

Can We Fuck Our Way to Freedom?

Investigating the Potential of Bisexuality for a Feminist Theory of Sexual Pleasure.

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One of the most important things I learnt from this process was to have faith in myself and my own ideas. The beauty of the conference paper structure is that it encourages you to explore a topic that intrigues you but that you might otherwise have been afraid to delve into in a 'normal' academic setting, where we see ourselves as 'simply' students or receptacles of knowledge. By the time you stand up and give your presentation, you are surprised to find that you actually pass as a mini 'expert' on that particular slice of enquiry, having devoted the last few weeks to understanding it. The early submission of the draft abstract is helpful in forcing you to get a head-start and begin thinking and reading early on. The most satisfying aspect of the conference is to come together as a group at the end of the course, learn from each other's areas of interest and ask and answer questions on our presentations. And in my case I enjoyed the opportunity to legitimately say rude words in front of an audience.

Can we fuck our way to freedom?ⁱ Investigating the potential of bisexuality for a feminist theory of sexual pleasure.

My intervention is that theorising a femaleⁱⁱ bisexual standpoint can contribute to a feminist vision of sex and sexual pleasure. Firstly, I acknowledge that any attempt to formulate a feminist theory of sex and sexual pleasure is riddled with difficulty, and I would never suggest that there is ‘a’ singular theory of this kind we should aspire to. However, I am influenced in my vision of such a theory by Audre Lorde ([1978] 1984) who sees “the erotic” in women as a powerful source of energy for social change. In this paper, I build on Lorde’s assumption that sex and sexual pleasure have potentially transformative effects on other aspects of our lives, for example, in the arena of gender equality. At the risk of overstating or simplifying my case, I wager that the multiple ways women’s sexuality has been historically erased and demonised are a testament to the threat and potential of the erotic power that Lorde describes.

Secondly, I would like to briefly acknowledge the problematic colonial and developmental roots of bisexual theory. This can be seen in contemporary assumptions like ‘everyone is bisexual really’, or bisexuals are just sexually ‘immature’ and going through a ‘phase’, one day they will ‘grow up’ and ‘choose’ a gender. Theorists such as Merl Storr (1997) and Clare Hemmings (2007) have shown how bisexuality has been and still is used to demarcate so-called ‘inferior’ and ‘primitive’ behaviour. Through its association via Freud and subsequent sexologists with a ‘natural’, infant-like state of potential, bisexuality can be used to distinguish ‘backward’ societies and individuals from so-called ‘civilised’ ones. Bisexuality is therefore not a neutral term but carries with it the taint of a hierarchical, racialised logic of modernity. This is one reason why we must be cautious about assuming there’s anything inherently radical or transgressive about bisexuality. I do not win a ‘revolutionary’ prize for being bisexual, although I would like to, of course.

Thirdly, bisexuality could be seen as somewhat limited by being caught invariably ‘between’ the two more dominating poles of homosexuality and heterosexuality. These poles

hold bisexuality in tension – functioning as the unstable ‘in-between’ term that bolsters a fictional binary. In fact it could be argued that bisexuality’s potential as a radical ‘undoing’ of gender and sexual binaries is only true in so far as it keeps those binaries in place. Despite this, I believe bisexuality *can* provide ripe ground for feminist theorising, particularly where feminism aims to challenge the sex/gender system, and the “compulsory heterosexuality” that holds it in place (Rich 1980).

In this paper I focus on the figuration and vantage point of the ‘bisexual woman’. Her over-association with sex is a good starting point for a feminist theory of sexual pleasure. However, this viewpoint is inevitably partial and any further enquiry would be enriched by male, gender-neutral and trans perspectives. My thinking on this topic is indebted to many interesting conversations – and a few disagreements – with my female partner who is gay.

Phallocentric pleasures?

I agree with Steven Angelides (2006, p.126) that “the marginalization and erasure of bisexuality brings into relief the strained relationship between the fields of gay and lesbian history, feminism, and queer theory.” With this erasure in mind, it seems that exploring whether bisexuality can enrich feminist theorising on sex and sexual pleasure is pertinent.

By arguing that the bisexual woman is seen as promiscuous, I do not just mean promiscuous in the ‘slut-shaming’ sense that can potentially attach to all women, regardless of sexuality, although this is still fundamental. The bisexual woman’s promiscuity is also linked to her refusal to be either *clearly* lesbian or *clearly* straight; her potential ‘fraternisation’ with both men and womenⁱⁱⁱ makes her not just promiscuous, but potentially deceitful and unreliable as well. Elisabeth Däumer (1992, p.94) characterises this view of bisexual women as: “floundering, promiscuously and opportunistically, back and forth between people of either gender – exploiting heterosexual privilege on the one hand, while savouring, unrightfully, the honey of lesbian sisterhood on the other.” Similarly, Hemmings (1993, p.131) captures this when she argues that “to a large degree the fear of bisexual women is the fear of infiltration, the fear that the secrets of a lesbian subculture will be sold

to the dominant heterosexual culture at the price of a one-night stand.” These theorists recognise that bisexual women are not placed in an *equal* power dynamic between the two supposed ‘sides’ of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Rather, it’s that they can’t be trusted not to go to the dominant ‘straight’ side, to access male patriarchal power. Indeed, bisexual women’s refusal to repudiate men as potential partners is seen as suspicious, a sign of residual loyalty to the status quo. This idea forecloses the possibility that bisexual behaviour or identity could ever challenge patriarchal structures.

