CHAPTER 11

'What Do They Look Like and Are They among Us?': Bisexuality, (Dis)closure and (Un)viability

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INTRODUCTION

> At the women's dance, my friend . . . was in the bathroom and . . . everybody had seen your signs and stuff, and bisexuals, there aren't any of those here. And it's like we're still foreign creatures and it's like what do they look like, you know, they could be among us. (P2)

This excerpt is taken from a Canadian study of 22 women who self-identify, with varying degrees of (dis)comfort, as bisexual (Bower, Gurevich & Mathieson, 2002). As this quote illustrates, bisexuals are simultaneously constructed as 'non-existent', 'foreign', 'unrecognizable' and 'interlopers' within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community. The 'bisexual' lingers uncomfortably in this growing list of awkward identity markers, which now includes the even more elusive 'questioning'. Although this extensive inventory is intended to expand our thinking about the multiplicity of sexual repertoires, it also serves to homogenize the socio-historic and psycho-social specificity of these complex identities. The seemingly expansive catalogue begins to resemble a grab-bag of sexual and social (mis)fits, rather than a descriptively meaningful designation of inexhaustible sexual possibilities. In part, this is a result of a well-meaning attempt to include

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'all the girls [and boys] in the team' (Eagleton, 1996, p. 14), wherein the chain of identity markers is continually extended (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, etc.). Residing in this ceaseless propagation is the inevitable *supplément* (Derrida, 1997).[1] The *supplément* denotes an 'excluded "other", which is forever subordinate, but which, paradoxically, also complements that which it augments' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 53). Thus, bisexuality, along with other 'sexual outlaws', highlights the limits of the 'original' inclusions (lesbian and gay), while simultaneously remaining an 'embarrassed "etc." at the end of' (Butler, 1990, p. 143) an inexhaustible enumeration of identities. This trailing 'etc.' of 'elaborate predicates'[2] is instructive, underscoring as it does 'that the effort to "encompass a situated subject" is invariably incomplete, and thus a tacit reminder not only of the possibilities of exclusions, but more productively, of the impossibly of fixing and exhausting identity categories' (Bower, 1999, p. 58).

Bisexuality, in particular, is misleading in its labelling and positioning within this roll call, framed as it is as comprising 'one part gay, one part straight, and mix' (Weasel, 1996, p. 8). This well-intentioned insertion of bisexuality in the evolving list of sexual identities paradoxically points to 'a curious disappearing of bisexuality, at once accepting and dismissive' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 56). Although bisexuality is invited to the proliferating identity party, it remains submerged in sexual categories that have achieved greater sociopolitical primacy, namely lesbian and gay identities: 'bisexual women (as bisexual women) are rarely in anyone's team' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 54). Bisexuality occupies a precarious cultural location; it is both unseen and ubiquitous (Esterberg, 2002). On the one hand, it is often subsumed under the categories of lesbian and gay within both popular and social scientific discourse, leaving little social, theoretical or political space for considering it as a sexual identity in its own right (Yoshino, 2000), and delimiting the possibilities for community building and political action (Fox, 1995; Rust, 2001). On the other hand, images of bisexuality are alternately and paradoxically positioned as natural (i.e. the default if society left us to our own devices), confused, hyper-sexualized, predatory, subversive, privileged and menacing (Esterberg, 2002). In this way, bisexuality appears to be simultaneously 'everywhere and nowhere' (Esterberg, 2002, p. 215, see also Barker, Chapter 6.

The recent trend of 'marketing bisexuality as "a la mode" ' to both women who identify as lesbian and as heterosexual (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 293) as a fashionable (and fetishized) transient alternative both to what is positioned as 'stale and sanitized' lesbian sex and to 'rough and phallocentric' heterosex further oversimplifies and depoliticizes bisexuality. For lesbians, sex with men is presented as an 'exciting', 'forbidden', leisure-time activity, an uncomplicated 'sport fuck'; for heterosexual women, sex with women is touted as 'soft', 'sensuous', 'safe' and 'carefree' (Wilkinson, 1996). Both types of border-crossing sex emphasize the liberatory, entertaining and recreational potential associated with having sex outside one's sexual identity straightjacket. Thus, a viable cultural space for intelligible bisexual desires, practices and identities is quashed in favour of catering to disconnected, decontextualized pleasure and stylistic imperatives (Wilkinson, 1996). Paradoxically, the exalted status of this new brand of 'bisexuality a la mode' simultaneously:

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[1] Derrida borrowed the term *supplément* from Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1755) *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Rousseau defined it as 'an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself' (Culler, 1989, p. 103). The term contains within it an inherent contradiction – if something is complete in itself, it should not need or benefit from a supplement; if it can be supplemented, an originary lack becomes apparent (Derrida, 1997).

[2] Although Butler uses 'elaborates' as a verb in the original quote, our transposition is intended to emphasize the unwieldy reach of such endless identity lists.

> reinforces the old idea that there are 'essentially' two sexual identities: lesbian and straight. If a lesbian having heterosex is 'transgressive', there must be some basic, underlying sexual identity that *can* be transgressed. Lesbians who have sex with men once in a while can be reassured that such practice does not mean they have to renounce a 'fundamental lesbian' sexual identity. Likewise, the notion of 'essential' sexual orientations provides a safety-net for heterosexual women who occasionally have sex with women: They remain certain that they are 'heterosexual really', returning securely to the arms of their men after a little lesbian 'fun' (Wilkinson, 1996, p. 294).

Importantly, this essentialism permits 'safe' sexual exploration, without destabilizing the ostensible solidity and politics of identity anchors. In this way, bisexuality's simultaneous 'uniquely conceivable and uniquely inconceivable' status is retained (Rust, 2000a, p. 205). Such behaviourally anchored formulations of bisexuality, by eliding issues of identity, community and politics, ensure its erasure (Yoshino, 2000).

The mainstream film (Jenkins, 2005; Stewart, 2002), television (Kachgal, 2004; McKenna, 2002) and music industries (Diamond, 2005; Mistry, 2000), in particular, have capitalized on the 'bisexual chic'/'lesbian chic' with a steady production of appropriated images of queer sexuality. Among the more well-known filmic examples of bisexual themes, of one kind or another, are: *Chasing Amy* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1998), *Wild Things* (1998), *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), *Just One Time* (2000), *A Girl Thing* (2001), *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001), *American Pie 2* (2001), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2002), *Frida* (2002), and *Kinsey* (2004).

Incidentally, even the ostensibly independent film makers are also cashing in on the feverish fascination with clichéd images of 'girl on girl' sexuality. *My Summer of Love* (2004), which originally premiered at The Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2004 and with a recent North American debut at The Inside Out Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (Canada, 2005) is one such recent example. The film has won numerous awards (including British Independent Film Award, Best New British Feature, Directors Guild of Great Britain) for its decidedly cinematically beautiful depiction of teenage first love. Although there is certainly much to recommend the film, what is surprising is that critics have almost unanimously lauded it for its ostensibly unusual and non-salacious depiction of sexuality between women. As one critic states, 'that such a compelling vision of teen-girl love could be created by a middle-age Polish man is slightly surprising' (Anderson, 2005, p. 2). The director himself, Pawel Pawlikowski, is quoted as asserting that 'what's more important than the homosexual element is that these girls are totally different types' (Anderson, 2005, p. 3). However laudable the film is on many levels, there is no denying that at times the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) lurks luridly and conspicuously, and that not an insignificant part of the overwhelming appeal of the film can be attributed to what has been repeatedly referred to as the striking 'physical allure' of the female leads (Anderson, 2005, p. 3).

