

# The Invisibility of Bisexuality

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## **Introduction**

The term "bisexual" is defined as a person who experiences sexual attraction for one or more genders. However, it is more commonly known as a person who

experiences sexual desire for both men and women. While we might expect that this would mean that "bisexuality" is a third term equal to "straight" and "gay," many people today view bisexuality as a kind of spectrum with "straight" at one end and "gay" at the other. This view comes partly from the work of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and partly from the work of the researcher Alfred Kinsey. In his essay, "The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure," author Kenji Yoshino quotes Freud, who said in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) that, "Man, too, is an animal organism with an unmistakably bisexual disposition" (Yoshino 374). Yoshino also notes that in another work, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937), Freud says, "We have come to learn, however, that every human being is bisexual in this case and that his libido is distributed either in a manifest or latent fashion, over objects of both sexes" (Yoshino 374). Building on Freud, Alfred Kinsey made bisexuality into a kind of scale or spectrum, and his research showed that most people have sexual experiences and desires that put them somewhere in the middle, and not exclusively "straight" or "gay" (Yoshino 380-85).

If this so, and most people are naturally in between straight or gay, why is "bisexual" identity usually erased and made invisible in our society? "Bisexual erasure" means the systematic invalidation and underrepresentation of bisexual identity in discourses about sexuality. As Lachlan MacDowell states, bisexual erasure "refers to the ways in which bisexuality as a mature form of desire is deferred, elided, or made invisible" (4). As we will see, Yoshino and others argue that bisexuality is erased by both the public discourse and academic discourse about sexuality which employs the gay vs. straight binary that exclude bisexuality as a valid and stable identity.

If this is true, a good test case would be to examine the status of bisexuality in the context of a community that identifies strongly as liberal and progressive where sexuality is concerned. I have chosen Sarah Lawrence College as the test case because of its self-identified commitment to the inclusion of all sexualities and gender/non-gender identities. I intended to discover what the experience of bisexual students at SLC is. Do they feel included and do they find that their bisexual identities are validated? Or do they experience “bisexual erasure” even in the SLC community? My research turned up three major findings in relation to the experience of bisexuals: 1.) the problem of the gendered experience of sexuality, 2.) the issue of forms of identification and disclosure of sexuality, and 3.) the difficulty of inclusion in the wider movement toward accepting different sexual identities. In the end, I found that bisexual erasure exists even for students on a liberal campus like Sarah Lawrence.

### **History of Bisexuality**

To understand bisexual erasure, we need to understand the historical context for the term and we need to know how the term has been defined in relation to other sexualities. The term “bisexuality” was first used in 1859 by Robert Bentley Todd in his book *Anatomy and Physiology* (MacDowell 9). In this biological context, “bisexuality” was used to refer to certain kinds of organisms that are not divided into different sexes, or to organisms that have a developmental stage in which the sexes are not distinct yet (MacDowell 9). As MacDowell explains, “In a sense, bisexuality was modern because it was primitive—it helped to anchor an enlightened and civilised sexuality by being its undifferentiated and undeveloped ancestor, phylogenetically and ontogenetically (i.e., across the life of the species and of the individual)” (10). Darwin’s theory of natural

selection reinforces this idea of bisexuality as primitive. It is from these primitive forms that sexual difference evolved, according to Darwin (MacDowell 11-13).

To understand the origins of bisexuality in the context of theoretical discourse surrounding sexuality, we must return to Yoshino's article, "The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure". In addition to giving us an brief overview of Freud, Yoshino examines sexuality studies by Kinsey (1948 and 1953), Masters and Johnson (1979), Janus and Janus (1993), Wellings (1994), and Laumann (1994). All but one of which use a scale similar to the one in the Kinsey study. Most of the studies use both experience and desire as indicators of sexual orientation. Janus and Janus use only self-identification. Laumann uses self-identification as well as experience and desire. Yoshino says that these studies show bisexuality is more common than homosexuality (380-85). Yoshino says, "we might ask why academic knowledge about the number of homosexuals trickled so quickly into mainstream culture while academic knowledge produced in the same studies about the number of bisexuals did not. This in itself is suggestive of the erasure of the conceptual category of bisexuality, even if that category has no stable referent" (386-387).

If sexual desire exists on a spectrum, maybe no one is truly exclusively straight or gay in terms of their desires. Why hasn't that translated into a greater acceptance of bisexuality? On the other hand, if everyone is bisexual, isn't this another way of erasing bisexuality? (see Yoshino 370-71). To provide more clarity for the logistics of bisexual erasure, we can refer to Angelides and his book *A History of Bisexuality*. Angelides explains that, "While homosexual identity is not universalized, a homosexual act is. The problem of identity is thus only deferred and displaced. Neither an act nor palpable

cultural identity-- at least until the late 1960s in the case of the latter-- bisexuality merely vanishes into categories of hetero- or homosexuality. The identity paradigm is thereby deified and bisexuality is completely erased from the historical record” (Angelides 7). Because there is really no such thing as the “bisexual act”, this is where people tend to want to sort bisexuals according to a monosexual binary.

