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## **Through Rainbow-Colored Glasses: Overcoming Bisexual Oppression through LGBTQ+ Press**

**Sofia Stechschulte**

Even as gay men and lesbians became more accepted in mainstream culture, bisexuals have remained targets of stubborn societal discrimination; however, they have also been ostracized within the LGBTQ+ community itself. An analysis of LGBTQ+ media reveals how and why this internal resistance persisted and what led to its eventual weakening.

One of the first to suggest that a spectrum of sexuality even existed was Alfred Kinsey (a rumored bisexual himself) in his 1948 publication, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*.<sup>1</sup> Most notably, this body of research included the first publication of the now commonly recognized “Kinsey Scale,” which placed sexuality on a spectrum with scores from one through seven. At a time when all homosexuality was still considered an undesirable pathological condition in the United States—one that was constricted to the Black and white, the gay and lesbian—the concept of a sexual spectrum was monumental; however, in terms of bisexual acceptance and visibility, the introduction of the Kinsey Scale did little but introduce this idea.

Neurologist Charles Gilbert Chaddock coined the term “bisexual,” referencing sexual attraction to both men and women, in his 1892 translation of *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Just as Kinsey’s research challenged the rigid distinction between gay or lesbian but failed to further bisexual acceptance, introducing the term “bisexual” did little initially, as all forms of non-heterosexuality were rarely discussed in American culture and press. The near silence on bisexuality undoubtedly served as both a cause and effect of bisexual discrimination. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia, PA, London, UK: W. B. Saunders Company, 1948).

also difficult to trace the role of bisexuals in the earlier stages of the queer rights movement because they were unintentionally lumped in with either gay men or lesbians. Other distinctions were thought to detract from the movement as a whole.<sup>2</sup> American society already had great difficulty addressing gay men and lesbians—why confuse the public further by introducing a more fluid and ambiguously-defined sexuality? For example, the vice president of the Society for Human Rights, the first known male homophile organization (founded in Chicago in 1924), was bisexual—and married with children.<sup>3</sup> He kept his bisexuality a secret, as the organization did not allow bisexuals to hold membership, operating under the assumption that bisexuals would only be half-committed to the cause. This special form of discrimination shaped the perception of bisexuality within the LGBTQ+ community and beyond, setting the stage for what became the bisexual rights movement.

The 1960s proved to be a turning point, as gay and lesbian political activist groups began to flourish. The success of the gay rights movement started to create space for bisexual activism as well. The 1970s marked the introduction of the modern bisexual movement: bisexual media would become more prevalent, but how was this movement perceived in other LGBTQ+ media and the greater LGBTQ+ community? How did opinion shift from a negative to a more accepting outlook? Jillian Todd Weiss examined this transformation in an article in the 2003 issue of the *Journal of Bisexuality*. In the piece, entitled “GL vs. BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia Within the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Community,”<sup>4</sup> Weiss examined the history of the LGBTQ+ movement and its accompanying political and psychological development, as well as past mainstream media, to

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<sup>2</sup> Brett Genny Beemyn, “Bisexual Movements,” *GLBTQ Archive* (2004): 1–4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jillian Todd Weiss, “GL vs. BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia Within the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Community,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 3, no. 3–4 (December 2003): 25–55.

reveal the nature, origin, and progression of biphobia. She stated that “biphobia and transphobia are not good descriptions of the phenomenon of heterosexist prejudice against bisexuals and transgenders, and are particularly inappropriate in the case of heterosexist prejudices within the GLBT community. I suggest that gays and lesbians who discriminate against bisexuals and transgenders are reacting to political and social pressures, not psychological ones.”<sup>5</sup> While illuminating, this piece failed to fully capture the metamorphosis of dialogue within LGBTQ+ media itself, specifically in reaction to these “pressures.”<sup>6</sup> This paper reveals some of these dynamics by looking at the inception and progression of dialogue in LGBTQ+ media in an effort to understand the motives for bisexual discrimination and erasure within the queer community—and its turnaround.