Television versions that have contained (occasional) instances of bisexuals content have included: *Roseanne*, *Will and Grace*, *Ally McBeal*, *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Real World*. The music industry is likewise relying on numerous 'girly action' images to peddle its wares.[3] Numerous sexually suggestive poses and

[3] The role of bisexuality in the music world is given more sustained attention in the 'fictional biopic' (Kelly, 1998), *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). Although on the surface purporting to tell the tale of glam rock, the film documents bisexuality in this domain. The gay American film director, Todd Haynes, has in fact explicitly stated that he would 'like to see questions about identity and sexuality ignited by *Velvet Goldmine*' (Haynes in interview with Kelly, 1998).

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provocative kisses of this genre populate the music videos; among the more famous posing 'couples' are Madonna and Britney Spears, Madonna and Christina Aguilera, and Julia Volkova and Lena Katina of t.A.Tu. Although images of 'bi-boys' (Bledsoe, 2004) are increasingly infiltrating these domains, the stage is more often than not occupied by 'girl-on-girl action'.[4] Taken together, such imagery is part of a broader increasing rise in the commodification of same-sex desire (Ingebretsen, 1999), wherein queer sexuality and a 'queer aesthetic' (Gamman & Makinen, 1994) has been appropriated as a marketing ploy (Janes, 2004; Mistry, 2000). Apparently queer sells. Notably, bisexuality is rarely explicitly named within these popularized representations, much less explored as a viable identity (Diamond, 2005; Wilkinson, 1996). The focus is on transient (and titillating) experimentation, fantasies (expressed or enacted) – frequently for the amusement of a male consumer – and very occasionally on lives lived but left very much unarticulated. And above all, depictions of heterosexualized 'luscious lesbianism' predominate (Ciasullo, 2001; Jenkins, 2005). In this way, the project of dismantling heteronormativity remains a fractured, apolitical enterprise that continues to reinforce simplistic dichotomous notions of sexuality and reinstalls heterosexuality as the norm, all the while claiming that it is all a matter of 'personal choice' rather than the outgrowth of specific socio-political dictates (Diamond, 2005).

The proliferation of these images continue to be the target of mainstream news fascination, speculation and even occasional attempts at critique, with such headlines as 'Women who "switch teams" – Drifting sexual orientation is in the pop culture spotlight' (Takahama, 2001), 'How Britney gets her satisfaction' (Adams, 2000), 'As times go bi' (*The Toronto Star*, 2000), 'Manufacturing lesbianism for CD sales' (Richler, 2003), 'Breaking down taboos: Hollywood coming out of the closet on bisexuality' (Portman, 2005). The growing popularity among teens, girls in particular, of exploring the bisexual option, is also the subject of numerous headlines: 'Hello, good bi' (*The Toronto Star*, 2001), 'Teen girls exploring "bisexual chic" trend: Debate rises over whether a kiss is just a kiss' (Malernee, 2003), 'Wave of "bisexual chic" sweeping American high schools' (*The Guardian*, 2004), 'Partway gay? For some teen girls, sexual preferences is a shifting concept' (Stepp, 2004).

The phenomenon is now sufficiently pervasive to become the target of frantic warnings by the religious right. *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, which claims to be in the business of 'helping the church deal biblically with gender issues' recently ran a story lamenting the rise of bisexuality's popularity, while cleverly appropriating the *argo* of popular culture, as well as of cultural and media studies critics: 'The newest teen girl fad: Bisexual chic' (Mohler, 2004). Rev Jerry Falwell, the infamous Christian evangelist TV star, has also weighed in on the issue, condemning bisexual experimentation: 'Teens commit to chastity until marriage' (Falwell, 2004).

Thus, bisexuality remains simultaneously invisible, by virtue of its status as a non-legitimate category and highly conspicuous, owing to its status as a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963), that is a discredited, socially alienated location that is disqualified from access to 'normal' identity status. Although bisexuality may be 'everywhere' in form (i.e. the deluge of bisexual chic images), the content continues to largely elude the cultural

[4] While these images proliferate, on-screen critiques of these representations are virtually absent. A notable exception is *Off the Straight & Narrow* (1998), which is the first in-depth critical documentary featuring media scholars who address the pros and cons of the steady rise of queer televised images.

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frame (i.e. the dearth of well-articulated, non-sensationalized portrayals). Bisexuals continue to be largely positioned as frivolous, exotic creatures at best, and as contaminating interlopers at worst. This paradoxical positioning is clearly illustrated in the opening quote of the chapter: there is both a negation of its viability ('there aren't any of those here') and a terror that its presence is always lurking ('they could be among us'). This dread is amplified by an uncertainly about locating markers of recognition ('what do they look like').

Bisexuality continues to be under-theorized, relative to the increasingly substantial literature on lesbian and gay identity, although significant exceptions that attempt to articulate a theory and a politics of bisexuality are emerging (e.g. Atkins, 2002; Bi Academic Intervention, 1997; Esterberg, 2002; Firestein, 1996; Fox, 1995, 2000; Garber, 1995; Hemmings, 2002; Rust, 1995; 2000b; Storr, 1999; Tucker, 1995). For a summary of the theoretical and empirical status of bisexuality in psychology, the reader is referred to these works and our companion piece to this chapter (Bower et al., 2002). In this chapter, we hope to add to these efforts by drawing on women's account of bisexual lives, identities, and politics to examine what it means to (dis)close bisexual identities. What sets of openings and foreclosures follow such revelations? As Däumer (1999) asserts, bisexuality presents a problem that extends beyond issues of visibility: 'the problems of bisexuals are social and political ones' (p. 159) and, therefore, require an epistemological shift that destabilizes and reconfigures gender and sexuality. As long as our socio-political systems benefit from keeping two ostensibly different sexual cultures (straight and non-straight) and gender cultures (male and female) in a divided and antagonistic relation to each other, then owning or displaying a bisexual identity is not necessarily a radical response to heterosexism and sexism. In other words, we need to be more than merely visible or tolerable to represent a subversive force. As Foucault says (1990), sexuality is not a 'natural given which power tries to hold in check, or an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover' (p. 105). Rather, it is a historically constructed matrix of variously inflected bodies, pleasures, discourses, knowledges and power. Therefore, it is through the deployment of sexuality that knowledge/power takes effect in bodies, pleasures and identities. As the women in our study attest, 'living' bisexual identities is difficult because they are always already submerged in the service of displaying and revealing identities that are more recognizable and more viable (i.e. heterosexual and lesbian and gay) within the existing social and political context. The aim of this chapter is to articulate an epistemology and politics of (dis)closure in relation to bisexual identities.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

The description of the methodological, theoretical and analytic approach is extracted from the original study (Bower et al., 2002). Twenty-two open-ended interviews were conducted during the summer of 1999 with women living in Nova Scotia, Canada who self-identified as bisexual. These participants were recruited via posters and brief introductory letters publicized at selected and appropriate community and university organizations and events (e.g. university women's centres; women's dances; bookstores). Given the constraints of accessing an invisible population, snowball sampling (wherein participants solicit likely participants via their own social networks) was also used to increase recruitment.

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The average age was 26, with a range of 19–41. Thirteen participants were cohabiting with a partner, four were dating and five were single. Of those who were dating or cohabiting, 15 were involved in a primary relationship with a man and of these, nine identified as non-monogamous, either in theory or in practice. Two participants were in primary relationships with women and both identified as monogamous. Although we advertised widely in order to obtain a heterogeneous sample, the majority were white, and 82% had, or were in the process of obtaining, university (including graduate) degrees. Eight participants were full-time students, eight were in full-time employment and six were in part-time employment or were unemployed.