### **Contemporary Views on Bisexuality**

Research shows that bisexual erasure in modern times is prominent in many forms. It is common in popular culture, especially literature, film, and television (Barker and Darren). It also is evident in media. Especially when celebrities come out as bisexual, they are either labeled as gay, or their bisexuality is ignored completely. Frank Ocean and Alan Cumming, for example, are repeatedly labeled as gay by the media whereas Angelina Jolie is perceived as straight, perhaps because of her marriage to Brad Pitt. In the sphere of education, Barker and Darren say that, “the exclusion of bisexual identities is reproduced and perpetuated in the discipline of psychology in the tendency to regard sexuality as entirely dichotomous.” A study of psychology textbooks showed that “two thirds of the textbooks failed to mention bisexuality at all” (Barker and Darren). According to Barker and Darren, bisexual erasure is even evident in queer theory, “Indeed, there has been very little discussion of bisexuality within queer theory in general, with most ‘queer discussion’ remaining focused on lesbian and gay histories, theories and practices. Fox (1996) and Angelides (2001) argue that bisexuality is not allowed to exist in the present tense (Petford, 2003): it is seen in psychoanalysis as belonging to the past as part of a stage towards mono-sexual maturity, and by queer and constructionist perspectives as part of a utopian future when there will be no need

to label sexualities – although it will presumably still be invisible then” (Barker and Darren).

The way in which bisexuality is erased is not through overt prejudice but rather a systematic discourse of sexuality that excludes bisexuality as a valid identity or cultural space. For example, “Theorists such as Angelides (2001) and Du Plessis (1996) concur that bisexuality’s absence occurs not through neglect but through a structural erasure” (MacDowell 5). According to Kenji Yoshino, “Each of the major sexuality studies demonstrates that the number of bisexuals is greater than or comparable to the number of homosexuals. This suggests that bisexual invisibility is not a reflection of the fact that there are fewer bisexuals than there are homosexuals in the population, but is rather a product of social erasure” (361). Bisexuality is consistently left out of the sexuality spectrum not only in public discourse about sexuality, but also in academic journals specifically focusing on progressive theories regarding sexualities. According to Yoshino, “Bisexual invisibility manifests itself in the studied omission of bisexuality in discussions of sexual orientation” (Yoshino 367). Even though more media attention than ever is being given to issues related to gender and sexuality, bisexuality continues to be erased or made invisible. I hypothesize that bisexual erasure is a result of the gay community viewing bisexuals as invalid, and only “pretending to be gay”; whereas straight people view bisexuals as if they are just “sitting on a fence”, in a sort of waiting period before they inevitably come out as being gay.

As Yoshino puts it, “bisexuals are being erased because the two most powerful sexual orientation constituencies--self-identified straights and self-identified gays--have mutual investments in the erasure of bisexuals” (388). This mutual investment means

that the binary opposition of gay/straight is something gays and straights have a stake in. In order for the binary to not collapse, each needs the other to define itself against. Gay means not straight, and straight means not gay. Bisexuality disrupts this binary and calls its logic into question; under bisexuality, the binary collapses.

### **SLC Field Work: Interviews**

To see if my hypothesis is correct even on a liberal campus like Sarah Lawrence, I conducted interviews with two first year, white cisgender women who requested that I did not use their real names in my paper. Thus I will be referring to my interviewees under the aliases of Ethel and Gertrude. This request to remain anonymous in and of itself could be considered evidence of bisexual invisibility, because it reflects their discomfort and fear of being identified. Upon conducting my interviews I uncovered three major findings regarding the bisexual identity. First, there is the issue of the gendered experience of sexuality regarding heteronormativity and the challenges bisexual women face against being presumed straight. This finding also presents the notion of how feminine homosocial spaces tend to be anchored by emotional intimacy, and how this presents complications between feelings of romantic and sexual attraction versus a strong platonic bond. The next finding uncovered involved the forms of identification and disclosure which dealt with the “third space” that bisexuals are forced to occupy as well as the way that homosocial feminine spaces present conflicts for bisexual women who wish to maintain their platonic friendships, and how the fear of losing these platonic friendships drives bisexual women to make discrete decisions regarding who they disclose their sexuality to. The final finding had to do with the inclusion of bisexual identity into the wider movement pushing for the acceptance of

different kinds of sexual identities. This is in regard to how bisexuals occupy their private “third space” in the context of the queer community. This finding also brought up more challenges for bisexual women to date other queer women when formally “coming out” does not really exist within the bisexual community. This leads to seeking partners through the Internet and social media, and could bring about a general feeling of isolation for bisexual women.