The 1970s comprised an era of “bisexual chic,” as popular media began to acknowledge the bisexuality of more mainstream musicians and artists, like Judy Garland and Elton John (who first came out as bisexual before coming out as a gay man).<sup>7</sup> During this same time, many of the early bisexual groups were founded—most focused on social spheres, though a few did venture into political territory. In March of 1978, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, founding members of the first lesbian rights group, the Daughters of Bilitis, said of bisexuality: “In the 1960s, one of our bisexual friends complained bitterly to us that she felt left out by both gays and non-gays.” They responded, “We said bis should organize.”<sup>8</sup> They explained the tensions bisexuals experience among gays, who “feel that bisexuals are really gays who are copping out,” and among heterosexuals, who also assume bisexuals are gays or are “arrested in their sexual development” and could be “easily

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robyn Ochs and Liz Highleyman, “Bisexual Movement,” in *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Bonnie Zimmerman, (New York, NY: Garland, 2000), 112–4.

<sup>8</sup> Martin, D., & Lyon, P. *Gays and Bisexuals: A Natural Alliance*, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society Manuscript, 4 (March 1974).

changed through therapy to their true nature—heterosexuality.”<sup>9</sup> Lyon and Martin emphasized that bisexuals and gays are on the same side—that together they must work toward understanding each other and heterosexuality as a part of human sexuality.

Bisexuals did as Lyon and Martin suggested: they organized. Many of the budding bisexual groups in the 1970s also created their own literature, no doubt in an effort to educate and inform the growing bisexual community and others in the greater LGBTQ+ circle. The first specifically bisexual advocacy organization, the National Bisexual Liberation Group, was founded in New York City in 1972.<sup>10</sup> It began publishing the first bisexual newsletter, *The Bisexual Expression*, in 1976, closing publication in 1984.<sup>11</sup> Though its run was short, *The Bisexual Expression* paved the way for other bisexual publications.

In 1983, shortly before *The Bisexual Expression* shut down operation, bisexual activist Robyn Ochs helped found the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network. In September of that same year, she took on the role of editor and published their first newsletter, *Bi Women Quarterly* (the newsletter published—and continues to publish—material on a wide variety of topics, including popular culture, coming out stories, and general information on bisexuality).<sup>12</sup> The second issue of *Bi Women*, published in January of 1984, contained a variety of logistical blurbs and general information about their organization.<sup>13</sup> Most notably, it included a cartoon from the *Gay Community News (GCN)* and an accompanying response letter from another bisexual advocacy group, the BiVocals, along with its own reaction. The cartoon, published in *GCN*’s “April Fools’ Wraparound” issue, was nothing less than controversial. It read as an advertisement for “bisexuality

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>10</sup> “The U.S. Bisexual Movement: a #BiWeek History Lesson,” *GLAAD*, 10 April 2019.

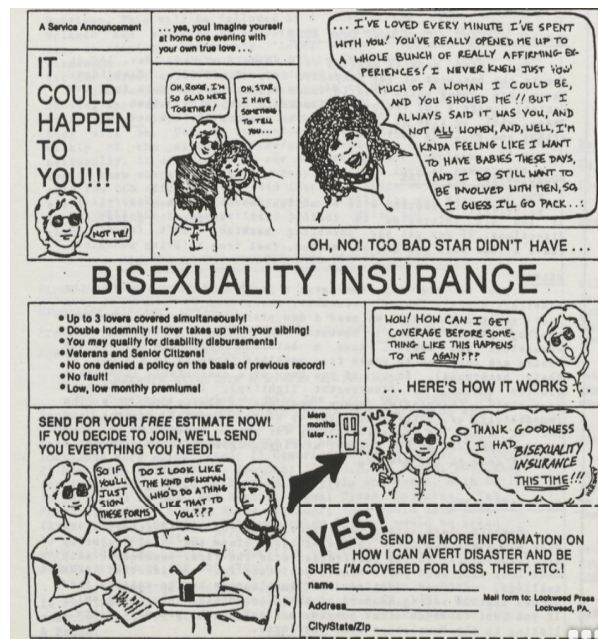
<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robyn Ochs and Marylene Altieri, “Celebrate Bisexuality,” *Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University*, 27 Oct. 2016.

