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Queer Politics, Bisexual Erasure

Sexuality at the Nexus of Race, Gender, and Statistics

COMING OF AGE as a bisexual Latina femme in the 1980s, I was surrounded by lesbian-feminist communities and discourses that disparaged, dismissed, and vilified bisexuality. Those of us that enthusiastically embraced femininity or that actively sought out masculine presenting butches, were deemed perpetually suspect. Femmes were imagined as being always on the verge of abandoning the lesbian-feminist communities that nurtured us for the respectability and privilege that heterosexual relations might afford. The label bisexuality, for those that dared to claim it, was viewed as the apolitical cop-out for those that were not radical enough to fully commit to the implied lesbian practice of feminist theory. In the bad old days of lesbian separatist politics, bisexuality was attached to a yearning, not just for men, but for multifarious sexual pleasures deemed decidedly anti-feminist including desires for penetration, sexual dominance and submission, and the wickedly perverse delights of expressive gender roles. Decades later, discursive practices have shifted. The B is now routinely added to the label LGBT and the umbrella of queer provides discursive cover for sexual practices that fall outside the normative frameworks of heteropatriarchy. Queer as an expansive politicized identity has overshadowed discussions of who or what we do sexually, and everyone gets to wear high heels and lipstick.

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So why return to a consideration of bisexuality now, when LGBT is the established political nomenclature and queer purports to not care what or who you do sexually? I argue that the answer to that question lies at the nexus of race, gender, and statistics.

As a scholar of racialized sexuality, the archival objects I have felt most attracted to have long been narratives, images, and performances, texts brimming with fleshy frictions and interpretive potential. As a humanist, not trained in the world of variables, probabilities, and data collection, I have nevertheless started to appreciate the kinds of perspectives and arguments that statistical data might afford for scholars and activists committed to making a more just world.[1] Adding statistics to my polyamorous harem of intellectual playthings, offers fresh possibilities for gaining insights into feminist sexual politics and pleasures. As a methodological toy that I am still unsure about, statistics can offer perverse satisfaction, corroborating what I have long felt to be true. Michel Foucault (2003) names these deeply felt convictions "subjugated knowledges." These "knowledges from below" confirm "what people know on a local level," they are the feelings that carry "the raw memory of fights" (Foucault 2003, 7–8), in this case fights about the significance of sex for feminist politics. While the numbers and categories I present in this paper are admittedly slippery signifiers, seductive and tempting in their own distrustful ways, they provide statistical validation for what I have long suspected about the sexual practices of the queer worlds that surround me: much of what exists under the rainbow colored canopy of queer, is decidedly bisexual.

Let me begin by offering a definition and some statistics. Bisexuals are people who acknowledge in themselves the potential to be attracted romantically and/or sexually to others of varying genitalia, and/or varying genders, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree (Ochs 2014).[2] Now the statistics: In 2011, Gary Gates and the Williams Institute of University of California, Los Angeles, published a report entitled, "How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?" In it, they compiled information from nine different international surveys, five based in the

USA, and the others from Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Norway and concluded that relative to lesbians and gay men, bisexuals comprise slightly more than half of the LGB population.[3] Among women the numbers are much more conclusive and consistent, in eight of the nine surveys bisexual women outnumber lesbians, in some studies as much as two to one (Gates 2011, 1).[4] Equally relevant to my argument, another study found that over 40% of those that self-identify as bisexual, also identify as people of color (Human Rights Campaign et al. 2009, 9). Even as I remain skeptical of underlying assumptions that inform how statistics are derived and deployed to construct truth claims, numbers make visible configurations at the nexus of gender, race, and sexuality that discourse analysis alone has trouble capturing.[5] What the statistical data makes clear is that bisexuality functions as the unspoken and unrecognized category of sexuality lurking within affirmations of queer femininities. This paper interrogates that invisibility to ask, theoretically and politically, how might foregrounding bisexuality instantiate more nuanced attention to a wider range of sexual practices and pleasures and how might that attention help redirect queer political agendas toward feminist social justice issues and more expansive community alliances?