The interviewer was a post-doctoral research fellow who identifies as a bisexual woman. The interview schedule was comprised of two parts: (1) general background and demographic questions; and (2) questions pertaining to sexual identity. The second part consisted of open-ended questions, followed by prompts, addressing four broad domains: sexual identity and meaning; coming out; community/social resources; key issues and unique concerns. For instance, within the category of sexual identity and meaning, we asked participants to tell us how they currently self-identify. This was followed by prompts that pertained to the meaning of this label and the circumstances under which they use it (e.g. How do you currently identify yourself sexually? What does this label mean to you? Have you always used this label?). Under the category coming out, questions included the following: When did you first begin to identify as bisexual (or whatever label they used) (publicly/privately)? What were the circumstances? Under the category community/social resources, questions included the following: Do you know other women who identify as bisexual? Are there places where you can socialize or obtain information about your sexuality? Under the category of key issues and unique concerns, questions included the following: What is most important for us to understand about your life? How much acceptance do you think there is of bisexuality?

To preserve anonymity, details that might identify participants were omitted. Participants are distinguished by the notation P#, appended at the end of each excerpt. A standard grammatical convention is used in the presentation of excerpts in order to enhance readability and clarity; speech features, such as intonation or length of pauses are not highlighted (see also Malson, 1998). Participants were paid an honorarium of $20. The interviews ranged from one to two hours, with and average of 1.5 hours. All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

The analysis of the interview material was guided by following questions: What does it mean for a woman to claim a bisexual identity? How do bisexual women construct their identities? What are some of the component parts of the bisexual narrative that allow us to theorize bisexual identity? With these questions as the central focus, thematic decomposition analysis (Stenner, 1993; Woollett, Marshall & Stenner, 1998) was adopted to explicate dominant themes. This analytic technique combines discursive approaches with thematic analysis. The term 'themes' here refers to coherent patterns identified in participants' talk (Stenner, 1993). We also use 'themes' here to emphasize that the patterns were not simply extracted from the interviews; rather, they emerged partly in response to the

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kinds of questions posed and the researchers' specific interests. These interests focused on the ways in which participants negotiated the contradictions that arose as they worked with the core questions indicated above. The themes here are also constituted by a variety of discourses. 'Discourse' here is defined in the Foucauldian sense, as not only referring to language, as in the 'general domain of all statements,' but also to regulated social practices (Foucault 1972). In this respect, Foucault suggests that discourses can be defined as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Thus, these 'objects' (identities, events and experiences) are not anterior to discourse and awaiting discovery, definition and classification, but rather are brought into existence thought their entry into discourse. As Prior (1989, p. 3) succinctly notes, these objects 'are not referents about which there are discourses but objects constructed by discourse'. In this sense, discourses are fundamentally productive. That is, they produce 'things' (e.g. objects, social institutions, individual subjectivities and subjects) and they have real effects. In so doing, discourses also have a fundamentally material dimension; they productively constitute objects, individuals and social realities in particular ways. For example, arguably identity politics and monosexism regulate the 'discursive field' within which sexuality is currently constructed. Identity politics comprise a complex array of political and theoretical leanings, largely organized around membership in specific marginalized groups; affiliation with a given political movement is centred on combating oppression, reclaiming previously stigmatized identities and working towards self-determination (Heyes, 2002). Monosexuality refers to the assumption that sexual 'object choice' must either be exclusively heterosexual or homosexual (Fox, 1995). Minimally, therefore, bisexual subjects constitute their specific identities and realities against, and within, this discursive backdrop. Thus, although participants echo similar 'themes,' these can be understood as being negotiated within a broader 'discursive field', which both produces individual and social meanings and relays meaning through culture.

The women in our study construct bisexuality as a matrix of ongoing interpersonal and socio-cultural negotiations. These centre on: issues pertaining to the limits and possibilities of labelling; questions about the viability (and desirability) of rendering bisexuality a coherent, visible and culturally intelligible identity; and the necessity for and struggles over formulating bisexual epistemologies and politics. A pervasive tension in these accounts pivots on the desire to achieve cultural intelligibility and social acceptance, while simultaneously wanting to retain bisexuality's transformative possibilities, such that this acceptance does not risk entrenching yet another fixed identity category.

(Re)Drawing Sexual Boundaries

A central pre-occupation in these accounts pertains to definitional issues (see Bower et al., 2002 for a comprehensive discussion). Questions about the (in)adequacies of labels, (ir)relevant identificatory criteria, and struggles over meaning predominate:

> It's hard because usually once you define yourself as bisexual, you end up going one way or the other at some point. Or you try to put a label somewhere, and I learned early on you don't have to have a label as long as you're comfortable with what you're doing . . . And, now that I'm in a relationship with a woman, I look back and I say it's

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> difficult being bisexual because when people ask you, 'What is your preference?' And you say, 'I don't have one'. 'Well, what do you mean you don't have one?' I have a preference of a person, not a preference of gender. And I think that's the hardest thing for people trying to understand bisexuality is that it's not a gender preference. It's a preference of a person. (P6)

> I've been struggling with labels recently, in the past few years . . . At the moment I guess politically and in attitude I'm a dyke. That's how I would describe myself. But I'm also bisexual and polyamorous, so that would also be included in that . . . I think, the term bisexual is . . . so limited because really I just fall in love with . . . or like I'm attracted to people. It's secondary, whether they're male or female really . . . it frustrates me sometimes because it's the word that people understand the most but it really doesn't describe my sexuality at all. It's very superficial in terms of labels. (P2)

Although the necessity and accuracy of labels is questioned and resisted, the socio-cultural injunction to tag (in its noun and verb forms) preferences, genders and identities is never far away. The women move back and forth between questioning the usefulness of fixed categories and resorting to these groupings (or inventing new ones) when trying to convey accurately their own identities and lives:

> It's really hard to just even divide things into gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual, I mean there's just a trillion different combinations of all of those words and any other words you feel like throwing in there . . . But I suppose, for all intents and purposes, my label would be bisexual. (P8)

> It's a very broad spectrum of people and because it's so broad, it's almost impossible to group us into one group . . . The only thing that we have in common is that we're bisexual . . . but hetero-flexible, I think that's probably my new identity. (P18)

The inadequacy of the bisexual descriptor in capturing the vagaries, vicissitudes, and fissures of identity landscapes is reiterated throughout as a desire 'for a language differentiated enough to capture the wealth of contradictions that pervades the efforts of individual men and women to subvert or modify dominant constructions of gender and sexuality' (Däumer, 1999, p. 158). This struggle over the 'startling dearth of currently available options (hetero, homo, bi)' (Däumer, 1999, p. 157) echoes Däumer's (1999) cautionary reminder that 'the effort to disambiguate bisexuality and elevate it into a sign of integration might counteract the subversive potential of bisexuality as a moral and epistemological force' (p. 159). That is, it is the very status of bisexuality as an ambiguous identity within the binary logic of monosexism, that gives it the potential to reveal (and even revel in) the inevitable inconsistencies and discontinuities within all identities. There is another tension at work here – between what is seen as a totalizing impingement of the bisexual signpost (i.e. the bisexual label runs the risk of fixing identities, in much the same way as the labels straight or gay) and a woefully persistent cultural incomprehensibility of bisexuality. The resolute desire to dismantle the limits of existing signs stands alongside the equally insistent demand to be understood, or at least admitted as an ontological possibility:

> Oh, valid options. I think that the most important thing for researchers to do or for society to know rather is that bisexuality is a valid option, that it can be. I mean I'm sure some people play, I mean people play. But I'd like to see more evidence and more told that allows bisexuality to be respected as real, it's real, people aren't faking. (P4)

(Un)Viable Identities

Bisexuality threatens to contaminate the ostensibly stable boundaries of, among others, heterosexual and homosexual, male and female (Eadie, 1999):

> I think that the most important thing anyone should understand about bisexual women is that it's not just bisexual in terms of what you like, it's also bisexual in terms of who you are. Sometimes I feel like a boy, sometimes I feel like a girl. And I can't describe it any more than that. Sometimes I feel really macho and sometimes I feel as feminine as Scarlet O'Hara. You know, it just changes from day to day and maybe it's partly a mood swing can affect it, but honestly, like I mean sometimes I'll be dressed in combat fatigues, the next day I'll be wearing like a mini-dress and high heels. (P1)

