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Rhetoric of the Invisible (Or, How Bisexual People Demand To Be Seen)

You're just saying you're bi so you can seem more interesting.
Bi people just don't understand homophobia.
You'll be gay in a few years.
So your girlfriend is your beard, right?
Give me one night and I can make you realize who you are.
You're appropriating gay culture.
I have some questions about your lifestyle.

Why is it still so hard to say I'm bisexual? I can write it. I can post about it. I can imply it. I can put it in my Twitter handle. I've been at least partially out for nine years, but when I try to say it out loud, "I'm bi," something still catches in my throat. Personally, I've only experienced a handful of invalidating comments, which are included among the set above. But testimonies published in Ochs and Rowley, Ochs and Williams, Queen, Rust, Beauchemin, Esterberg, and Baumgardner, among others, illustrate just how pervasive these kinds of erasure and invalidation are. Far too often, the phrase is limited to "gay and lesbian," and when it's "LGBT+," the other letters are frequently afterthoughts. And I'm not the only one who has trouble saying it. Bisexual journalist Jennifer Baumgardner says that for her, "*bisexual* sounds pathological, academic, and a little embarrassed…[it] makes me cringe at times, but saying I'm heterosexual or a lesbian feels inaccurate. So, cringing all the while, I use the label" (50-51).[1] Whether through direct experience of biphobia or by receiving these messages more indirectly, we can't help but internalize some of the biphobia circulating around us, as our identities are routinely erased, overlooked, and minimized, making us in turn feel silenced and ostracized.

[1] See also Beauchemin 47

The erasure and cultural invisibility of bi+ people[2] affects a significant portion of the community, and it has material consequences. Today, more than half of the LGBTQ+ community identifies as bi+ (Human Rights Campaign, "Bi+ Youth Report"). However, bi+ people disproportionately suffer from a variety of mental and physical health problems (e.g., depression, suicidal ideation, smoking, binge drinking) and socioeconomic problems (e.g., poverty, employment discrimination, and police violence) not only more than straight people, but more than lesbian and gay people as well (Human Rights Campaign, "Bi Health Report"; Movement Advancement Project, "Issues Facing"). The causes of these disparities are undoubtedly highly complex and deserve their own research attention, and I do not intend to argue that cultural invisibility is the sole or even the primary cause. However, the disparities do prove that the particular experiences of the bi+ community are *not* arbitrary or irrelevant.[3] And cultural invisibility, which I will expand on in the following section, *is* one of those experiences.

During the twentieth century, a shift took place in popular thinking about gender and sexuality, encouraged by homophile organizations: namely, that gender and sexuality are fully separable – that someone can be gay without being gender nonconforming. It is understood that anyone in a crowd could be gay – that there are no inherent physical or behavioral traits that will reveal their orientation to anyone who looks. However, gay and lesbian subcultures have developed rhetorical systems with which to signify and read sexual orientation using

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[2] "Bi+" is an umbrella term encompassing all people who identify with attraction to multiple genders. I use this term, and always use "bisexual" in this sense, because "pansexual" did not emerge into widespread usage until around 2008, so "bi" has a longer history and greater recognizability as a term. While many individuals prefer "pansexual" because of the binary implications of "bi," bi people and organizations have always used "bi" in a gender-expansive way. From Issue 3 (1991) onward, the front matter of the bisexual magazine *Anything That Moves* included the following: "Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature…In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders."

[3] For example, Sarno and Wright found that bisexual people experience the "Alien in Own Land" microaggression, an incident in which a person is not recognized to be part of their own community, more frequently than gay and lesbian people. Statistical analysis found that experiences of "Alien in Own Land" partially contributed to bisexuals' higher rates of identity confusion.

characteristics such as dress, mannerisms, and style (including alterations to one's body such as hair and makeup). Some of these strategies are visual, like those just mentioned above, while others are discursive, such as the use of gay slang and cultural references. Some of these strategies are recognized by straight people, and can be used in stereotyping, while others (such as the handkerchief code, wearing pride colors other than the rainbow, or flagging sexual preferences using keyrings) are less well-known outside of the community.

Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes define queer rhetoric as "a constellation of discursive practices that emerge at different times for different groups in order to articulate resistance to regimes of sexual normalization" ("Queer Rhetoric"). Typically, the regimes of sexual normalization are *heterosexual,* or at least homonormative. But the LGBTQ+ community[4] has its own regimes of sexual normalization that reinforce a perceived hetero/homo binary. Consequently, bisexuals --- but also people "in the middle" of other axes of identity (genderqueer, intersex, etc.) --- have no distinct place within gay and lesbian rhetorical systems. Within the dominant discourses, we are silenced and made invisible, lumped in with one discrete category or another. How we navigate this situation given limited rhetorical resources --- or rather, rhetorical resources that we must borrow and remix for ourselves --- is what I am terming the *rhetoric(s) of the invisible*. Rhetorics of the invisible are not limited to bisexuals, but to all people who occupy identities that are illegible (or at least only partially legible) to mainstream discourses. Not all bisexual rhetorics will map exactly to other identities,[5] but I hope the

[4] In this chapter, I will use "LGBTQ+" and "queer" interchangegably as umbrella terms for the full spectrum of diversity in gender and sexual orientation.

[5] Two examples to help illustrate this partial mapping: First, people with "invisible" disabilities (a more accurate term would be "less visible") do struggle with being recognized as part of a particular community and accessing services related to that community, but the root of that rhetorical invisibility is typically not "in-between-ness." Second, multiracial or multiethnic identity can be experienced as a socially illegible "in-between-ness," but may have visible phenotypic components that lead to particular categorizations from others.

formulation I am putting forward in my discussion of bisexuality will be useful to others for theorizing the specificities of these other rhetorics as well.

In her article "Queer Rhetoric in Situ," Jean Bessette argues that queer rhetorical methodology ought to pay closer attention to "(1) the historical specificity of a potentially queer rhetorical act, (2) the nuanced complexity of power relations *within* broad categories of queerness and normativity, and (3) the diversity and range of audiences for any given rhetorical act, which might render it both queer and normative at the same time" (149). This chapter is primarily concerned with the first two tasks. I will begin by charting some points in the evolution of bisexual-specific aesthetics and self-expressions (both visual and discursive), as bisexuals tried (or tried not) to differentiate themselves within the gay and lesbian communities. Then, I will turn to a deeper discussion of some of the more recent developments in bisexual identity rhetoric, specifically on TikTok.

The History of Bi (In)visibility

In the early 1970s, several gay magazines and organizations published statements arguing that "nonhomosexuals" did not belong in the gay liberation movement (Angelides 124-127). Steve Gavin wrote, "straights and 'bisexuals' should never be admitted into a gay consciousness-raising group; otherwise, the whole process is a sham" (qtd. in Angelides 125). Later, in 1990, a group of bisexuals in Northampton, Massachusetts protested a decision by the Lesbian and Gay Pride March to remove "bisexual" from the event's title. In response, one woman asked, 'Why can't you be gay for a day?" (Garber 80-81). But they couldn't be gay for a day, because there was already a strong political current within the liberation movement that had been rejecting bisexuals from "gay spaces" for at least twenty years. So, bisexuals were excluded from "gay" while being simultaneously pressured to embrace the label instead of demanding space for

themselves. In many cases, it was both personally and politically advantageous for bi people to not try to distinguish themselves --- to mask their different-gender attractions and blend in as gay. Paradoxically, bisexuality had at the same time become fashionable in the glam rock scene and other music circles, just as it had among London and New York's literary avant garde in the 1920s (Garber 105-116). Despite the disconnect between the popularity and sex appeal that stars such as David Bowie enjoyed, in part as a result of their titillating bisexual affect, and the exclusion that bisexuals were simultaneously experiencing within the gay movement, these icons played important roles in the lives of queer young people, showing them that it was possible to be both queer *and* cool.

Jennifer Baumgardner says that in her experience, it "became okay" for women to be bi around 1990 (105). Third wave feminism (circa 1990-2010) embraced femininity and "girl power," which also included sex-positivity and an emphasis on being personally empowered in one's sexuality, in contrast to second wave feminism's focus on consciousness-raising and rejecting traditionally feminine cultural markers. However, at the same time bi women were flourishing like never before, bi men were facing a new kind of stigma as a result of the AIDS crisis. Since HIV was "the gay disease," bi men were blamed for allegedly introducing it into the straight population (Garber 93-94). While bisexuals were already stereotyped as being especially promiscuous, bi men (especially in the eyes of women) were increasingly seen as dirty or dangerous.[6] For some bi men who were not already part of the gay social world or having sex with men, the epidemic was an incentive to try to ignore --- or at least not act on --- those feelings. As Ron J. Suresha says, closeted bi men who are married to women might be "the most

[6] See Garber 93-95 for examples from news media.

important bi-identified subpopulation to be identified and convinced to come out" (Ochs & Williams 27), and are likely a sizable, though invisible, demographic.