However, I think it is precisely the ambivalence of bisexual desire that opens up possibilities to challenge aspects of patriarchy. That is not to say that bisexuals never have a preference between men and women because I am sure many do. Rather, their refusal to see one gender or set of genitals as the *only* option for desire and sexual pleasure suggests an implicit challenge to phallocentric ideas about sex. Of course, there is nothing wrong with phallocentric ideas about sexual pleasure *per se*. The problem is rather the hold that this has over what we understand as ‘real’ sex – penetration, using a penis. Therefore men can be seen to have ‘real’ sex together, as long as it is penetrative, but women cannot.

To demonstrate the power of phallocentric ideas about sexual pleasure, two examples come to mind. The first is when I used to clear the backlog of junk mail at work. E-mails that exhorted recipients to ‘drive your girlfriend crazy tonight’, or ‘make your wife scream with pleasure’, made it clear what they were promoting.^{iv} As academics, we might dismiss this phallocentric obsession, but the continued success of this narrative should give us pause for thought. Clearly, many people are still, literally, buying into this idea.

Secondly, don’t we often assume that a bisexual woman will eventually leave a woman for a man, i.e. she is ‘actually’ straight? In a similar vein, we believe a bisexual man will also eventually leave a woman for a man, i.e. he is ‘actually’ gay? In other words: why would a bisexual man or woman have pussy, when they could have cock instead? It may sound crude, but this is a feminist question. What does this denigration of the female body as a potential source of sexual pleasure say about misogyny in Western society today?

Whether they like it or not, bisexual women are judged by their relationship or closeness to a penis – if you are close to one, we will bring your identity into question, because you are clearly straight and not bi. If you are far from one, we might also question your identity, because in identifying yourself as bisexual and not lesbian, you are signalling to us that you may betray us by going back to men at any time (Ault 1994, p.114). This phallocentrism of sexual pleasure creates particular problems for how bisexual women are viewed in some lesbian (feminist) communities. Some lesbians may have issues with women's bisexuality, because to them, "it seems to undermine all the progress lesbians have made toward making it difficult for men to reclaim and eroticize women's sexuality" (Armstrong 1995, p.209). Where a political lesbian identity emphasises an allegiance to feminism and an opposition to patriarchal control (Rich 1980), a bisexual woman's "refusal to pledge eternal allegiance to the cunt" (Armstrong 1995:199) could be seen to re-eroticise women-women sex for the benefit of straight men, thereby letting her (lesbian) sisters down. The symbolic force of phallocentricism creates anxiety for those faced with bisexual identity or behaviour, but in this case the anxiety can be blamed on bisexual women's supposedly 'innate' promiscuity.

Positioned thus, the bisexual woman's apparent 'choice' between privileged and acceptable heterosexuality and coveted lesbian sisterhood is loaded with significance. I say 'apparent', because choice implies an agency over sexual desires that none of us possess. I agree with Shiri Eisner (2013, p.150) who argues that "the bisexual woman... creates a form of resistance to patriarchy... because men's access to her is not secure." However her following point is that bisexual women have a better vantage point to "negotiate power and hierarchy [because] they do not *require* [men] for relationships" and can therefore "choose interactions with [them] on their own terms" (ibid., p.152). This seems problematic to me. Even though my pool of potential partners is greater, I don't believe I'm any more 'free' or agentic being bisexual than someone who defines as 'straight' or 'gay'. I no more 'chose' to fall in love with my current partner, than I 'chose' the compulsory heterosexuality that defined the first 23 years of my life.

The Double Agent

I have shown how the perceived ‘choice’ of the bisexual woman makes us anxious, infused with the phallogentric symbolism of what it means to be on either ‘side’, ‘for’ or ‘against’ patriarchy. The apparent fear that bisexual women evoke can be usefully explored through Hemmings’ (1993) concept of the bisexual “double agent” and Eisner’s (2013) concept of the bisexual “femme fatale”. Hemmings (1993, p.129) describes the double agent as someone who “appears to be part of one camp but is also strongly identified with another. The implication [being] that one can never be sure where her allegiance lies.”