The resistance to being fixed within a gendered or a sexual prototype works in tandem with the claim that sexuality represents a 'way of being' (Eadie, 1997). Although the women in this study want to retain the terms of this 'beingness' perpetually open, they are equally adamant that bisexuality is a real (and radical) identity:

> So that makes me quite angry in fact that, that because I've decided that I'm attracted to men and women, I feel that attraction, I'm not pretending, I'm not making it up, and I don't want to walk down the street holding some guy's hand just for heterosexual privilege, because I know what it's like to be discriminated against on other bases and for other reasons, so, that makes me, I think, more upset than anything. That I'm just going to adopt this [label] because that's the safest thing to do. I don't live my life in that safe a manner, actually I consider myself kind of a radical person. (P11)

As Eadie (1999) asserts, 'by being non-prescriptive around sexual desires, practices, relationships and identities, bisexual collectivities undermine the very ground on which they gather' (p. 123). Declaring a bisexual identity paradoxically works against the claim of its indeterminacy. In other words, if owing a bisexual identity implies a way of being that resists fixedness, explicitly adopting this identity (as individuals or as groups) to convey a complex and shifting trajectory of emotional, physical, epistemological and political navigations also runs the risk of rendering it less flexible:

> I have to admit, I have to commit, to say that that's what I think I am. And part of it again is not feeling legitimate. I mean even before we started [the interview] I was sitting here thinking I don't have, I don't know the answers, like I don't have all the short answers to explain how and everything that I am. It's still a process that I'm going through . . . I feel like my friends are all wondering, what's the next gender I'm going to bring home, so to speak . . . I think I have a tendency to go from one to the other almost like to balance anything so that I don't get labelled one way or the other. And then maybe people will get more used to the idea that, that I'm not a lesbian, and maybe I'm not straight, and maybe it doesn't matter. (P21)

The imperative to 'admit a commitment' reveals 'bi discourse' as functioning as both 'an "instrument and effect" of power, marked as it is by the binary structures and sexually conservative features of the dominant discourse' (Ault, 1999, p. 184). As Foucault (1990, p. 100) argues, the 'tactical polyvalence of discourses' operates such that, although discourse can be a catalyst for strategic resistance, it can also be 'both an instrument and an effect of power' (p. 101). The project of instantiating a bisexual identity in order to 'undermine and expose' (Foucault, 1990) the fragility and permeability of sexed and gendered borders not only becomes a moment 'when women marked by the sign of the bisexual

begin to establish the terms of legitimate bi identity', it also marks the very point at which they simultaneously 'participate in the discursive reinforcement of the sex/gender structure. The construction and definition of categories is an exercise in imposing order, not an exercise in disrupting it' (Ault, 1999, p. 184).

Bisexuality's intractably tainted standing relegates it to an 'unviable (un)subject position' (Butler, 1991, p. 306). That is, within the domain of the normative, and therefore, intelligible, bisexuals are 'unthinkable' and, thus, outside the contours of viable subjects:

> Sometimes I do feel, in certain contexts and in certain situations, I feel like it's simpler to just say that I'm a dyke or I'm a lesbian. It's more understood, it's more intelligible to people and unless I have time to go into why I say I'm bisexual or how I'm bisexual, I don't always feel comfortable saying that. Especially, actually, in the lesbian community. (P16)

As Butler (1993) asserts, subjects are constituted through forces of exclusion and disavowal:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (p. 3)

Bisexuality is this 'constitutive outside', which is both menacing and mandatory in the regulation of identificatory and sexual practices. In as much as lesbian and gay identities have attained the status of viable subjects within the LGBT communities, the dreaded disclosure of a bisexual domain jeopardizes this thinkable, inhabitable location. At the same time, the possibility of a bisexual identity underscores the 'actuality' and greater legitimacy of lesbian and gay identity (i.e., the 'true queers'):

> I still have a feeling that bisexuality doesn't really exist. That it's not defined, or even seen as something meaning laden, rather it's just something 'other' and not defined and maybe defined negatively . . . it's like well, that is not gay and that is not straight and therefore it doesn't mean anything to me and it just gets pushed away. (P17)

> I might perhaps feel that bisexuality is not legitimate whereas being a lesbian, I'd see that as being legitimate . . . I can never be legitimate and so I feel like a little lost soul, like, that I'm floating in between two sides that are very, very sure of what they are. (P2)

> I think we're pretty invisible. I don't think you can talk about a bisexual culture, except as part of a larger, gay and lesbian and bi culture . . . I don't think there is a separate bisexual culture. (P22)

In these accounts, bisexuality as an identity marker is positioned as impossible, incredible, illegitimate and meaningless. Inhabiting a viable bisexual identity is forestalled by the predominant cultural assertion that bisexuality is provisional, posing and pretence, that is, non-existent (Rust, 2000a).

(In)Visibly Contagious

Paradoxically, bisexuals are situated as both unviable and as (in)visible potential contaminants, in some cases in very literal ways:

> A lot of the lesbians and gay men will say, how can you say that you're bisexual? That doesn't make any sense. Does that mean that you're not going to settle down, or you're not a monogamous person? What are you? You're going around spreading AIDS, what's your problem? Make a decision. So it's kind of like we're stuck in the middle. (P18)

Their 'polluting' force also stems from bisexuality's defiance of 'forms of separation and demarcation which serve particular social interests' (Eadie, 1997, p. 130):

> I've heard a lot of really negative comments about bisexual people . . . Like I'd hear 'Oh well, bisexual people, it's just like a cop-out because they don't want to choose or it's just like if they can't get a male, then they'll go with a female. If they can't get a female, they'll go with a male'. (P5)

> I feel like, like bisexuals are disappeared in the queer community. I think it's . . . you're gay or you're lesbian or you're, oh, yeah, bi. Hmm? Just, it doesn't seem like . . . it still seems like bisexuality is a fringe, a fringe non-option. (P4)

> I find a lot of time there's an expectation that it's the gay and lesbian community. A lot of men and women who are bi, who are working to talk about the gay and lesbian community, who don't talk about being bi. Like, you know, a group will put out a lot of literature that never, ever mentions being bi . . . there's a certain stigma that's attached to being bi that . . . or a certain status that's attached to not being bi, like people are more willing to listen to you talk about like your position as a lesbian then they are willing to listen to you talk about your position being bi, I think. (P20)

Although bisexuals appear to be an afterthought, a 'copout,' a 'fringe non-option,' that cannot be located on equal footing with other sexualities, they loom as a threat to both homo- and hetero-sexualities:

> I think also that bisexuality threatens to invalidate the claims of people in the hetero and the homo side and that might, might make them hold off from accepting that as a viable option . . . However, having, just having a third option which says, you can kind of, as they say, go between the two, that makes it, that makes those two seem fluid and a lot of people feel threatened I think by that, that they don't want to see their own identity as fluid. I don't necessarily agree with it actually being that way. Like I'm sure there are people who are really straight and really gay. Why not? And I don't think that bisexuality invalidates those, but I can see why it would be perceived as a threat. (P4)

> We don't seem to belong to the straight community, and we don't seem to belong to the gay community, but most of us don't want to belong to the bisexual community either. Most of us just want to be us. Or just me. We're not deviant. We're not experimenting for the rest of our lives. It's not, for a lot of people it's not a phase. It's not something that they just get into and just toss out later on when they settle down with someone. (P18)

> The two camps of homosexuality and heterosexuality, neither one wants any bisexual people around because it's just not good for their image, for either one. So, we're left in the middle. (P21)

Because disclosure of stigmatized identities constitutes a confessional moment, as much as a declaration (albeit unintentionally), the one who receives the utterance has the power to legitimate or invalidate. Thus, disclosure can have both a constructive and constrictive function in the constitution of subjectivity. Non-normative and stigmatized self-ascriptions, in particular, risk (in)jurious consequences owing to their position as sites of contagion. That is, their articulation is not merely a communication but a production that

threatens to contaminate the listener by transmitting the referent's disposition or practice. In this sense, such utterances not only perform a constitutive function in configuring the subjectivity of the speaker but they also take effect in the listener. This effect can engender acceptance and facilitation *or* contamination and judgement. So, statements that are intended as 'reflexive, that attribute a status only to oneself, [are] taken to be solicitous, that is, a claim that announces . . . the intention to act, the act itself' (Butler, 1997, p. 113). Hearing the utterance (here, a declaration of a bisexual identity) is equated with 'contracting' the act/identity to which it refers. In these accounts, public avowals of a bisexual identity (i.e. saying one is bisexual) are frequently met with fears of contamination, and relatedly, accusations of betrayal.