At least in New York City, among those whom we would now call trans and/or genderqueer people, most assigned-male-at-birth people in the 1990s identified as "gay [males]," regardless of gender identity, since "transgender" was not in widespread use outside of social services at that time (Valentine), and "genderqueer" was only just beginning to be used on online message boards (Rajunov and Duane 41). Even if they were bisexual in behavior, these people strongly aligned themselves with the gay community. Two iconic examples are Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, who identified as gay, as transvestites, and as drag queens, but are known to have had relationships with people of multiple genders and are now popularly considered trans women, despite the difference in language used at the time.

Around this same time, in the late 80s and early 90s in both the U.S. and the UK, some bisexuals began organizing as bisexuals, rather than as part of broader LGBTQ+ groups (Rust). By publishing newsletters, organizing conferences, and running support groups, these organizations were primarily concerned with: 1) creating designated spaces for people to talk about bi-specific concerns and receive support that they had trouble finding in gay-centric spaces, and 2) advocating within the broader LGBTQ+ community for greater bisexual visibility and acceptance. Many lesbian and gay people were uncertain if bisexuality was "real" or if it was a word used only by people who either had not yet accepted their gay identity (see the epigraph) or were unwilling to give up the benefits of heterosexual privilege (Rust 69; Whitney 123). Bisexuals organizing as such sought to dispel myths and stereotypes and to differentiate and claim space for their whole selves in LGBTQ+ community spaces, rather than hiding their "straight" attractions in order to fit in.

Rhetorically Negotiating Bisexual Invisibility In The 1990s

Many bisexual people, especially prior to the 1990s, chose to repress or hide some of their attractions in order to fit in with either straight or gay culture (or, by alternating, both). As Baumgardner says, “second-wave women thought about looking both ways a lot, even though they rarely described their lives...as bisexual. Instead, they were woman-identified women or political lesbians” (78). Additionally, “when you want to relate to others, it may become strategically necessary to act as though your desires consistently matched up with a recognized identity label” (qtd in Whitney 115). In other cases, people who privately identify as bi refrained from doing so out loud for fear of being excluded from the lesbian social groups they were a part of (Esterberg; Queen; Rust). For example, after singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco married a man, some questioned whether she should be allowed to receive a queer music award (Baumgardner 124). While nearly fifteen years have passed since Baumgardner’s book was published, one need not look very far to find similar “queer-policing” today, such as the outrage when the bisexual pop musician Halsey posted a screenshot of her results from a “What % Lesbian Are You” Buzzfeed quiz[7] or when bisexual author Tallie Rose had a manuscript rejected because the publisher did not think she was part of the LGBTQ+ community on the grounds that she “looks to represent herself as straight” (i.e., she is married to a man) (Copes).

Even so, distinctly bisexual aesthetics, signifiers, and intentional discursive patterns have emerged so that to some extent, so-called “gaydar” (here referring to the ability to read and interpret queer subcultural signs and signals) can be used to distinguish between those who are gay and those who are bi. Baumgardner cites the audiences at Ani DiFranco concerts as emblematic of 1990s women’s bisexuality: “legions of women clad in hippie guerilla couture:

[7] Both Halsey’s original tweet and the Buzzfeed quiz itself were deleted due to the controversy.

combat boots, tattoos, crazy hair, and strappy tank tops with bras showing....The combination seemed to say that you could be both: you could be a girlie-girl and tough; you could be hot for women and men" (100). In contrast, Liza Featherstone says that "Dressing girlie felt more lesbian" to her, even though it "looked straighter to others," because "with my girlfriend it just seemed so important that we were stylistically different" (qtd. in Baumgardner 108).

Some aspects of a "bisexual aesthetic," such as the clothing-based rhetoric discussed by Baumgardner, are also an implicitly *white* aesthetic. The Riot Grrrl scene (with which Ani DiFranco is associated) was predominantly white (Bess), and a large portion of the most visible bisexual celebrities, authors, and activists are cis white women, including Baumgardner and Featherstone, but also Robyn Ochs, many of the authors of bisexual research I'm citing in this chapter, and myself. However, according to one study, people of color are actually *more* likely to identify as bisexual than white people (Movement Advancement Project, "Invisible Majority" 2). While some aspects of "bisexual culture" are really part of white bisexual culture, many bisexual rhetorics are shared across racial categories, and bisexuals of color have also developed their own rhetorics specific to their particular communities.

For example, in the Summer 1994 issue of the bisexual magazine *Anything That Moves*, Adrienne Davis describes a conversation with a friend who asked her, "Why don't you go do something radical, get pierced or arrested? All the queers are doing it" (6). "Because I'm not all the queers," Davis replies, before explaining that her race and transness already set her apart no matter how she expresses herself, so she doesn't need to "announce [her] difference to the world" in the same ways that white queers do. As another example, many of the women E.

