexual minorities can more easily claim a space without having to constantly justify their existence. However, other bis are less comfortable with the queer concept or relate primarily to the het world. Ultimately, the relationship between bis and other minorities such as butch/ femme or transsexuals remains unclear. As well, many bis and presumably most anarchists would have problems with S/M, with its array of accoutrements, dungeons and dominator/ dominated roles. For anti-authoritarians, S/M no doubt raises a variety of thorny questions concerning power, consent, and the limits of desire/reappearance of PC sex.

The bi Milieu/Movement

If a vocal bisexual milieu has indisputably surfaced in the last decade, the extent of the existence of a movement is more a question of debate. Susan Sturges, in a letter responding to Gabriel Rotello's *Voice* article, speaks of a "surging bisexual movement"; in *OUT/LOOK*, on the other hand, bi theorist Amanda Udis-Kessler is considerably more hesitant: "Each group has a different sense of where a movement — if there exists a movement — or where a community (god knows if there is a community) might be going."

Bi groups began to spring up in a number of North American and European cities in the late seventies and early eighties. In 1985, the East Coast Bisexual network was formed. Bi contingents in gay and lesbian pride marches were organized, newsletters and journals appeared, and in 1990, Bi Pol, a political action group, sponsored the first national Bisexual Conference. As bis come out of the closet what has been termed the GBD (Great Bisexual Debate) has rippled through the gay and lesbian press. In *Genre*, a new upscale publication which bills itself as the "gay *Esquire*," bisexuality was recently labelled "the most controversial issue of the nineties."

As it takes shape, however, a number of problematic aspects of the new bi milieu/movement have become apparent. First, there is the diversity noted by Elizabeth Rebe Weise in an assessment of a 1988 bi conference: "We are Communists, Socialists, Anarchists, Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, and probably some who want to see the monarchy re-established." In other words, a sprawling mess: a shared sexual orientation becomes the only glue preventing things from disintegrating into cacophony, underscoring the familiar, limiting focus endemic to single-issue-based groups.

Although many bis talk of selecting friends and partners as individuals as opposed to members of gender categories, this individualist thrust is rarely explored further. Rather, organizers typically exhort bis to execute "theoretical tasks" or to "take on liberation work," putting forth a dreary, sacrifice-oriented approach which is exhausting in itself as opposed to potentially liberating. Talk of leadership, unity, 'tasks', role models, programs — all the reactionary bric-à-brac of 'progressive' and national liberation movements abounds in the new bi milieu. But there are also critiques of identity politics and victimization approaches, and attempts to learn from the mistakes of national liberation movement ideology. (I should add that, in attempting to outline bi viewpoints, this text has taken on something of a victimization coloring itself...)

Despite the eclectic nature of the milieu, some bis are proposing a false unity. For Rebecca Gordin, "Recognition takes a strong and united bisexual front." "Unity Is Our Bi-Word" was chosen as the theme of the bi contingent in a San Francisco gay and lesbian pride day march. Unity usually implies leaders to crystallize a representation racket. And there is no lack of talk of leadership in these texts. According to the editors of *Bi Any Other Name*, "we must nurture all the leadership potential of our community." Calling for a "liberation program," Rebecca Schuster exhorts bis to "claim our homes among lesbians and gay men and heterosexuals and rapidly take our place with them as powerful leaders of all people." This craving for leadership is complemented by the media's need for leaders in order to feed the spectacle. In his anti-bi article in the *Voice*, Gabriel Rotello deftly integrates the leadership phenomenon, playing off bi leaders whose discourse supports his thesis against others he feels threatened by. That a leadership has solidified as far as the media are concerned appears evident for example in the letters printed and choice of participants in a round table on bisexuality which appeared in *OUT/LOOK* in response to a feature section on bisexuality in the previous issue: three were editors of books on bisexuality and

another was Amanda Udis-Kessler, who appears to be the most referred-to bi theorist. But there are also texts which stress a non-hierarchical approach or which question leadership. Kathleen Bennett, for example, cautions that “The bisexual movement must not yield to the faulty thinking of ‘vanguardism’ just because of our potential to have a special perspective on dualism.”

Along with cheerleading for leadership are equally strong but somewhat different calls for role models. (Personally it has always escaped me why people want to model themselves on someone else, anyway). Lacking a bi milieu, or often even someone to share perceptions of bisexuality with, it is no doubt understandable, if unfortunate, that the role model exerts such an attraction for so many bis. For Gary North, “the problem is, we don’t have many role models.” Dianne Anderson, upon moving to L.A., “found few bisexual role models and even fewer that I could relate to.” For Beth Elliot, a cultural hero — a Malcolm X — becomes the solution to the question of the bi message not getting out. Comparing Holly Near, who rejects the label bisexual, to Gretchen Phillips (a young out bi musician), Elliot says, “Still, it is Holly Near and not Gretchen Phillips who has the credentials to be a spokesperson or role model attractive to seventies lesbian feminists and the younger women who identify with their left-oriented community...” What is needed, in Elliot’s opinion, is “a Holly Near-type/ era bisexual feminist role model to go along with the Gretchen Phillips-type/ era bisexual feminist role model.” One individual representing an era would seem aberrant, but no stranger than representation itself to those of us who wish to be represented by no one.