> I talk to a lot of the gay women. And there are certain gay women that don't like bisexual women at all. There's a sort of almost a heterosexual fear, the opposite of the homophobic thing. (P10)

> Sometimes I go into circumstances and I don't even mention being bi. I just say I'm a dyke and let people make all those assumptions . . . Because then, once I've talked enough and then once I've got people's respect and people's attention, then I can say I'm bi and I won't lose their attention. But if I go into a situation and I say I'm bi, then I don't get their attention in the first place. (P20)

> I find that in the lesbian and gay community, there's like an out-casting of bisexuals, or bisexual people, which is such hypocrisy and such contradictions . . . Because of the gay and lesbian community and their opinions on your bisexuality, it makes it hard for certain people to sort of stand up, stand their ground and even admit, so they'll just say they're either gay or lesbian and not bisexual, which is you know, the case. 'Cause there's a lot of anger in that community towards bisexuality. So it's not nearly as open as it could or should be. (P7)

Most of the women who identified strongly socially and politically with the lesbian community also experienced a pervasively painful disjuncture between such socio-political commitments and displacement from the 'insider group':

> At times I felt not good enough because I knew I had a boyfriend and I knew that many of the women I was meeting were lesbians or appeared to be or seemed to be or whatever. And at times I kind of felt, not like I didn't belong, like that I was not quite as valid because I wasn't supporting the cause by being with women. (P21)

> I also wanted to say something in terms of the sort of the betrayal or the lack of trust. The issue of culture I think is also something that makes it tricky to identify as bisexual versus gay or lesbian because there is a very strong queer culture or lesbian culture that I feel a part of. Through movies, through singers, through music, all kinds of figures in popular culture, and even sayings and certain ways of talking, those are all part of my culture. And so the bisexuality part is tricky because it's like, well if that is my culture and I'm not allowed to have complete claim on that culture somehow because it's a lesbian culture and if I identify as a bisexual woman, then I'm kind of not exactly one hundred percent part of that culture or supposed to have the membership . . . There's always this feeling of having to negotiate this straight looking relationship and my queer community or queer culture. But then if I'm with a woman, it's like well, I'm a dyke and there's a complete like negation of any kind of opposite sex relationships that I've had in the past. So, I feel like either way, I kind of lose in terms of bisexual kind of positive identification, or existence. (P16)

Acknowledgment of the legitimacy of bisexuality by others is equated with ontological validity. Central here are appeals to the importance of visibility and public avowals.

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Incitement to Reveal and Conceal

Given the risks of disclosure, decisions about the costs and benefits of revealing and concealing were cited as a key struggle for many of the participants. In contrast to allegations of bisexual women's ability 'to pass', most of the women asserted that passing was neither a desirable nor a viable option in either the straight or the gay world. Not only was discovery always an imminent risk in many social contexts, in a significant way, being able to voice or display their bisexual identities was positioned as integral to rendering their identities as bisexual women viable. Foucault (1990) has argued that western societies routinely rely on confession as a central mechanism for the production of truth, among which truth about the individuation and authenticity of the 'self' is central: 'the individual. . . . [is] authenticated by the discourse of truth he [sic] [is] able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself [sic]. The truth confession [is] inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power' (pp. 58–59). Sexuality in particular, holds a key place in this domain of discursive imperatives:

> sex became something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance with deployments that were varied, but all, in their own way compelling . . . sex has not ceased to provoke a kind of generalized discursive erethism . . . that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse (Foucault, 1990, pp. 32–33).

As part of the 'will to knowledge regarding sex' (Foucault, 1990, p. 65), incitement to confess the truth of one's 'sexual peculiarity' has been codified not only scientifically (i.e. in the form of *scientia sexualis*, the development of a science of sex that systematically classifies sexual types and establishes norms for regulating desire) and socially, but also intrapsychically, as part of the formation of subjectivity.

Importantly, this 'obligation to confess' is so thoroughly installed that it is not viewed as an impingement of power but rather barriers to revealing 'our most secret nature' are now positioned as the 'violence of power' that constrain the emergence of truth (Foucault, 1990, p. 60). And sexuality, owing to its peculiar status as a sentinel of an 'individual and fundamental secret', has become firmly entrenched not only in the 'economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge' (Foucault, 1990, p. 69). Knowledge and pleasure are now yoked. That is, individual subjectivity is now so thoroughly caught up in the interplay among confession, truth, and power that the individual is not merely an object of study by scientific methods, but has also become an object of knowledge to oneself. The pleasure is in knowing, being known, discovering the truth about self, and effecting change in the self. The proliferation of pleasures in the 'production of the truth about sex' are inexhaustively manifold:

> pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure (Foucault, 1990, p. 71).

The regulatory force of confessional discourses is affected in large measure by the real or virtual presence of the listener:

> who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally a ritual in which

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> the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation (Foucault, 1990, p. 62, sic).

Thus, speaking the 'truth' about the self is a requirement for producing an individuated selfhood. Such proclamations, however, are in turn regulated by 'normalizing surveillance procedures' (Foucault, 1995) that assess, categorize and discipline subjects in relation to particular social norms. The potency of these 'techniques of subjection' does not lie in an exteriorized imposition, but rather in the internalization of 'disciplinary power,' such that self-monitoring and self-constraining subjects and subjectivities are produced (Foucault, 1995). In this way, 'discipline "makes" individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals as both objects and as instruments of its exercise' (Foucault, 1995, p. 170). This form of power functions through 'humble modalities' rather than grand sovereign gestures by exerting a sustained but 'calculated economy' (Foucault, 1995). In other words, power is affected not by coercive external legal or social forces but by the more subtle, less visible but much more efficient mechanism of ongoing self scrutiny and self management.