In the first interview that I conducted with Ethel, I found that the word “weird” became quite prevalent as she was describing any romantic or sexual attraction she felt towards women. Even though she identifies as bisexual, she always made it clear that she never tells people about her bisexuality unless someone explicitly asks her. She feels this way in part because she is currently in a relationship with a cisgender man. When I was asking her about how she arrived at the label bisexual, she began to elaborate that her bisexual identity is something very private to her. She said to me,

I'm not really like, one to tell people [about being bisexual] first thing, because I don't feel the need to...and then I like... I am dating a boy now so I don't feel the need to announce to everyone I meet that I'm bisexual and that's a thing ... it's more just kind of like... I don't know it's just how I feel.”

Interestingly enough, I discovered in my follow up interview with Ethel that the boy she is dating now is also bisexual. However, since they are of the opposite gender, their relationship is perceived as heterosexual. This is evidence of heteronormativity affecting a woman’s bisexual identity. Ethel is perfectly fine discussing her relationship



to the opposite gender because that is what is “normal” or “acceptable” under heteronormativity. Her sexual and romantic attraction to the same gender feels problematic to her, which leads her to use words like “weird” so frequently when discussing her homo-feminine relations. It may also feel “weird” for Ethel because it can be very confusing figuring out your level of attraction for someone when feminine homosocial spaces are so often anchored by emotional intimacy. When she told me about the first crush she ever developed for another girl, she explained how they had a very close friendship and it was initially very hard for her to distinguish her platonic feelings from her romantic and sexual attraction. She said,

We had like a really close relationship that she like, didn't care if she was like naked around me or like I would like sleepover at her house all the time and like it didn't like seem like a weird thing, and then I was like thinking about that and I was like trying to like, rationalize it as 'oh I'm not thinking about it like that because I like her I'm thinking that because... she's just naked ... and I'm just a... person.'”

When female relationships are already so intimate emotionally, it can be hard for someone to distinguish their erotic attraction for a person of the same gender from a strictly platonic one. It is also because of heteronormativity that most bisexual women find it difficult to reach this conclusion. Because it is not “normal” for them to be attracted to women the same way they are to men, they presume that these

overwhelming feelings of romantic and sexual attraction are just platonic feelings that anyone would have for their best friends.

In terms of identification and disclosure, it is interesting to see how bisexuals have had to carve a sort of “third space” for themselves in between the binaries of straight and gay. What I mean by this is that bisexuals want to be “out of the closet” so as to not be oppressed by the heteronormative binary, but they still do not have the space to be an active member of the queer community. Thus bisexuals occupy what I refer to as “the third space.” When I asked Ethel if she identified as being “out” she said, “Yeah it’s not that I’m like ‘in the closet’; it’s just that I don’t talk about it. Like if someone came up and asked me, then I would tell them. But if no one asks me, I’m not going to make that apparent.” It is clear that Ethel is not completely keeping her identity a secret. When presented with the construct of “the closet” she vehemently opposes it, placing herself outside of the closet as to avoid heteronormative oppression. Yet the way in which she chooses to disclose her identity indicates that she is still passive about her identity. She never actively discloses to people that she is bisexual. Only when specifically prompted will she make her sexuality apparent. So yes, at least Ethel is not in the closet, but she is still locked inside of the room. This also creates complications for bisexual women who wish to maintain their female friendships, as they have to be very careful who they disclose their sexuality to and in what manner. As my second interviewee Gertrude explains, “It’s hard to date girls because they don’t like... I kind of feel like sometimes it’s like less uh acceptable to like... I never try to like... hit on my friends ever. I never want to alienate the people around me.” Ethel also shares this fear of making her female friends uncomfortable. She says, “There’s always this fear that

like... your female friends are gonna think it's weird and you don't want to like... if they're changing and you don't want them to think that like.. you're watching them... because.. I mean that's not how it is but like.. you don't want them to feel uncomfortable." Despite bisexuals wanting to oppose the notion of the closet, it is this fear of losing their female friendships that keeps bisexuals in the cycle of perpetually coming out of the closet, selecting who to tell. This also means that they are perpetually in the closet as well, because the closet re-fabricates itself every time you have to come out to someone new.

The way Ethel participates in the queer community is also indicative of her occupying the third space. She says, "I've gone to a pride parade before because I was like 'this is an important cause', but it wasn't because I was like 'hey everybody look I'm bisexual' it was more just ... I don't know... like I've never felt the need to like .... what's the word... I don't know just tell other people..." In a follow-up interview, I was able to clarify that Ethel attended this pride parade before gay marriage was legalized, and that was the "important cause" that she was referring to. Why is this "important cause" separate from her bisexual identity? Personally, I think that of any environment a pride parade would be the most appropriate to bring visibility to your bisexuality, and yet Ethel feels that this is not appropriate and would take away from the "important cause". This is especially interesting because in the follow-up interview she mentioned that she had no preference to foreseeing herself marrying a man or a woman, so "gay marriage" may be a possibility for her future. And yet, being an activist for gay marriage feels separate to her from her identity of being bisexual.