Also problematic is the concept “bi pride.” If bi pride functions as an understandable reaction to homophobia and biphobia, it rapidly tends to become a broader, in one bi’s phrase, “I am fine the way I am” outlook which promotes complacency: if everyone stays exactly the way they are, the chances of radical change are mighty slim...

Mirroring the new bi movement, the editorial focus of these books is feminist. Thus some of the many feminist insights are incorporated, and dismantling the patriarchy becomes a focal point. But at the same time feminism itself is largely left unchallenged; on the contrary, underlining the feminist credentials of the new queer-bi milieu becomes a priority. Although there are critiques of lesbian separatism (the tendency which has been the most hostile to bis), much of the writing in these texts is similar to mainstream lesbian currents. Speaking about members of the Seattle Bisexual Women’s Network who encountered problems when they attempted to organize a workshop at the Northwest Lesbian Conference, Elizabeth Rebe Weise states, “in fact, many of us were indistinguishable from the lesbians in that group in our politics and lives.”

In *Closer To Home; Bisexuality and Feminism*, bisexual men are rarely mentioned beyond a couple of accounts by women who were involved with bi men. One is left to wonder what the relationship (if any) between the bi women’s and men’s milieu is (if there is a men’s milieu), though there is clearly some interaction in certain local bi groups and in planning regional and national events. Beth Elliot notes, “Many of us take part in bisexual *women’s* groups without necessarily feeling part of a larger (and co-ed) bisexual community.” In a review of *Closer To Home* in *Frighten the Horses*, Carol Queen comments that “Many of the book’s contributors seem to feel that they’ve found practically the only man worth relating to...”

There is little specifically anti-statist sentiment in bi texts, or, indeed, mention of the state at all. One is left to wonder what kind of state is being proposed, no doubt a question better left unasked. There is also little profound questioning of technology, industrialism, or the economy, giving the impression that the status quo, or something close, is acceptable to most of these writers and activists.

To date, bi visibility and achieving formal recognition in the gay/lesbian milieu have constituted the narrow focus of most bi organizing efforts. Like Susan Trynka, some bis feel that the “queer women’s communities are probably a lot more responsive to bisexuality now” than in the past. Certainly some of the more absurd myths, such as the non-existence of bisexuality, seem to be crumbling. The word bisexual is more and more visible in gay and lesbian journals and events. And as long as same-sex attractions continue to bring us together, bis will interact with lesbians and gays, whether we are formally accepted or not. As Carol Queen notes, “It won’t help to vote whether bisexuals should be let in: we are in.” At the same time some gays and lesbians have made it clear that, for them, bis will never be accepted; they will remain “heterosexual transgressions into our entrenched, yet fun, little world,” as Ara Wilson put it, or in Sandy Dwyer’s blunt phrase: “They are merely opportunists.”

Merely opportunists?!?

Anthologies

Bisexuality; A Reader and Sourcebook edited by Thomas Geller (Times Change Press, Box 1380, Ojai, California 93023, 1990) 184pp. \$10.95 paper.

Bi Any Other Name; Bisexual People Speak Out edited by Lorraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu (Alyson Publishing, 40 Plympton Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02118, 1991) 416pp. \$11.95 paper.

Closer To Home; Bisexuality and Feminism edited by Elizabeth Rebe Weise (Seal Press, 3131 Western Avenue, Suite 410, Seattle, Washington 98121, 1992) 320pp. \$14.95 paper.

A new anthology, of which at least half will be by women of color, will soon be available from Sister Vision Press. Write to: Bisexual Women’s Anthology, c/o Sister Vision Press, P.O. Box 217, Station E, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6H 4E2.

Journals

BiWomen (East Coast Bi-Network, 338 Newbury Street, Second Floor, Boston, Massachusetts 02115). Bi-monthly. \$15.00/ year.

North Bi Northwest (P.O. Box 30645, Greenwood Station, Seattle, Washington 98103-0645). Bi-monthly. \$12.00/year.

Organizations

BiNet USA, the Bisexual Network of the USA (5584 Castro Street #441, San Francisco, California 94114). A quarterly newsletter is available. No fee, but \$35 donation is requested.

East Coast Bi Network. Phone 617-2476683 in Boston.

3x3 (P.O. Box 10436, Oakland, California 94610). Bisexual People of Color — political, support, and social group.

Directory

International Directory of Bisexual Resources (The Center, 338 Newbury Street, Second Floor, Boston, Massachusetts 02115) \$6.00.

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