The norm of monosexuality that governs both straight and lesbian communities functions in precisely this way as a 'disciplinary regulator' (Foucault, 1995) in producing self-governing and self-containing subjects. Negotiating 'fields of visibility' (Foucault, 1995) that construct and constrain gendered, sexed and sexualized subject positions and subjectivities is a precarious enterprise that eludes balance. Although the women in this study are insistent on retaining the flexibility of bisexuality, in its naming and enactment, as these accounts also attest, occupying the 'ambiguous' bisexual position 'creates painful contradictions, incoherences, and impracticalities in the lives of those who adopt it' (Däumer, 1999, p. 159). Marginalized to some extent by both the straight and lesbian communities and caught, in many respects much like 'queer', in the unstable 'gap of disidentification' (e.g. Nguyen, 1999), bisexual women confront a series of difficult negotiations in relation to disclosure issues:

> I guess the worst is the mistrust and the feeling that I'm going to betray someone or that I've already betrayed. I've betrayed a lesbian community because I can become a het, because I can walk down the street with a guy. And mistrust on behalf of straight women who think I can either make a pass at them or their boyfriend, because I have twice as many to choose from, I immediately go after everyone. (P11)

> I seem to remember a very uncomfortable situation with somebody I worked with who was saying 'it's fine for gay, it's fine for straight, it's this bisexual thing, that's just children who haven't grown up', blah, blah, blah. I remember fighting tooth and nail with her over that for a few hours after work one day and being so upset and so angry when I went home but never being able to say, never feeling I could say, you know, but I am bisexual. (P9)

Accusations of betrayal, predatory impulses and maturational inadequacy are presented as evidence of the impossibility (and inadvisability) of bisexuality. Both self-declarations of bisexuality and the perpetual possibility of being 'discovered' put the women at risk of being ascribed diminished psychological, moral *and* social status:

> I had one bad experience, it was kind of like my first lesbian party and I was with my partner and we were still closeted because of her and a woman at the party basically just kind of leaned forward and said, 'So are you a lesbian or what?' I was

> dumbfounded, I didn't know what to say cause I was never expected to be asked outright like that. I just didn't think it would be really good to say no, and I didn't want to say, well, no, but you know what, I'm sleeping with this woman sitting next to you. (P21)

> I mean, having to out myself as bisexual at the store, even with customers when they ask, when it comes up that I live with a man, if it ever does come up. Where I live on [street name] next to the Woman's Co-op, so it does come up actually. That's been sort of difficult. I felt uneasy, felt other people were uneasy with that . . . People aren't out and out asking or anything but you do get the double take if I meet up with people at the market or something Saturday morning. You're shopping with your lover, it's pretty obvious that you know, you're shopping together for home. You know, it's like, 'Is this your brother?' (P9)

The explicit political identifications with the lesbian community run counter to the 'indictment of bisexuality as apolitical' (Hemmings, 1999, p. 197):

> I appreciate the point that there are a lot of lesbian and gay men that have worked really hard, that had a really hard time of it, that are really adamant about their standing. And there is sort of that community for lesbians and for gay men I think more so than there is for bisexuals, so they sort of have a bit more of a cohesive unit . . . so I think that just gets pushed to the top more . . . I mean I feel like bisexual women, like I feel I experience that from both sides, so I get a lot of negative feedback or whatever you call it from the lesbian community. And not even negative, just pressure . . . Things like 'I'm just not interested at all in hearing about any relationship that you have with a man, well not completely disinterested but very not interested.' It usually comes with some snide remark and I understand that, whatever, people, animosity or something but like it's just tiring . . . But I would probably shrivel up and die if I didn't know at least some lesbians. (P12)

> If I walk into a queer environment, I'm still married to a man, with the ring and the marriage certificate and the whole bit and that can cause some rejection from the queer groups I've found. And I'm cautious about that as a result. (P4)

Resulting from the 'nested' power differentials of 'hierarchized surveillance' (Foucault, 1995), many of the participants experience greater freedom to proclaim a bisexual identity in the straight world, given a much diminished concern about approval by this community. That is, although being subject to scrutiny is an ever-present possibility, the scrutinizing forces (i.e. the lesbian and gay community vs the straight community vs the self) have different impacts, depending on shifting socio-political realities:

> In the straight world of school [university], which is mainly straight and I'm the only out, queer person in my class of 50 as far as I know, yet I felt that it was easier to come out as a bisexual woman in that context and be queer and talk about my attractions to men and my attractions and relationships to women. Just because there's this feeling that if they don't accept me, screw them. Like, I don't care. I don't need their approval or need their acceptance. I think it's because I don't look for acceptance from straight people in the same way that I do from lesbians, from like the lesbian community. (P16)

The rhetorical, social and political primacy of 'gay' and 'lesbian' within these communities ensures that bisexuality, along with its other 'abject' associates (Butler, 1993) (e.g. transgendered, questioning), retains its repudiated status:

> I was perceived as being a lesbian or a dyke and it was assumed that I was because of the way I look. And I just let that assumption carry forward. I thought that was safer for me and that's still true today. It's still true. (P11)

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> I should say that when I was playing along and just being queer and letting other people identify me as lesbian that it was great . . . but now I look back on it and it seems very hollow. It all seems leading up to the time when I was sort of ostracized . . . I just know that I only had those experiences because I knuckled under, that if I stood up and insisted, I'm bisexual and that's different from you, you know, that I would have been . . . ostracized. (P17)

Rejection (and ejection) by the lesbian community is the cost of publicly avowing a bisexual identity. 'Passing' becomes a handy mode of avoiding 'normalizing judgement' (Foucault, 1995), albeit simultaneously constraining the possibility of mutually pleasurable recognition:

> Simply being able to assert your identity, have it recognized by people around you, and finding a community of similarly identified people is easier [for lesbians]. I mean it's still hard for lesbian women but it's easier for them than bisexual women. Because as soon as you're with a man, it's like suddenly everything that you struggled to gain in terms of recognition is gone . . . at work you don't say, 'I'm married, but I'm bisexual too' . . . just if people could know that it's a real thing. That it's like as concrete in a way as other identities . . . and yet concrete is sort of the wrong word because it's almost more like that you can live your whole life, your whole lifespan in what seems to be a sort of flux and that flux can be a wholeness. That a wholeness doesn't have to be a singularity as well. (P17)

The struggle here centres on whether it is possible to achieve 'any sense of belonging on the basis of temporary identifications and alliances. The burning question is how one can become a *subject of dislocation* that is able to recognize other such subjects' (Hemmings, 1999, p. 199, original emphasis).

This raises the issue of whether 'sexual identity must be continuously performed to be proven' (Whitney, 2002, p. 116). If, as Butler (1999) contends, the subject is constituted by 'certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity' and if this operates through a '*regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects' (p. 185, original emphasis), what is the status of repetition and performance for dissident identities? Butler (1999) enjoins such outsiders to 'enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification' (p. 189) because 'it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that subversion of identity becomes possible' (p. 185 original emphasis). The status of lesbian and gay as privileged signifiers within the economy of dissident sexualities makes 'qualify[ing] as a substantive identity an arduous task' (Butler, 1999, p. 184):

> I mean, I think it's really important to do stuff like this because, I mean, I have been feeling less and less bisexual, if that makes any sense. Like in the sense that it's just so much easier to say I'm a dyke and to be, to simplify things that way, especially when I had a girlfriend and I guess if anything that this interview has done is renewed my hope that a bisexual identity can be, can be okay. (P16)

The precariousness of maintaining both 'being' and 'being legitimate' is a reminder of the 'constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable' (Butler, 1999, p. 186). And we would add to this the 'constitutive failure' of all sexualities. More specifically:

> when the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of coherence . . . that regulatory ideal is then exposed as norm and a fiction

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> that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe. (Butler, 1999, p. 173)

The flimsiness of these fictive masquerades underscores the importance of sustaining a politics of 'radical difference' (Eadie, 1999). As Haraway (1990, p. 223) argues, the goal here is 'not of [creating] a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia', wherein the matrices of resistance need not require coherence but rather that they maintain their 'productively conflictual' force (Eadie, 1999).

