

## **Warning Concerning Copyright Restrictions**

The Copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyright material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction not be "used for any purposes other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

## NOTES

1. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), edited with an introduction by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1982), 77-78, 81-82.
2. The effects of gender difference made the experiences of black women in slavery distinct from those of black men; Douglass's narrative cannot therefore be considered as representing the life of the female slave. The best example of the female slave's narrative is Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* ([1861], ed. Jean Fagan Yellin [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987]).
3. It is worth stating explicitly that antiblack racism has never been a purely southern institution in the United States. The South does, however, offer the clearest examples of the blatant control that characterizes the relation of white to black in the nineteenth century. As my discussion moves chronologically into the twentieth century, the differences between North and South will largely fall away.
4. This history is usefully summarized in Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 167-205.
5. For further elaboration on this idea, see Joel Kovel, *White Racism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

From *Homophobia: How We ALL Pay the Price*  
 ed. by Warren J. Blumenfeld, Boston: Beacon Press,  
 1992 pp. 67-75

4

## Moving beyond Binary Thinking

ROBYN OCHS  
 AND MARCIA DEIHL

All the essays in this anthology address, in some way, how heterosexism and homophobia hurt all of us. Heterosexism denies the reality of bisexuals as well as those people whose identity or behavior is exclusively homosexual. Since homophobia is directed at even the *appearance* of "gayness" in any of us, biphobia and homophobia are often indistinguishable. Indeed, it can be argued that fear of bisexuals is due to homophobia. This is often the case. However, there is an additional component to biphobia that is unlike homophobia and that will be a main focus of this essay. It is our belief that these unique aspects of biphobia harm us all.

Sexual definitions have become polarized. We think of our sexuality in terms of opposites; male/female, straight/gay. This polarization is limiting, causing us to "choose sides" and be loyal to "our team." This focus on the differences between us, rather than on our commonalities, can prevent us from being true to ourselves and to our own feelings and desires. When we do behave in ways that are against the "rules," or when we become friends or lovers with others who violate these rules, we often feel compelled to remain silent about our deviation.

Consider how you would feel if you found out that a close friend identified as bisexual. If you are gay or lesbian, would you feel mistrustful, deserted, or betrayed? If you are heterosexual, would you immediately think either, "Is he/she coming on to me?" (if you are of the same sex) or, "What about AIDS? I can't possibly consider sleeping with him/her now!" (if you are of differ-

ent sexes). Perhaps your response would be some subtler, "liberal" version. Are these reactions harmful to you? This essay will define *bisexuality* and discuss the ways in which biphobia oppresses bisexuals and how it hurts heterosexuals as well as gays and lesbians.

### What Is a Bisexual?

Everybody knows about bisexuals—they're confused ("just a stage you're going through . . . you'll eventually choose . . . you're not secure in your mature heterosexuality yet . . . you're afraid of the other sex and the same sex is less threatening . . ."); they're sex maniacs ("They will do it with anyone, anytime"); they're shallow ("They can't commit themselves to any one person or even any one sex for a long-term deep relationship . . . they're typical 'swingers' . . . they're fickle . . .").<sup>1</sup>

These descriptions of bisexuals are fairly typical responses. If you ask someone what a bisexual is, they will often envision a married man or woman who has secondary flings with people of the same sex. In the gay and lesbian community, the stereotype is usually associated with betrayal. The 1983 "April Fools" edition of Boston's *Gay Community News* featured a cartoon about a jilted lesbian who had been left by her bisexual lover for a man. The next time, she was prepared with "bisexuality insurance."<sup>2</sup>

This cartoon reflects the common false stereotype that bisexuals are more lacking in compassion when we end relationships than are heterosexuals, lesbians, or gay men. Sometimes bisexuals do leave women for men. We also leave men for women, women for women, and men for men. And, just as often, we are left. Some of us are monogamous and tenacious; others are promiscuous and restless.

There are many types of bisexuals. For some, bisexuality may be a phase. Others have always been attracted to both women and men. There are historically "technical" bisexuals, who end up as primarily gay, lesbian, or heterosexual but who may not choose to be known as bisexuals. There are also many people who continue

to identify as bisexual despite celibacy or a lifelong monogamous commitment to one partner.

### What Is Biphobia?

Biphobia is fear of the other and fear of the space between our categories. Sometimes it manifests itself as homophobia (fear and hatred of homosexuality) and heterosexism (institutional or organizational discrimination against homosexuals), other times as fear on the part of gay and lesbian communities. Our sexual categories have long been founded on the illusion that there are two separate and mutually exclusive sexual identities: heterosexual or homosexual. This ethic states that you are either one or the other, that those who are not like you are very different, and that you need not worry about becoming like them. Biphobia, like homophobia, is prejudice based on negative stereotypes. It is often born of bigotry, but it is sometimes simple ignorance.

ROBYN: I showed a coworker a photograph of a friend with her husband and mentioned that she was a member of my bisexual support group. My coworker responded, "How does her husband feel about sharing her? He must be really tolerant." I asked what she meant. She answered, "Well, tolerating her seeing other people and all that." I informed my coworker that my friend was in a monogamous relationship. She looked confused.