In explaining this absence of bisexual recognition in the presence of so much bisexual identification and practice, legal scholar Kenji Yoshino (2000) posits that both self-identified heterosexuals and self-identified homosexuals have overlapping interests that lead them into what he terms "an epistemic contract of bisexual erasure." He describes these interests as the stabilization of exclusive sexual orientation categories; the retention of sex as an important diacritical axis; and the protection of norms of monogamy (Yoshino 2000, 399). Pressing harder on Yoshino's analysis, I would add that bisexuality destabilizes not only exclusive sexual orientation categories, but also exclusive and distinct classification of binary gender. And even though the term bisexuality also functions to articulate non-sexual attractions and affinities, it never fully escapes its association with overt, unrestrained sexual desire. Not surprisingly, the attendant stigma of excessive sexual desire that clings to bisexuals is constructed through raced, classed, and gendered associations regarding normative

sexual behavior. Rather than erase sex as an axis of analysis, consideration of bisexuality illustrates how sex remains a politically salient, if inherently messy, critical imperative for queer theory and queer politics.

As a signifier, the queer in queer studies is a voluminous and imprecise way of naming creative modes of engaging intimacy, kinship, and community and there is a decided joy in its stubborn refusal to be pinned down. But the statistics on bisexuality suggest that this refusal also serves as discursive shelter for sexual silences that trouble community investments and foreclose possibilities for greater political alliances. Any cursory review of academic literature in queer theory will confirm suspicions that despite the statistical significance of bisexuality, and the ways it complicates and disrupt sexual norms around gender and desire, the specificities of its incarnation, pleasures, or politics rarely get addressed. While in social science literature, bisexuals frequently appear under the larger rubric LGBT, when bisexuals are not separated out in investigative data or critical analysis, we simply disappear (Ross and Dobinson 2013).[6] Instead, the majority of the scholarly attention to bisexuality exists in the critical literature on public health, mostly within the context of HIV and AIDS transmission, amplifying heterosexual and lesbian anxieties about sexual contamination caused by border crossers.

Like everything else having to do with sex, discourse around bisexuality is radically transformed when read through the transnational and intersectional lens of race, class, gender, and embodiment. While in celebrity circles bisexuality registers progressive *laissez-faire* sexual politics and endless possibilities within neoliberal economies of desire, when the category gets attached to racialized Others, the results are decidedly different. Rather than embracing a progressive sexual politics, bisexuality, at best, gets coded as an immature phase that one will eventually outgrow, or at worst, as the apolitical option for those too closeted, or too backwards, to fully affirm a gay or lesbian identity. For example, in dominant culture, bisexual diasporic African, Latin American and Arab men are frequently depicted as repressed sexual agents living on the "down-low," pre-modern subjects that are not fully capable of embracing their true gay identity, or as carriers of disease and

Anglo perversity. In *Global Divas*, Martin Manalansan (2003, 22) links the emergence of a universalizing gay identity – one that is allowed to be *exclusively* homosexual and exist outside familial and community networks – to ideas about the individuated bourgeois subject operating within an assumed European and American cultural cosmopolitanism in ways that occlude alternate understandings of non-western forms of sexuality. In her essay, "What's in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies," Clare Hemmings (2007, 18) goes further to demonstrate how bisexuality as a "desire for both men and women can thus only be narrated as a failure to become fully gay or lesbian, which is also to say fully transnational." Both locally and globally, bisexuality refuses both prescribed colonial sexual dictates, and global gay and lesbian identification predicated on white western cultural norms.

Turning to how bisexuality is expressed within the discourse of femininity exposes another equally disturbing trope where bisexual women are caught in the discursive vice grip between invisibility and hyper visibility. Bisexual women are seemingly everywhere visible in pornography, reality television, and music videos as spectacles in the service of male sexual pleasure, but denied the political and affective complexity and interiority of our own sexual urges. Stereotypes of bisexual women as sexually uncontrolled and ethically unrestrained intensify the discourse of racialized sexual excess and deviance that attaches to non-white femininities, even as they also echo the ways femmes have been shamed for our sexualized attraction to hyperbolic gender. In her essay, "Ruminations on *Lo Sucio* as a Latino Queer Analytic," Deborah Vargas (2014) uses the Spanish phrase *lo sucio* or "the dirty" to name those modes of sexualized behavior that refuse middle-class comportment and racialized respectability. She points to how,

> the analytic of *lo sucio* operates in conversation with three racialized discourses of difference, with attention to queer genders and sexualities: first, lewd, obscene, offensive hypersexual undisciplined bodies; second, darkened, suspect citizens perpetually untrustworthy, impure, and

> nonloyal to the state; and third, diseased "cultures of poverty" subjects overdetermined to fail to arrive to normative womanhood and manhood. (Vargas 2014, 716)