(Im)Possible Bisexual Epistemologies and Politics

The primacy of the 'Big G's' – gender and genitals – is particularly entrenched in both lay and theoretical discourses about sexual varieties. Although these biological and social markers are not inherently or inevitably linked to sexuality, they typically take centre stage in our sexual understandings and enactments (Rust, 2000a). The women in our study attempt to de-couple this insistent link between sexuality and the gender/genitals dyad:

> Even bisexual is hard for me to adapt to because my definition which I would think is the general consensus of bisexual is where your sexual orientation is and mine isn't necessarily sexual. It's an emotional, mental bond with somebody and, like I said, that could be any one person . . . So it's just, it's clearly for me just a person. So I usually say I'm bi, not necessarily bisexual because I have no sexual desire to be with a man, but if I was in love, it probably would come back . . . I fell in love with my partner before ever laying eyes on her. I talked to her on the computer for two hours before I actually knew she was a woman . . . (P6)

> Just a person, who identifies, wants to connect sexually but with both men and women . . . I guess when I talk about connecting sexually with someone I'm not necessarily just talking about physical connections. I mean if I'm in a heterosexual relationship for the rest of my life, does that mean I'm not bisexual anymore? So, I guess I figure that I still will always be bisexual as long as . . . I still feel interested. (P14)

Like our participants, Sedgwick (1990) muses over this puzzling conflation of sexuality and gender/genitals and the neglect of other, potentially more relevant, characteristics in decisions about sexual object options:

> of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another . . . precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation' (p. 8, original emphasis).

Notably, although 'gender is not a deal breaker' for bisexuals, 'conceptualized with a gender-based dichotomous sexual classification system, . . . *bi*sexuality is constructed in terms of the one characteristic that does *not* define it: gender' (Rust, 2000a, p. 209, original emphasis). The women in our study work against this negation of non-gendered/non-genital features in ascribing partner attractions and choices. Instead, they rely on other explanations for these leanings, as indicated throughout this chapter such as an 'emotional, mental bond', the desire for 'just a person', feeling 'interested' in principle in the absence of physical enactments, 'who you meet', experiencing 'intimacy', being 'in love', the transition from love to 'sexual expression', and 'inner beauty':

> Usually I say bi-sexual. It's the most simple way of saying it. Except for, usually I say I'm in love with one person now, so that is my sexuality, is this one person. (P15)

> When I settled down with my current partner, who is male, as the relationship progressed I discovered that I probably would be staying with him and I love him more as a person, not necessarily as a man so it's not really a matter of gender in our relationship, he just happens to be male . . . It's just a matter of this person is a nice person, I could grow to love this person. And if I love this person, I can express it to them sexually. (P18)

> Essentially I'm just gender inspecific. I don't have a preference. I don't have a preference for height or for body size or other than that I'm not particularly concerned. I care a lot about a person's mind, and I know that's very cliché to say about the inner beauty . . . I'm attracted to the beauty and I discovered that when I was young, like very young that I was attracted to people and not to sexes . . . I don't see gender anymore, I just see faces. I see a beautiful face, I see a beautiful body and I see a beautiful person inside. (P19)

Gender is positioned as largely irrelevant by these participants, to the extent of being equated with the preferential status of other subjective social markers such as 'height or body size' (see P19 above). Paradoxically, in de-emphasizing the genital and the gendered in describing a bisexual identity, anxieties about being found 'insufficiently bisexual' emerge. Although a fixed identity may not be desirable or possible, 'in the absence of a coherent (which would also mean policed) bisexual identity, [bisexuals'] expression of sexuality is [found] wanting' (Eadie, 1999, p. 123). This issue of whether one 'counts as bisexual' in the presence or absence of specific (sexual) enactments was expressed by most of the women, as indicated in the preceding (P6 and P14) and the following excerpts:

> If I said bi-sexual, people expect me to go 50% with guys and 50% with girls, you know. I think it's more who you meet and you know, like the person rather than their sex . . . if you meet somebody and you really like them and you become intimate with them, you don't necessarily have to have sex with them to be intimate but, so it depends on, if the intimacy is there. (P3)

> And to me, you don't have to be in a lover's relationship with someone to be out. That's going back to it's not all about sex, that's only part of it. I mean I consider myself a single person. I'm not interested in pursuing anyone right now, I'm not looking for a partner in particular, but I'm still bi. That hasn't changed. That hasn't changed at all. (P11)

> I think that when people say bisexual, because you're saying bi, people see it as half and half. So either people identify I think, or understand that you're half, half of you is attracted to men and half to women . . . I mean what happens if I'm attracted to a transgendered person? Then you know, my bisexual, how can you be bisexual then? (P9)

The criteria for a 'true bisexual' are indeterminate, shifting and murky, but closure is a perpetual possibility. At any moment, unspecifiable, unruly attractions, desires and practices may disqualify one as 'truly bisexual'. The cultural expectation of equalizing sexual or gender proportions ('half and half') runs counter to the way in which most bisexual people view their identities. Most bisexuals do not report having both male and female partners simultaneously (Rust, 2000b), nor do most require both male and female partners, or experience equal or the same kinds of attractions to men and women (Rust 2000c). Identifying as bisexual often reflects attractions or capacities for attractions or actions, rather than their enactments.

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This re-mapping of bisexuality outside the contours of the gendered/genital is also firmly anchored in epistemological and political imperatives (Rust, 2000c):

> I hesitate to identify being bisexual as being action or intention or ethic or mentality or what have you because I've been through stages covering the gamut of that so I wouldn't want to exclude anybody . . . I think that choosing you know, to identify as bisexual or identifying as bisexual is as much political as sexual and emotional. (P4)

This resistance to being consigned to an easily understood and identifiable category stands alongside concerns about the absence of a political handle that could render bisexuality visible and viable:

> I think there's a lack of a movement, politically because I think bisexuals can be really invisible . . . Lots of people don't like it when you don't make a choice apparently and frankly this is how I am and it's the choice that I have made, that's how I've chosen to label myself and I'm not going to choose to be something I'm not. (P2)

Allegations invoking undecided 'fence-sitters,' or 'switch hitters'[5] (Yuen Thompson, 2000) are defended against by appeals to deliberate choice, on the one hand, and remaining true to one's essence, on the other. The disordering of classificatory regimes is seen as a potent political force that confronts society's 'very real fear of the collapse of a symbolic system: the heterosexual/homosexual dyad' (Eadie, 1999, p. 131):

> I think it's significant not to be taken as straight because a lot of our society is based on assuming that everyone is straight. So it's important to me politically not to be taken that way, just because I'm sleeping with a man because I'm in love with somebody who's of the opposite sex as I am. It just feels more important to wrestle with that than to just be pigeonholed. (P9)

Attempts to locate themselves simultaneously within and outside of erected sexual borders, the women call for 'models of a non-devouring relationship to difference' (Eadie, 1997, p. 131). While declaring relative 'comfort in other people's discomfort' (Yuen Thompson, 2000), they continue to ask 'who will be loyal to me? Which group/community/movement(s) will claim me as their member and comrade?' (p. 178):

> And I think that needs to be challenged, that people in particular in the gay and lesbian community aren't as accepting of bisexual people as they could be, or even should be . . . People who are marginalized because of their sexual orientation shouldn't immediately turn around and say, 'Oh, you're not bi, you just haven't made up your mind.' That's not validating what my choices are or what my orientation is at all. But trying to deny it, in fact, it's not validating anything. It's a rejection of what my choice is and what my orientation is. And that's quite wrong, and I'm not going to take it. So, for myself, being more and more out, I plan on challenging that more, challenging those assumptions. And without having to justify that I'm bisexual, I shouldn't have to explain that. (P11)

While the identity of bisexuality is adopted as an epistemological and a socio-political necessity, the women are equally adamant about the project of interrogating, re-defining and expanding the boundaries of the term. These accounts highlight the tension between 'the desire for bisexuality to be accepted as a coherent and stable sexual identity, but also

[5] The term 'switch hitter' is taken from baseball, where a batter who can switch-hit, or hit the ball from either the right or left side of the plate, is in a better position to get to first base, which is initial object of the game (Garber, 1995).

(ambivalently!) a recognition of the necessity and pleasure of such wavering' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 58). For Kaloski Naylor, wavering here refers to the ways in which the bisexual female subject is left suspended in feminist lesbian texts, unsure if it pertains to her. We are extending this concept here to describe the ways in which, in these accounts, there is a sustained (and alternately pleasurable and painful) ambivalence about simultaneously being counted (as part of the non-heterosexual category) and not being counted.