<sup>13</sup> “Gay-Identified Bisexuals,” *Harvard Library* <<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:27773203?n=5>> (5 March 2020).

insurance,” depicting a woman explaining her desire for children and men to her female partner, effectively breaking off the relationship: “I guess I’ll go pack,” it reads.

The cartoon also included the benefits of the insurance in bullets, such as “up to 3 lovers covered simultaneously!” and “double indemnity if lover takes up with your sibling!” While it was included in an April Fools’ issue and could have been played off as a joke, the BiVocals took it seriously, and rightfully so. Bisexuals could not afford the perpetuation of flawed stereotypes, much less at a time when their position—or rather, membership—within the LGBTQ+ community and American society were already in question (not to mention *GCN*’s precedent of practically ignoring bisexuality. Enough was enough).



In their letter, the BiVocals explained that “the joke [seemed] to be directed not to but against bisexuals: most bisexuals would not find it particularly funny and most of us have found it hurtful.” The obvious conclusion, they stated, was that *GCN* believed “bisexuals [were] not considered part of the gay community”—a dangerous proposition, indeed. But the BiVocals were not finished. Their letter went further, as they discussed the discrimination they

faced from lesbians, in particular, who believed bisexuals should be ostracized because of their unwillingness to join lesbian political initiatives or “commit themselves to a lesbian lifestyle.” “Obviously the real problem which some lesbians have with us is not that we don’t love women but that we haven’t rejected men,” they said. This section in particular highlights the prevailing turbulence in relationships within the LGBTQ+ community at the time: even lesbian and gay publications were not immune to forms of homophobia. The fact that bisexuals had to fight for recognition within their community was highlighted by the next section of the letter, which emphasized two “particularly painful” bisexual stereotypes: the first, that they are “‘experimenting’ heterosexuals,” and the second, that bisexuals are “more lacking in compassion when we end relationships than lesbians are.” That, the BiVocals so eloquently stated, was “bullshit.”<sup>14</sup>

The disconnect between these seemingly similar communities is stark. The roots of this special kind of discrimination were deeply entrenched in society; like most forms of institutional bigotry, it bled into everything and was difficult to escape. Bisexual media was doing all it could to combat the negative tropes and perceptions, but as a relatively new movement, its abilities were limited. Following the cartoon and response letter, *Bi Women* issued their own brief interjection. They urged readers to contact *GCN* regarding bisexuality and bisexual media coverage, “because the more they realize that bisexuals are a part of the gay community, the more responsive they will be.”<sup>15</sup>

In the July 1988 issue of *The Empty Closet*, an LGBTQ+ publication introduced in 1971, a similar dialogue took place.<sup>16</sup> “Bilines: The Limits of the Language,” authored by Betty Barcode (the pen name of Cynthia Van Ness), delved into the intricacies and undesirable permanence of terms for variations of sexuality—

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Betty Barcode, “Bilines: The Limits of the Language,” *Empty Closet*, 5 July 1988, 15. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

specifically of bisexuality, as Van Ness discussed her own identification as a bi woman. Van Ness explored the use of the phrase “lesbians who sleep with men,” and asked, “isn’t this a contradiction in terms, like a vegetarian who eats steak?” She also proposed a ban on the word “lifestyle,” arguing that, regardless of one’s sexual orientation, “we are all living real lives, in all their comedy and tragedy, not some ‘lifestyle’ as though it were some passing fad inspired by the media.” Van Ness’s repulsion for the word had only increased as its coupling with the term “perverted” became more apparent; ironically, she lamented that “if anyone has a perverted lifestyle, it’s Donald Trump.”<sup>17</sup>