For minoriticized subjects, rather than signal modernity, progressive politics, or sexual liberalism, bisexuality is quickly aligned with the deviance, disease, indecipherability, and suspicion that Vargas codes under queer racialized difference. Similarly, when practiced by racialized Others, socially sanctioned forms of non-monogamy become evidence of non-western primitivism, "cultures of poverty," or sexual and racial degeneracy, rather than cultural practices that occur outside the norms of socially sanctioned western forms of sexual respectability. Polyamory, like bisexuality, is socially valued as modern and progressive only when it is aligned with the norms of neoliberal and colonial whiteness.

Let us face it – bisexuals, particularly bisexual women, still get shade, and the antipathy and anxiety that animates bisexual erasure works – alongside the assumption of whiteness – to limit queer political alliances with sex workers, immigrants, indigenous populations, and the poor that could align to improve the life chances of diverse populations impacted by racism, poverty, violence, police brutality, and inequality. While today we might hear less open vociferous vilification of bisexuality in mainstream LGBT political rhetoric, in the intimate gossip and cliquish conversation of many dyke spaces, claiming bisexuality – like coming out as a transman – can often lead to social ostracism and political suspicion. For femmes, bisexuality can activate butch anxieties about our sexual allegiances and desires, making us suspect both politically and erotically, even as so many butches are likewise attracted and intrigued by forms of masculinity that exceed the boundaries of woman (Sweeney 1995; D'Angelo 2016). Moreover, the stereotype that bisexuals are desirous of "anything that moves," that we are sexually needy, greedy, and demanding, reanimates the ways femmes have been shamed for the perceived intemperance of our sexual yearnings.[7] In this way, bi-phobia is invariably linked to our perceived inability to be monogamous, and therefore respectable feminine sexual citizens.

Even as bisexuals are begrudgingly allowed to share letters in the LGBT rainbow, we are only tolerated if we use the veneer of queer to omit any references to sexual pleasures that fall outside the gay and narrow. While other terms such as pansexual, polysexual, ambisexual, and fluid are also used to define sexual and romantic desires that exceed hetero- or homosexuality, and are seen by some as being more inclusive, like "queer" these terms are often used to mask certain sexual and social practices. I use the term bisexual because it is the most commonly understood term, the term used in the clinical literature, the term most commonly used disparagingly within the gay and lesbian community, and because it makes clear that my sexual practices and possibilities include not just butches and transmen, but also cis-gender men. Once claimed openly, bisexual women are either castigated for failing to conform to community standards of sexual behavior, or imagined to be privileged benefactors of patriarchy, sucking precious resources from "The Community," while enjoying all of the material and social benefits of heterosexuality, even if it is imagined that we only benefit from them half the time.

Once again, turning to statistics helps us tell a different story. One study found that, "compared with lesbians, bisexual women [...] had significantly lower levels of education, were more likely to be living with income below 200% of the [US] federal poverty level, and had more children living in the household" (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2010, 2257). Another Canadian based study found that "[b]isexual women were more likely than lesbians or heterosexual women to report poor or fair mental and physical health, mood or anxiety disorders, lifetime STD diagnosis, and, most markedly, life-time suicidality" (Steele et al. 2009, 353; see also Audrey Koh and Leslie Ross 2006). For suicidality – the numbers are just shocking, 45.4% of bisexual women have considered or attempted suicide compared with 9.6% of heterosexual women, and 29.5% of lesbians (Steele et al. 2009, 360). While it is understood that co-relation does not imply causality (we have no idea the extent to which bisexuality influences an individual's choice to end their life), and often statistics risk privileging one vector of analysis – bisexuality – separate

from other potential contributing co-variables such as poverty or race, these numbers nevertheless serve to refute arguments that suggest that bisexuals benefit from forms of social privilege and exist protected from the social harms that gays and lesbians might face. Rather than having the best of both worlds – study after study show that the life chances of bisexuals, particularly bisexual women, are more precarious than either heterosexuals or gays and lesbians. Therefore, a necessary correlate of my argument is finding and supporting ethical, community-supported ways of collecting data on gender and sexuality in order to parse out the specific ways that sexual behavior and identity impacts research outcomes beyond the categories of heterosexual and homosexual and male and female (Michaels 2016).