DISCUSSION

The women in this study exhort us to consider the pleasures and pains of bisexuality 'coming out of the "etc.," if only for brief and strategic moments' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 55). Their accounts can be understood as strivings to establish an alternative discourse around bisexuality. The bisexual label is alternately strategically adopted, resisted, questioned and modified. Neither the exclusivity of 'lesbian' nor the inclusivity of 'queer' capture the specificities of these bisexual women's identities, lives and experiences. The difficulties associated with producing such a discourse must be considered, and we outline three of these here. First, any such discourse is both potentiated and constrained by the organization of existing discourses. The organization of the discursive field around the politics of sexual identities is characterized by mutually exclusive either/or binaries. Thus, any alternative discourse, for coherence, must first establish itself to some extent in terms borrowed from the dominant order and, in so doing, risks reifying precisely those binary structures it seeks to undermine. As Hemmings (1999) powerfully asserts:

> To maintain a sense of my (privileged) outsider position, I must invest heavily in reproducing those binarisms, particularly as having 'nothing to do with me'. So I rail against the dualisms that I claim are 'keeping me down', preventing an adequate theory of my own *marvellous fluidity* from emerging triumphant. But of course, those 'dreadful binaries' are scarcely somewhere 'out there,' they inform and produce my identity as much as anyone else's. The conversations I have with myself, the operation of binaries within my psyche, the way I see the world, etc., all reconstruct what I claim to deconstruct. (p. 197)

The second difficulty in formulating an alternative discourse of bisexual identity is that rendering bisexuality 'visible' also risks fixing its meaning. The danger here is that it sets up its own regulatory regime, similar to the construction of lesbianism (or heterosexuality). That is, achieving an 'identity' through labelling and definition establishes it as oppositional (i.e. always already in opposition to something else), and thus risks simply reversing existing hierarchies and re-inscribing the very power relations it seeks to undermine (Bower, 1999). Not surprisingly, 'heteronormativity' (Wilton, 1996) may be transposed into another version of normativity, in this case 'binormativity'.

The third difficulty arises because accessing alternative discourses depends on changes in real conditions outside of the texts (Parker, 1992). Although often presented in this chapter as the hetero/homo oppositional binary, there are continuing clear social and material inequities between the two sides of this divide. That is, being allocated to, or identifying with, non-heterosexual categories is not the same as identifying as heterosexual. Heterosexism, as an ideologically rooted set of structures and practices, operates through negation, disparagement and oppression of non-heterosexual acts, relationship identities and communities (Herek, 1995). The manifold persistence of heterosexism can

be seen in continuing derogatory public attitudes, discriminatory social and legal practices, harassment and physical violence. Thus, there remains a pressing requirement for these marginalized others to continue to assert the legitimacy of their identities, albeit often at the expense of other sexual identities, including bisexuality. Accordingly, although both 'bisexuality' and 'queer' promise to transgress the categories of both gender and sexuality, the lesbian and gay communities remain invested in maintaining a significant discursive distance from heterosexuality, a distance that is not always or preserved (or served) by 'bisexuality'.

The predominant assertions about the utility and significance of a bisexual identity centre, in varying degrees, on one of three positions:

> (i) bisexuals have (potentially) a viable identity, and should seek to make themselves more distinct; or (ii) bisexuals are (primarily) either heterosexual or homosexual: there is no such things as bisexual identity; or (iii) bisexuals have neither a consistent and distinct identity, nor are they either straight or gay – instead bisexuality can be best understood as a perspective, though also containing within it the possibility and indeed necessity for a strategic and non-essential identity. (Kaloski Naylor, 1999, p. 54)

In our study, the accounts gesture towards the latter stance: 'critical heterogeneity' (Kaloski Naylor, 1999). This pivots on a desire to retain the 'fluidity' of bisexuality and its definitional uncertainties, while simultaneously retrieving bisexuality from invisibility and cultural invalidation. As one of our participants states:

> I think that bisexuality is the broadest possible, or it is a very broad identity, so I think that there is a possibility within bisexuality . . . if the visibility is increased with bisexual people, there is a possibility to expand that even further. And so I think there is a real chance to just break open that box that sex is kept in and to give it a wider definition and to make it a more, a wider context within the world that we live. So I think that bisexual people are probably identified with that idea, that sexuality is quite fluid and that can be experimented with and can be played with and that it just means sort of a wider space within our society. (P13)

Notably, 'fluidity' frequently appears as a 'metaphor for bisexuality,' although its meaning is not as apparent as its ubiquitous usage suggests (Herdt, 1999). Although bisexuality is figured 'as fluid presence in a landscape of monoliths' (Eadie, 1997, p. 9), 'routinized and elaborated, fluidity is itself a discourse, whose origins are firmly within the ambit of thought about the sexual' (Eadie, 1997, p. 10), the social, the gendered and the self. Eadie (1997) reminds us that the centrality of 'fluidity' in contemporary bisexual discourse is situated within a broader move in modernity towards 'relentless progress through time towards absolute self-realization' (p. 7). Thus, bisexuality as a specific socio-cultural iteration may not so much represent the 'epitome of "unrepressed" sexuality' (Eadie, 1997, p. 8), but rather, its valorization of 'fluidity' is consistent with modernity's rush to progressive propulsion. If 'change' and 'flux' are the currently exalted commodities, a politically radical reading of bisexuality requires that we do

> not stop with its celebration, but [that we] go on to ask exactly what conceptions of bisexuality are being celebrated, and whether they dislodge, or merely consolidate, other assumptions that perpetuate the dominant social order. (Eadie, 1997, p. 8)

The women in this study call for an epistemology and a politics of might be termed *pragmatic (in)coherence*. Bisexuality's resistance to definition, its refusal to assimilate into invisibility and its cultural incoherence within the binaries of contemporary sexualities,

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all signal its potential to question sexual politics and hetero-/homo-normativity. At the same time, 'bi discourse' (Ault, 1999) threatens to re-instantiate the very binaries it is intended to dismantle. As Ault (1999) reminds us:

> At the present, a great deal of tension exists between the emergence of a visible but ambiguous space in our sexual culture and the impetus for the construction of a well-bounded, highly defined structure as an easily identifiable hybrid between the familiar oppositional categories. (p. 185)

In our study, the *provisional* adoption of identity labels and their continued, judicious use is positioned as inevitable, albeit ultimately unsatisfying. The tension is this: On the one hand, such identity signs may enable marginal identities (including those as-yet-unnamed) to become or remain visible and *dis*order normative categories (Butler, 1991; Dollimore, 1991; Doty, 1993; Phelan, 1993). On the other hand, the challenge, as Phelan (1993) argues, is to explicitly resist characterizing such identities as *re*ordered, foundational or essential and instead recognize them as impermanent, perpetually in the process of 'becoming', and subject to questioning and disruption. The women in our study assert that the disruptive and denaturalizing potential of a bisexual identity is neither obvious nor guaranteed:

> In the contested space of the bisexual body, the ultimate conflict is not *between* categories but *about* them, and the move to define and defend the bisexual subject paradoxically seems the move most likely to undermine the radical, transformative potential of its indeterminacy (Ault, 1999, p. 185, our emphasis)

Importantly, these accounts remind us that the troubles and triumphs of bisexuality may be irreconcilable, as transformative moves that potentiate culturally intelligible identities simultaneously risk becoming epistemologically truncated. In other words, as Ault (1999) reminds us, while the adoption and use of specific categories (e.g. bisexual) and definable category markers (e.g. sexually attracted to both men and women) may render bisexuality more culturally comprehensible and viable (e.g. enabling the constitution of bisexual communities), retaining category borders (even permeable ones) does little to dismantle the dualistic and simplistic logic of hetero/homo and male/female.

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