### Fear from the Heterosexual World

In the course of our activism, we have come across a number of bisexual men who have described to us their pain and confusion about coming out. One friend told us how afraid he is to come out as bisexual to women he is interested in because many of them will reject him as a potential partner if they know he is bisexual. He said, "What kind of choice is that—honesty or rejection?"

We all lose when we judge a man simply by saying he is bisexual rather than judging him on the basis of who he is. If our concern is AIDS, not all bisexual men have engaged in unsafe sex. If

our concern is monogamy, not all bisexual men are nonmonogamous. Similarly, not all heterosexual people are at low risk for AIDS, and not all are monogamous. We all lose when we fail to get beyond our stereotypes. We will all gain when we are not punished for our honesty. In a world free of biphobia, we would not have to choose between honesty and rejection.

ROBYN: I came out to my brother several years ago, and he seems on many levels to accept my bisexual identity. Recently, when I was visiting him, however, he took special care to request that I not discuss being bisexual in front of his roommates.

Bisexuals do exist. Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey agree that there is a spectrum of sexuality from "purely" gay to "purely" straight.<sup>3</sup> Heterosexuals who are brought up in a homophobic environment will often react to bisexuality as they react to homosexuality. But with bisexuality there is the added dimension of potential identification with the "straight half" of a bisexual person. They may be even more threatened because they see that the "other" is not quite as different as they had believed or would prefer. A formerly safe fantasy could turn into a very real possibility.

If homophobic conditioning is keeping some straight people from accepting or acting on their gay fantasies, they will probably be biphobic. If they are living a heterosexual life-style for negative reasons ("It's sick and perverse and sinful to act on any of my homosexual feelings"), they will probably be threatened by others' bisexuality. If they are identifying as heterosexual for positive, inner-directed reasons, their chances of being threatened are lessened. Some of our best allies are secure heterosexual people.

Bisexuality defies old categories and demands new responses. Historically, bisexuals' status has simply been one of nonexistence. In scientific studies and in the media, we are labeled as either heterosexual or homosexual, depending on our external appearance. In a love story about a man and a woman, who considers that one or both of the characters might in fact identify as bisexual? In literature and in popular culture, bisexuality is rarely presented. When it does appear, it is often within a conflict situation, usually

involving privileged white men, as in movies like *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Torch Song Trilogy*.

The fears expressed about us are largely based on ignorance rooted in our invisibility. Bisexuals, especially bisexual women, who are not middle class or rich, traditionally "beautiful," able bodied, or white are invisible. Thus, it is hardly surprising that, when *Newsweek* finally got around to publishing a feature story on bisexuality, the principal focus was on the secretive married bisexual men who are passing AIDS along to their wives.<sup>4</sup> Bisexuals fare little better in the gay community. We hear in conversation that bisexual women are "really lesbians who want access to heterosexual privilege" and that they are "really heterosexuals who want access to the support and excitement of the lesbian community."

### Fear on the Part of the Gay and Lesbian World

MARCIA and ROBYN: A friend of ours had been active in the lesbian community for several years. Then she fell in love with a man. When her lesbian "friends" found out, they ostracized her and held a "funeral" for her.

Sexual minority communities are under siege, especially in this age of AIDS. People under constant siege often band together to form a united front. Consequently, formerly gay and lesbian people who "turn bi" are perceived as regressing into the "safer" haven of heterosexuality and are often met with feelings of betrayal and anger. These reactions are unfair.

A recurring theme in Robyn's lesbian relationships has been the voiced fear on the part of her lover that Robyn would eventually choose to leave her for a man. After all, so much of mainstream society is structured to encourage and support heterosexual relationships. Social life, the media, and the legal institution of marriage (with its economic benefits of corporate health insurance, other "family plans," and inheritance laws) are all based on the configuration of the heterosexual couple. Therefore, how could a lesbian lover possibly "compete" with the odds so stacked against them?

Society's encouragement of heterosexuality and discouragement of homosexuality is very real. However, Robyn also felt that there was a certain amount of internalized shame due to homophobia at work here too: the feeling that whatever her lover had to offer her and whatever they had together could not possibly outweigh the external benefits of being in a heterosexual relationship. There is an underlying assumption there that anyone who has the choice will ultimately choose heterosexuality, that lesbians and gay men choose homosexual relationships because they are unable to be heterosexual. However, this assumption is belied by the number of bisexuals who have chosen homosexual relationships.

Some say that bisexuals are only half oppressed. In the words of one bisexual woman, "I have had rocks thrown at me when I was out with a woman. I have had my ex-husband threaten to sue me for custody of my children because I have had lesbian relationships. I have been kicked out of my apartment by a homophobic landlord. Well, I am *sick and tired* of hearing lesbians tell me that, because I am bi, I am not oppressed."<sup>5</sup>

The public is becoming more aware that many famous historical figures were gay. Yet many of these "gay" and "lesbian" people behaved bisexually. Virginia Woolf, Eleanor Roosevelt, Sappho, Christopher Isherwood, James Baldwin, Vita Sackville-West, Colette, and Kate Millet are embraced by lesbians and gay men; modern-day bisexuals working common jobs and bearing ordinary names are not. If we want to add *and bisexual* to a gay and lesbian organization's title, we are often called intruders.