Statistics might provide the material reasons for paying greater attention to bisexuality, but the theoretical and political imperatives are equally as compelling. Here the B and the T come together in powerfully generative ways. Bisexuality complicates articulations of sexual desire and practice that are formed in excess of attachments to gender or genitals. Yet both transgender and bisexual people are frequently called out for supposedly undermining the political project of queerness by re-inscribing fixed understandings of a gender binary that queer is intent on questioning. However, rather than reify categories of gender, bisexuals and trans-identified people decenter attention to genitals as determinants of gender identity or sexual desire and rarely are gays or lesbians criticized for their attachments to men or women as supposedly stable categories. Bisexual and trans-identified people are also frequently disparaged for their ability to "pass" into legible social categories of privilege, be they heterosexuality or cis-gender. Yet, all sorts of people pass, try to pass, or fail to pass, into and out of categories of privilege or marginalization. Moreover, we know that "passing" as a Black man or as a Latina woman rarely comes with social benefits. Instead, the statistical data around bisexuals reveals that "passing," or refusing to pass, has dire psychic and material consequences for our ability to thrive physically and/or socially (Stotzer 2009).[8] Theoretically, bisexual and transgender identities not only challenge static binaries of gender and sexuality, they

also share nuanced relationships to temporal narratives that attempt to fix the time of gender and sexual self-knowing. And while bisexuality also refers to romantic attachments, it remains stubbornly attached to wayward passions that are not imagined as sustainable within the parameters of hetero- or homo-monogamous coupling, further marking us as bad sexual subjects unworthy of community or state recognition.

Even as transgender studies have made significant in-roads into transforming possibilities of queer theory, bisexuality remains continually under erasure, even within progressive queer studies circles. Yet, as definable gender categories start to become undone through the critical lens that transgender studies offers, our understandings of monosexual desire and sexual practices in relation to gender also need to be productively challenged. Very often, however, the B and the T come together not just politically and theoretically, but also erotically, as when sexual desires toward queer masculinities move across the bodies of butches, transmen, and cis-men in ways that exceed recognizable boundaries of lesbian.

Perhaps the resistance to more fully integrating the complexities of bisexuality into our scholarship is more aptly explained by Hemmings (2007, 14) who asserts, "bisexuality continues to be invisible [...] because that invisibility is fundamental to ensuring that lesbians and gay men remain the *de facto* subjects of queer studies," and I would add queer politics. Although bi-specific programming, funding, and research needs to be part of the larger queer activist landscape, the desire here is not to simply be more inclusive of bisexual identities as a discrete knowledge category, but instead to rethink how sexual regulation functions in both dominant heterosexual and seemingly progressive queer communities. In his essay, "Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionality," Roderick Ferguson (2008, 163) reminds us that in a moment of increasing institutionalization of racial and gendered difference, "sexuality finds itself within the realm of administration." Challenging the "epistemic contract of bisexual erasure," requires more than merely a commitment to naming bisexual specificity, it instead demands a renewed commitment to interrogating the social and political effects that the administration of sexual regulation instantiates.

For example, bisexuality confounds political asylum claims predicated on narratives of gay and lesbian identity as innate and immutable. Bisexuals who have experienced persecution in their countries of origin are routinely denied asylum because of the additional skepticism and suspicion surrounding their sexuality, suggesting that they are either attempting to deceive the court or are capable of suppressing their same-sex desires to avoid further persecution (Rehaag 2009; Marcus 2016). Similarly, attempts at prison reform that aim to separate out gay and trans populations as an effort to increase prisoner safety, sacrifice the safety of bisexuals and others, who are deemed insufficiently worthy of additional protections (Robinson 2011). For an issue like immigration, accounting for bisexuality and social practices of non-monogamy in migrant communities complicates political narratives of family reunification organized around a single unified and monogamous family as the state's selectively enforced standard of kinship. As some gays and lesbians manage to escape pernicious forms of sexual surveillance and control, and are increasingly receiving various forms of state recognition such as marriage, bisexuality unsettles attempts to make sexuality respectable.