Patrick Johnson interviewed for *Black. Queer. Southern. Women. – An Oral History* preferred not to identify themselves with a particular label at all (49).[8]

While bisexual desire exists independently from involvement with another person, how an individual's sexual identity is interpreted by others can shift based on one's current partner(s) and by other aspects of someone's positionality. Although an individual's internal experience of their own sexuality may remain the same across two points in time, they may need to change their outward expression in order for their internal experience to be accurately read by others. As a male friend in my master's program once told me, "I'm more attracted to women, but I never, ever want anyone to think that I'm straight." Sexuality is always relational, so our identity expression exists within a web of sociality that preconditions our rhetorical acts.

Navigating Bisexual Invisibility in the 21st Century

In 1998, Michael Page designed the bisexual pride flag, intended as an alternative to the more common rainbow pride flag. The bi pride flag consists of three horizontal stripes (pink, purple, and blue), with the middle stripe thinner than the other two. Ever since the flag was released, many bi people signal their identities to others using the flag or by wearing the bi pride colors (Whitney 116-117). In the years since then, the same colors have emerged in a film and television phenomenon called "bisexual lighting," where television shows and films are purported to use these colors to hint at the sexuality of one or more characters (Pierpoint). The term originated in a Tumblr post about the BBC's *Sherlock* in the early 2010s (alabellecreation-blog). While some film critics have argued that bisexual lighting is likely a coincidence (Pierpoint), the lighting has been embraced by the bisexual community nonetheless. Even if the

[8] Nonetheless, Johnson refers to his interview participants as "lesbians" throughout the book, only mentioning the possibility of bisexual identity twice.

origins of the lighting scheme are coincidental, queer artists are now employing it in their own work – for example, Janelle Monae's music video for "Make Me Feel."

Despite being more than two decades old, the bi pride colors are still not very well known, even among the LGBTQ+ community. In my own experience, it's easier to find flags for sale in the pansexual colors at Pride, and I've spoken with multiple members of the LGBTQ+ community who didn't know bisexuals had our own flag or colors at all. At the same time, though, this invisibility can be strategically useful. Because bi pride colors are relatively unknown compared to the rainbow flag, a friend of mine was able to comfortably express her pride on Instagram using emoji hearts in the bi pride colors, even though she wasn't yet out to her parents, who followed her account. Those in the know were able to recognize the significance of this post, and of her first Pride celebrations after coming out to herself, but she was able to remain under the radar of other people in her life until she felt ready. A rainbow may have more easily raised eyebrows.

Another tactic that bisexuals use in everyday life to communicate our sexual identities to others is what Baumgardner calls linguistic "embroidery" (189). Embroidery means strategically deploying gendered (or deliberately non-gendered) phrases like "my ex-girlfriend," "my baby's father," or "my partner," particularly with someone one has just met, in ways that are at first glance indistinguishable from small talk or other casual conversation. However, this embroidery is not casual at all, but highly calculated. In these situations, the bisexual rhetor must evaluate several kairotic factors very quickly: *does this person seem safe to come out to, is there a way to work it into this conversation and have it not be weird, what are the social and/or professional risks for me if they react negatively, do they assume that I'm straight or that I'm gay?* Depending on the subject matter and context, we will leave our conversation partner with assumptions,

accurate or not, about our sexual identity no matter what we say. Colleen Kase's study on self-presentation of sexual orientation among non-monosexual women demonstrates the invisible complexities of such situations. Kase's survey instrument asked participants to fill out a survey anytime they experienced a "self-presentation opportunity," and the very first question on the survey asked participants whether they chose to share any information about their sexual orientation at all during the self-presentation opportunity. In some cases, such as in conversations about dating, it is impossible not to communicate *something*. In other cases, the rhetor may be able to choose whether to embroider the conversation or not.

Bi+ TikTok and the Online Bi+ Community

Today, there are many bi visibility and other kinds of bisexual advocacy campaigns that take place online, including Bi Visibility Day, Bi Health Month, and #StillBisexual. However, the newest major trend in online bisexual culture is #BiTok, or bisexual TikTok. TikTok, an app primarily known for audiovisual memes like lip-syncing and dance trends, became increasingly popular between 2019 and 2020, during which time the number of U.S. users tripled (Sherman). TikTok users are primarily under 30 years old, and 30% of U.S. teenagers say it is their favorite app (Piper Sandler). The algorithm that governs its "For You Page," which allows users to discover new content in a never-ending scroll of videos, is also known for being remarkably sensitive to users' interests.[9] For instance, just by Googling "bisexual TikTok" while writing this paragraph, I found two essays about how the TikTok algorithm correctly identified the writers as bisexual before they were fully aware of it themselves (Joho; MacGowan).