The article concluded with Van Ness dubbing herself a “humansexual”—a term with more of a “generous, healing feel to it,” a term that helped her “feel less funny about loving men and women.”<sup>18</sup> The publication of this article in the wider LGBTQ+ media reveals a shift—however slight—in the current of internal bisexual discrimination. Publication is recognition, is validation, and one reader in particular took issue with that. In a letter to the editor, published in *The Empty Closet*’s August issue under a heading “Create your bi culture, but leave ours alone,” a lesbian expressed her annoyance with Van Ness’s stance.<sup>19</sup> She shared a common perspective among gay men and lesbians—the perspective that bisexuals, given the opportunity, would hijack strenuously cultivated gay and lesbian culture, thereby undermining community solidarity. This, she said, would “literally, physically threaten” their survival.<sup>20</sup> Van Ness’s published response to this letter was perfectly summarized by her opening line: “My, my. Looks like I touched a nerve. Good!”<sup>21</sup> This dialogue, while tense, was vital. In order to begin to understand the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Create your bi culture, but leave ours alone,” *The Empty Closet*, August 1988, 6. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



complexity and importance of bisexual identity, and bisexuals' position within the LGBTQ+ community, their feelings and desires had to be made clear. Their passions and emotions were similar, and their demand for acceptance the same, so why could they not be on the same side? Communication and cooperation of this nature between these groups would become fundamental in the progression of bisexual acceptance both inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community.

Another prominent bisexual publication, *Anything That Moves*, a magazine published by the Bay Area Bisexual Network, began in 1990. Its manifesto explained the naming of the magazine, revealing that the decision to use this title was “nothing less than controversial”—but that redefining the stereotype that “bisexuals will fuck anything that moves” was a shift “toward bisexual empowerment.” Their goal was to create “dialogue through controversy” by “challenging people to face their own external and internal biphobia.” The manifesto concludes: “We are demanding attention, and are re-defining ‘anything that moves’ on our own terms.”<sup>22</sup> The third issue explained that bisexuals were frustrated with those who “refuse to accept our existence; our issues; our contributions; our alliances; our voice.”<sup>23</sup> Bisexuals were tired of being silenced, misunderstood, ostracized, and overlooked—and they were more than prepared to engage their gay and lesbian oppressors. This process, as the manifesto for *Anything That Moves* asserted, needed to begin with dialogue.

Similar sentiments appeared in other publications. For example, the gay newspaper, *Bay Area Reporter*, published a critical letter in their November 1989 issue from a bisexual woman named Karla, who expressed her anger regarding the propagation of bisexual invisibility by the publication and, by association, the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, as well as the ignorant societal

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<sup>22</sup> “ATM Manifesto,” <https://atm.silmemar.org/manifesto.html> (28 Feb. 2020).

<sup>23</sup> “Anything That Moves,” *Anything That Moves*, no. 3 (Summer 1991). Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

condemnation of bisexuals for their “spread” of AIDS.<sup>24</sup> While this still evidences the persistent divide between the groups, it was dialogue—and dialogue was everything. The first issue of the co-sexual publication *Sphere*, released in 1991, printed “An Invitation to Dialogue,” by Louise Sloan.<sup>25</sup> The article served as exactly that: a call for conversation between these estranged groups, notably from an entity that represented the entire non-heterosexual community. “The concept of the Sphere—a co-sexual, multiracial, ethnically diverse newspaper for bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, their friends and families—assumes all these radically different people will be willing and able to communicate with each other and work together. That’s assuming a lot.”<sup>26</sup> Sloan acknowledged the differences—of opinion, experience, and identity—between all members of the LGBTQ+ community, but maintained that, though not an easy feat, compassionate, productive communication would be paramount to inciting change. And change began to occur. The 1990s were a turning point for bisexual visibility and acceptance, as bisexual advocacy groups (BiPOL, predominantly) found success in lobbying.<sup>27</sup> Naturally, the media reflected this shift. In 1990, *Matrix Women’s Newsmagazine*, a principally feminist publication, published an article celebrating the first National Bisexual Conference.<sup>28</sup> The piece began with a quote from the conference program: “Just as Stonewall marked the crystallization of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, so this conference marks the beginning of the coalescing of our bisexual community.”<sup>29</sup> This article highlighted, and commemorated, the