There is, however, another equally compelling reason for insisting on the significance of bisexual identity and experience, doing so affirms a queer commitment to feminist, anti-racist political demands for greater sexual autonomy and self-determination in the presence of increasing state regulation and discipline. Rethinking the relevance of bisexuality reorients queer politics and community practices toward the administration of sexuality as another vector of racialized discipline. It brings issues like access to childcare, prisoner rights, and pleasure-affirming health care to the fore of queer political activism and turns a queer lens on racially gendered forms of reproductive labor. A queer sexual politics that is capacious enough to engage with the social and sexual complexity of bisexuality, focuses our attention on the regulation of gender and sexuality that continues to criminalize sex work, limit state-recognized forms of kinship, and authorize access to reproductive autonomy. Equally as important, it forces us to contend with a range of sexual and social

practices that complicate political positions organized strictly around definable binary sexual identities.

Unlike sexuality, that might seem to allow for clear distinctions of categorization, sex remains unruly; a moment of rupture that eludes an administrative ethos and the will to institutionalization that Ferguson (2008) documents. Unpacking queer, naming its constitutive parts and the ways these situate us in relation to social harms and privileges means being much more explicit about what, who, and why we do what we do sexually, as a way of investigating how sex functions as a regulatory force, and it means getting way more specific about what behaviors, communities, identities, and politics get subsumed, interrogated, or championed under the banner of queer. Coming out as a sex worker, as asexual, as kinky, as trans, or as bi might all be understood as queer, yet each exists within different proximities of violence and marginalization, different articulations of pleasure and vulnerability, making us legible and illegible to the state and each other as queer comrades in a world saturated with risk. As scholars, examining and responding to these risks requires research informed by an understanding of multiple and intersecting categories of difference, even as it necessitates a willingness to interrogate how those differences are produced and deployed. As activists, let us be brave enough to see each other in the fullness of our social and sexual complexities and bold enough to forge capacious political alliances in the service of greater social justice and more expansive sexual futures.

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NOTES

1. In the United States, statistics and data-driven arguments have been indispensible to social justice activists working on a range of issues including mass incarceration, police violence, access to higher education, environmental justice and other issues that disproportionally impact people of color and women.
2. This is an adaptation of Robyn Ochs's (2014) definition which states: "I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree."

3. The report states: “Among adults who identify as LGB, bisexuals comprise a slight majority (1.8% compared to 1.7% who identify as lesbian or gay)” (Gates 2011, 1). While the percentage of bisexual men is also quite high, gay men comprise slightly more than half of gay and bisexual men in seven of the nine surveys. It should be noted that these studies find 0.3% of the population identifies as transgender, but it does not tell us how many transgender folks identify as bisexual. The exclusion of transgender people in statistics is a recurring problem in the available data sets. See also, San Francisco Human Rights Commission’s Report, “Bisexual Invisibility” (2010).
4. In her book *Sexual Fluidity* (2009), Lisa Diamond dives more deeply in existing clinical research on sexual behavior and reported sexual orientation to argue that the difference between men and women relative to these phenomenon merit greater attention and more sophisticated analysis. She concludes: “Most important in terms of sexual fluidity, women show more discontinuous experiences of same-sex sexuality than do men. In other words, they report more changes in sexual attractions and behaviors over time and in different situations. Women are also more likely than men to report sexual behaviors or attractions that are inconsistent with their identity.” (Diamond 2009, 50)
5. For a more in-depth discussion of the challenges of compiling demographic data on LGBT populations, see Gates, “LGBT Identity: A Demographer’s Perspective” (2012). For a more detailed discussion of the limits and possibilities of statistics in relation to queer theory, see Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan (2015).
6. In studies on parenting for example, bisexual parents disappear in data where they are assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual depending on the gender of their partner. Researchers Ross and Dobinson (2013, 87) for example report searching, “the databases Medline, In Process Medline, Embase, CINAHL, PsycINFO, Gender Studies Database, Social Work Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts, and LGBT Life from start dates to August 2011[…]. Of the 422 total abstracts identified in this search, only 7 reported any findings or considerations specific to bisexual parents.”
7. *Anything That Moves: Beyond the Myths of Bisexuality*, was the title of a magazine initially published by the San Francisco Bay Area Bisexual Network.
8. A more in-depth investigation of how transgendered men and women fare relative to health, education, criminalization, suicidality, and violence exceeds the scope of this paper, see Rebecca Stotzer (2009), and Sari Reiser et al. (2014) for some preliminary findings. However, this is another example of how gender impacts perception and acceptance within queer communities; bisexual men are often valued as sexual partners for gay men, and transwomen. And even as transgender women are frequently dismissed, exocitized, or tokenized, rarely are they perceived as threats to the queer community in the ways bisexual women and transmen are perceived.