To illustrate the current valence of this representation, the character of Kalinda Sharma, from the popular US television series *The Good Wife*, is helpful. Kalinda works as an investigator for a law firm, so she is literally a double agent. As a character she’s sharp, intuitive, and very good at her job, which requires finding out hidden information. She is depicted as powerful and capable of inflicting damage and violence. However, she is also bisexual, and her sexuality is represented as a key part of her job’s success. Kalinda uses her (bi)sexuality in manipulative ways to get the information she needs, for example from colleagues Lana and Cary who often work on ‘opposing’ sides of legal cases. Kalinda perfectly fits the picture of the duplicitous “double agent” as described by Hemmings (1993, p.130), although her character was created more than two decades later: she “knows both sides”, but is amoral in that she will “sell her services to the highest bidder”. It’s always hard to tell where her loyalty lies. Everyone else in the series is an ‘open book’ to Kalinda, but she herself is hard to read. Furthermore, the racialisation of her character begs the question of how Kalinda “takes up space” as a raced, gendered and sexual subject (Hemmings 2002, p.46), particularly in regards to bisexual theory’s colonial legacy.

Eisner’s (2013, p.153) trope of the bisexual femme fatale is similarly duplicitous, and applicable to Kalinda. She “is a riddle because she carries knowledge that neither the characters nor... the viewers possess. Her full knowledge of ‘both worlds’ indicates missing

knowledge on [the] part of the other (monosexual) characters.” Eisner’s theory suggests that a fear of bisexuals in terms of contamination and betrayal is not just grounded in stereotypes, but also in assumptions about bisexuals’ apparently fuller knowledge of sex. I argue that this idea of ‘missing’ knowledge relies on the segregation of sexual cultures and sexual practices along the lines of sexuality. Just as the slurs ‘you’re so gay’, or ‘you must be a lesbian’ police heterosexuality, and keep our performance of masculinity and femininity intact, a bisexual who sleeps with both men and women threatens this gay/straight divide in that they are able to reveal the ‘secrets’ of the other ‘side’. Why is this so scary? Surely, such a ‘transfer’ of sexual knowledge from gay, to straight, and back again, could be a positive thing for sexual pleasure?

In fact, in many cases, the kinds of sex that men have with men, and women have with women, are also the kinds of sex that men and women could have together. But they don’t, on the whole. Why not? Intimate knowledge of genital anatomy could be one aspect of this. If you have a cunt or a cock, you are perhaps more likely to experiment with what makes a cunt or a cock feel good, or at least feel more confident about doing so. If you engage in penetrative sex, it might be easier to penetrate someone with a cock than it is to penetrate them with your fingers or a sex toy, although not necessarily, and it might be easier to penetrate a vagina than it is to penetrate an anus, although not necessarily.

Of course, genitals do not equal gender. I might be a man with a cunt, or a woman with a cock. Many scholars have pointed out the dangers in theorising sexual pleasure as an aim or ‘starting point’ (Dollimore 1996; Pereira 2003) and Eisner (2013, p.22) has rightly critiqued a cissexist emphasis on genitals in theorising bisexuality. Even so, I think that this *differentiation of sexual cultures* can be usefully explored through a power analysis of gender and sexuality. If ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ erogenous zones are broadly the same, but our sexual practices are split along lines of sexuality, what can this tell us, if anything, about the relationship between gender relations and the negotiation of sexual pleasure? Is it possible, and this is now being researched in sexology studies (McClelland 2010, p.668) that it might

be easier, in some instances, to negotiate sexual pleasure along same-sex lines? Or, is it simply that, freed from phallogentric heteronormativity, same-sex couples have no other choice but to focus more on pleasure?

Indeed, a variety of power differentials come into play during sex, including 'race', class, age and ability. One could argue that unequal power dynamics are erotic in themselves, hence the popularity of BDSM. But, if there *is* a relationship between sexual pleasure and gendered power dynamics, then does more pleasure in the bedroom rely on more equality outside of it, or can it go the other way? Can fantastic, reciprocal sex create more equal relationships in society more broadly? If so, where does a contemporary project of sexual pleasure fit within feminism today, if anywhere?

I return to Lorde. She argues that upholding a standard of excellence in the bedroom can lead us to upholding a standard of excellence in every other aspect of our lives. Though there is nothing revolutionary about bisexual identity or behaviour itself, is it possible that, in not adhering to a hierarchy of gender or sexual practice, it can tell us something revolutionary about sexual pleasure?

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ⁱ An inversion of a Pat Califa quote from *Macho Sluts* which states: "I do not believe we can fuck our way to freedom", used by Elisa Glick (2000: 19) in her article 'Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory and the Politics of Transgression'.

ⁱⁱ I am aware of the essentialised pitfalls of using the word ‘female’ in contemporary feminist analysis, however it makes more sense in this instance than ‘woman/women’ because (to me) it emphasizes the abstract nature of this task.

ⁱⁱⁱ I don’t mean to suggest that there are only ‘two’ genders, but use this binary to illustrate my argument in this case.

^{iv} Forms of Viagra or penis-enlargement products.