In contrast to Ethel, Gertrude uses selective language in order to make herself feel more included in the queer community. She says that, "I identify as bisexual but usually when people ask me a lot of the times I say 'uh I'm just whatever, I'm pan, I'm bi, you know just like generally queer'". The reason Gertrude does this is because of bisexual erasure. There isn't as strong of a sense of a bisexual community, which is why Gertrude is so fluid with her label, so she can fit into other, better represented groups as well. She elaborates further saying that, "I guess I feel represented... probably more so as just like part of the LGBT community but less so like as a bi person because my identity to me is less important than just being a part of the group really." This is evidence that because bisexuals are not given the space to be active members of the queer community as bisexuals, they are forced to find their own methods for inclusion. Whether it's quietly occupying the third space like Ethel, or manipulating terminology to feel more accepted, bisexuals have had to develop their own techniques to gain inclusion into the wider movement.

Because bisexuals occupy the third space, they do not publicly "come out" the way gay people do. Gertrude explained that, "...because I never really 'came out,' some of my friends were unsure about how I identified and I almost forgot who I've told that I was bi and who I didn't tell." This creates complications for bisexual women who want to date other women, when a language for them does not really exist. Gertrude shares that, "Probably the hardest part was just like I guess knowing that I'm attracted to girls, but not really finding any opportunities to date girls. I've only had one short term girlfriend and it's just very like... like I got a tinder...I deleted it after like a month but... it's just kind of that stupid thing where you don't know any other bi or queer girls and it's

kind of hard to date.” The issue within the bisexual community is that if everyone “comes out” selectively like Ethel and Gertrude, then the only way they can seek out other bisexual girls is by having really deep, emotionally intimate conversations with every girl that they possibly can and just hope that one of them happens to be queer. In fact, Gertrude discusses that the easiest way she meets other bisexual girls is through an anonymous social media app called Yik Yak. She says, “When I go on Yik Yak, I always see posts like ‘any girls down to netflix and chill with another girl?’ and I’m like ‘Oh cool, there’s another bi girl or a gay girl out there’... but yeah that’s pretty much it in terms of what I see of bisexual representation on campus.” Despite Sarah Lawrence being such an accepting campus for queer identities, it is because of the cultural norms within the bisexual community that makes it so difficult for bisexuals to find one another. As Gertrude observes, “I think there is definitely a large group of bisexuals and pansexuals, but a lot of people here don’t really make it publically known that they are queer. It’s sort of just like a thing they just go with instead of like their label. I feel like for a lot of bisexuals, they won’t like ever really come out -- they’ll just like hook up with whoever they want to”. It is because of this culture that makes it difficult for bisexuals to have a sense of community. Even though the bisexual population is not necessarily small on this campus, the greater cultural implications that come with being bisexual make it more difficult for bisexuals to seek each other out. This is what unfortunately leads to a larger feeling of isolation for people of the bisexual community.

## **Conclusion**

Despite Freud’s theory that we are all inherently bisexual, bisexual erasure is still incredibly prominent. This is mainly because of the mutual investment that

heterosexuals and homosexuals have in keeping the logic of their binaries set. Bisexuality makes the gay/straight binary collapse, and it is because of this that bisexuality as an identity does not occupy the same social or cultural space as the identities “gay” and “straight.” This makes it hard, if not impossible, for bisexual men and women to feel that they have a unified, coherent identity. As Amber Ault says in her essay on bisexual women, “As a result of the structural pressures aligned against the formation of a unified bi subjectivity, bisexual women often must choose which features of their structurally fractured identities to emphasize and deny in a social world organized by oppositional categories” (Storr 174).

From my case study, I found that bisexual erasure is, in fact, prevalent even on such a famously queer-friendly campus as Sarah Lawrence. But it is not because the queer community at Sarah Lawrence has homonormative ideals that prioritize monosexuals that makes bisexual erasure so prevalent. Rather, it is because of the deeply ingrained gay/straight binary and the cultural implications of being bisexual that make it so hard for the community to come together. Lacking the public act of coming out, and lacking a language of their own, bisexuals have been forced to find their own unique ways of occupying space, being included in a wider movement, and reaching out to each other to avoid feelings of isolation and invisibility. Unfortunately, bisexual erasure means that these attempts at expressing one’s identity, carving out a “third space,” and feeling included are not always successful, even at Sarah Lawrence.

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