Another essay describes how TikTok helped the author feel comfortable in her bisexual identity and eventually led to her coming out to others (Newman). Newman mentions several

[9] TikTok subcommunities, as perceived by users, can be as specific as "Alt Cottagecore Middle-Class Black Girl TikTok" and "Queer Latina Roller Skating Girl TikTok" (Joho).

trends that were meaningful to her own experience: people coming out to their parents, comedy about queer stereotypes, posting about fictional characters who "made me bi," and simply hanging bi pride flags in the background of videos. Examples of queer stereotypes joked about in the TikToks referenced by Newman, Joho, and McGowan include: that bisexual people are bad at driving, math, and spelling, have bad relationships with our fathers, cuff our jeans, are financially precarious, struggle with mental illness, and play the ukulele.

There are a number of other subcultural features of bisexual TikTok. These include, but are not limited to, the identity of "disaster bisexual,"[10] the concept of "bi-wife energy,"[11] the idea that bisexual people can't or refuse to sit in chairs properly, and the notion that bi women are attracted to only three types of men: "sad gamer boys," "golden retriever men," and "adult men with undiagnosed ADHD." While it's unclear which of these trends will fade as passing TikTok memes and which (if any) will become longer-lasting staples of American bisexual culture, they are ample evidence of a vibrant bisexual community on TikTok that is providing a place for not only comedy, but also opportunities for self-exploration and mutual support.

Some Closing Thoughts

While it's not quite constitutive rhetoric, since a bisexual identity existed prior to the emergence of bisexual TikTok, the rhetorical activity of this community and the circulation of cultural materials facilitated by features of the platform (such as "stitch," "duet," and "use audio") has created new, distinctly bisexual cultural reference points. However, the flourishing of this community doesn't mean that bisexual invisibility or other manifestations of biphobia are no more. Some of the same videos referenced above also discuss the common experience of

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[10] Disaster bisexuals reclaim the stereotypes that bi people are confused, don't know what they want, are promiscuous, and/or are overwhelmed by their attractions.
[11] "Bi wife energy" describes a straight man who is supportive of his out bisexual wife, or a man who seems like he fits this description.

being told one's bisexuality is "just a phase." TikToker @marcusterritory says in an August 2020 video, "As a bisexual man, I've dealt with this from both sides. I have both been told that women are uncomfortable when they sleep with me because I've slept with men, and I've been told that just because I don't present a certain way means I don't belong in an LGBTQ space." User @dogberry.mp3 posted a video in January 2021 discussing in under one minute exactly the same argument that Baumgardner makes about linguistic embroidery and its importance for bi people's identities. Other accounts, such as @the.gender.rebel, use TikTok primarily to provide educational content on queer history, with an emphasis on bi and trans people.

The teens and young adults on TikTok (although bisexual TikTok is certainly not limited to these age groups) are continuing to battle the same ideological misconceptions that bisexuals have faced in decades past while carving out space for themselves to celebrate their identities online and share in bisexual pride. The same kinds of biphobic discourse on social media that I remember reading as a teenager are still around,[12] but it also seems like there is so much more to enjoy. All of these elements, both the joyful and the frustrated responses to hurtful comments, are part of bisexual identity rhetoric in the twenty first century. Despite the persistence of bisexual invisibility and silencing across the decades, bisexual people are demanding to be seen, heard, and *listened to*. Some of these rhetorical strategies are verbal, such as linguistic embroidery and the plethora of bisexual comedy on TikTok, while others are visual, such as the subtle (or not so subtle) use of bi pride colors and the deployment of a distinctly bisexual style. While I use the term "rhetoric of the invisible," a play on the common phrase "bisexual invisibility," to name the types of rhetorics used to navigate the unique situation of bisexuals within the LGBTQ+ community, the term is also paradoxical: bisexuals have always been

[12] Only this morning, I read a tweet claiming that bi women only date women because they "want someone to help them process [their] trauma."

rhetors in our own right. We have never been actually invisible, but instead dismissed and intentionally marginalized by both heteronormative culture and our own queer community. In the words of YouTuber and rapper Domo Wilson's "Bisexual Anthem":

Yeah, these bitches hatin' on me cause I'm confident in me
Better not forget the B in LGBT
…
No I am not gay and no I am not straight
I'm the B in this bitch, Bi pride all day

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