Like *some* straight people who may be ignoring their gay inner signals and needs, *some* gay men and lesbians may be repressing their bisexuality. They may fear the loss of their gay identity and their closest friends if they act on these desires. Like those who are secure heterosexuals, people who have chosen positively to be gay or lesbian tend to be supportive of bisexuality in others.

### Biphobia Kills the Spirit

The denial of our existence and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes prevents many bisexuals from proudly claiming their

identity. Many people are bisexual. Whether they claim that label or not, they behave bisexually as they live their lives in the gay, lesbian, or straight communities. Therefore, any denial of our existence and any outright oppression of us is damaging. Polarized notions of gender and sexuality limit everyone. Margaret Mead documented that societies with the greatest difference between male and female roles exhibit the greatest violence toward women.<sup>6</sup> Societies that have less explicit gender-specific roles tend to be more peaceful and egalitarian in general.

By presenting gender or sexual orientation as polar opposites and pretending that people are only one or the other (exclusively heterosexual, or exclusively homosexual, or exclusively "feminine," or exclusively "masculine"), we are denying the fact that there are many points on the spectrum in between. People are then forced more toward one extreme than is natural for them. This limitation leads to denial of an inner need, which can only hurt the spirit, contributing to a stifled emotional life or, in more extreme cases, to drug use, mental illness, or even suicide. Peter Alsop's song "It's Only a Wee Wee" says it well:

*As soon as you're born grown-ups look where you pee,  
And then they decide just how you're s'posed to be.  
Girls pink and quiet, boys noisy and blue,  
Don't it seem like a dumb way to choose what you'll do?*

#### Chorus

*It's only a wee-wee, so what's the big deal?  
It's only a wee-wee, so what's all the fuss?  
It's only a wee-wee and everyone's got one—  
There's better things to discuss! . . .*

*. . . The grown-ups will watch every move that you make,  
"Boys must not cry. Girls must bake cake."  
It's all very formal and I think it smells,  
Let's all be abnormal and act like ourselves!*<sup>7</sup>

Anyone can be punished for "inappropriate" gender behavior. A woman truck driver of any sexual orientation may be subjected to antilesbian remarks. If a lesbian admits to sleeping with a man,

she may be shunned by former friends. If any man—gay, straight, or bisexual—is uninterested in sports, enjoys attending the opera and ballet, happens to lisp, or use his hands flamboyantly, he is in danger of being taunted or even physically attacked. His actual sexuality is less important than his perceived sexuality. When others see how these people are punished, they will restrict their own behavior to avoid censure. Thus, even the “good” members of a community are emotionally limited by the punishment of the overt nonconformists.

If we, as women, walk down the street in the United States holding hands with a man, people will assume that we are straight. If we walk down the street holding hands with a woman, people will assume that we are lesbians, and we may well be subjected to disapproving glances. We aren't shifting; others' perceptions are. We want to be defined not by our behavior but by our essence. We do not get up every day and think, “Should I be straight or gay today?” We are, every day, in all situations, bisexual. Each of us is a living yin-yang symbol, perhaps emphasizing one aspect now but with the seed of the other always present.

If bisexuality were accepted, rigid gender-role expectations would be weakened. Whether one was gay, straight, or bisexual would be less relevant to any activity, way of dressing, or choice of occupation. Bisexuality blurs these gender lines just as much, *not half as much*, as homosexuality does. Plus it adds another choice: the gender of our sexual partners. A movement that calls itself progressive must accept true diversity.

### Conclusion

All of us—bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals—have the right to exist and to choose whom we will love. In answer to the question, “Are you gay or straight?” bisexual activists have begun to challenge this artificial polarization and create a lifetime identity that need not change with the gender of our lovers. Honesty demands flexibility, and by dissolving the barriers created by old static categories, all of us can focus less on our differences and more on our common goals of political empowerment. Bisexuals

are not fence sitters. There *is* no fence. Instead of a fence, we see a field, with mostly lesbian and gay people on one side and mostly heterosexual people on the other. Since we *are* men and women, since we *are* “gay” and “straight,” we are in the middle. Sometimes we travel toward one end or the other—in a day, in a year, or in a lifetime.

### NOTES

1. Marcia Deihl, interview in *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, ed. Warren J. Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond (Boston: Beacon, 1988).
2. *Gay Community News* 10, no. 36 (1 April 1983).
3. S. Freud, “Infantile Sexuality,” in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938). A. Kinsey, W. B. Pomeroy, and C. E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948).
4. “Bisexuals and AIDS: The Dangers of a Double Life,” *Newsweek* (13 July 1987), 44.
5. Remarks by a participant in Robyn Ochs' workshop “Bisexuals and Lesbian Women: A Dialogue,” conducted at the 1990 Bisexual Conference, San Francisco, 23 June 1990.
6. Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1935).
7. Peter Alsop, “It's Only a Wee Wee” (1981). Permission to quote the lyrics given by Flying Fish Records, Inc.