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<sup>24</sup> Karla Rossi, “Letters,” *B.A.R.* [Bay Area Reporter], 9 Nov. 1989, 7. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

<sup>25</sup> Louise Sloan, “Invitation to Dialogue,” *Sphere*, no. 1 (1991): 3. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> “The U.S. Bisexual Movement: a #BiWeek History Lesson,” *GLAAD*, 10 April 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Kate Fox, “National Bisexual Conference: Bisexuals Celebrate Historic First,” *Matrix Women’s Newsmagazine*, Aug. 1990, 8. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Gale Primary Sources.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

impact of an institutional bisexual community. There was no mention of stereotypes, no reference to dated and ignorant tropes—only descriptions of happy, smiling, and proud bisexuals. This was radically different from the skewed illustrations of perverse, indecisive, and tortured bisexual individuals that had previously prevailed in all forms of American media.

In 1992, a column in the *Bay Area Reporter*, the same publication criticized for contributing to bisexual erasure only a few years prior, seemed to change its tune and expressed satisfaction regarding the August 15 issue of *Time Magazine*, which included a three-page, “refreshingly free of moralizing,” feature on the flourishing bisexual community, which revealed the overwhelming discrimination they faced from gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals.<sup>30</sup> While some felt that the feature still focused too much on polyamorous bisexuals, effectively propagating the stereotype that bisexuals were depraved and promiscuous, the *Bay Area Reporter* deemed it “a welcome piece of reporting on a community whose existence the media has been very reluctant to acknowledge.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, bisexuals were gaining *some* representation and traction in the media.

The fight for true bisexual acceptance and visibility was far from over, but on the eve of the twenty-first century, bisexuals found themselves in a much more favorable position than just a decade before. A dialogue that began in niche bisexual publications had spread to more general LGBTQ+ publications, and gradually, became more positive—or at the very least, offered validation of their position in the community. Bisexual representation in the media transformed in the later decades of the twentieth century; instead of indulging in ignorant, constricting, and oppressive tropes, publications like *The Bisexual Expression*, *The Bi Women Quarterly* and *Anything That Moves* helped shape the new legitimizing, humanizing, and normalizing approach for

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<sup>30</sup> Hollie Conley, “GLAAD Media Watch,” *B.A.R.* [Bay Area Reporter], 20 Aug. 1992, 21. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Gale Primary Sources.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

addressing, and accepting, bisexuality. Greater LGBTQ+ media followed suit, though it cannot be denied that the process was, and continues to be, a gradual one. Even today, it is not altogether rare for the representation and perception of bisexuals in the media to miss the mark. Tropes, such as the “murderous bisexual,” “depraved bisexual,” and “the experimented-in-college bisexual,” are still evident in pop culture. Even this, however, is a far cry from the level of invisibility bisexuals faced in the 1960s. Dialogue has transformed biphobic culture by increasing understanding and competency through conversation, with the press serving as an arena for differing perspectives. This was essential to the foundation of the bisexual rights movements and its perception, as it gave bisexuals a platform. Finally, the media offered a space for bisexual voices to be heard, an escape from the suffocating silence and ostracization.

### **Author Bio:**

Sofia Steichschulte is a junior majoring in Economics and History. Her research investigates protest, activism, and revolution in the twentieth century.