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THE BISEXUAL TO BE CORRECTED: INTERROGATING THE THREAT AND  
RECUPERATION OF WOMEN'S FEMME BISEXUALITY

by

HANNAH MCSHANE

Under the Direction of Megan Sinnott, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this project I seek to explore the ways in which women's performance of femme bisexuality constitutes a threat to existing regimes of gender and sexuality in the West. In my analysis, I will consider how femme, femininity, womanhood, and bisexuality are constructed and policed, and further, how these forms of policing layer onto women's femme bisexuality because of the identity's potential to weaken existing hegemonic frameworks of power and control. In these considerations I will explore the history of femme as a descriptive/identity label, dominant perceptions of femininity both outside and within feminist circles, the history of bisexuality, the controversies of identity politics and visibility politics, and the contradictions and connections between queer theory and bisexual theory.

INDEX WORDS: Bisexuality, Femme, Identity politics, Representation, Queer theory,  
Femininity

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HANNAH MCSHANE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

THE BISEXUAL TO BE CORRECTED: INTERROGATING THE THREAT AND  
RECUPERATION OF WOMEN'S FEMME BISEXUALITY

by

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August 2019

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis project is dedicated to the members of the LGBTQ+ community who feel invisible, erased, and/or inferior. You are seen, you are deserving, and this is for you.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	5
<b>1 INTRODUCTION: WHY BISEXUAL FEMME WOMEN? .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Purpose of the Study .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>1.1.1. Scope of the Project.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<b>1.2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1.3 Research Questions .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>1.4 Methods .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>2 CHAPTER 1: THE NORMS OF NON-NORMATIVE SEXUALITY (AND HOW BI FEMMES BREAK THEM).....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.1 Creating Normative Gender: Essentialism and Social Construction .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2.2 Homonormativity and Essentialism .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2.3 Queer Essentialism: The Boundaries of Queerness .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>3 CHAPTER 2: “SHE OCCUPIES NORMALITY ABNORMALLY”: THE AFFECT OF MISRECOGNITION .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>3.1 Coming Out As Monosexual vs. Coming Out As Polysexual .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>3.1.1 Case Study: Bisexuality, Immorality, and the AIDS Epidemic.....</i>	<i>64</i>
<b>3.2 The Privilege of Misrecognition .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>3.3 Passing as Heterosexual and “Straight” Relationships .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>3.4 Bisexual Femme Women and Community Building.....</b>	<b>74</b>

3.4.1	<i>Lack of Historical Connection</i> .....	75
3.4.2	<i>Bisexual Relationship Configurations and Community Fragmentation</i> ....	79
3.4.3	<i>Internalized Biphobia</i> .....	81
3.4.4	<i>Invisibility to One Another</i> .....	81
4	<b>CHAPTER 3: THE (BI) FEMME FATALE</b> .....	86
	<b>CONCLUSION: REFRAMING PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION THROUGH BISEXUAL THEORY</b> .....	95
	<b>WORKS CITED</b> .....	99
	<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	107

## 1 INTRODUCTION: WHY BISEXUAL FEMME WOMEN?

*“The term bisexual has ended up as the ugly stepchild of sexuality, both in name and meaning. Its fate is symptomatic of the bisexual’s own lot in life: to be as common as can be, but unacknowledged.” Jennifer Baumgardner, Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics*

*“I never fool myself into believing I am safe because I’m femme, because in some spaces I pass as straight.” -Katie Livingston, "Snapshots: Being Femme or Doing Femme”*

*“Instability, confusion, inability to make decisions, and fickleness are all characteristics that are often stereotypically connected to bisexuality, and that have also long been assigned to women and femininity.” - Shirt Eisner, Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*

### 1.1 Purpose of the Study

In this project I explore the ways in which women’s performance of femme bisexuality constitutes a threat to existing regimes of gender and sexuality in the West. In my analysis, I consider how bisexual femme women’s identities are constructed and policed because of the identity’s potential to weaken existing hegemonic frameworks of power and control. In these considerations I explore the history of femme as a descriptive/identity label, dominant perceptions of femininity both outside and within feminist circles, the history of bisexuality, the controversies of identity politics and visibility politics, and the contradictions and connections between queer theory and bisexual theory. I argue that femme bisexual women subvert and transgress heteropatriarchal norms in a way that is uniquely threatening and echoes of the femme fatale. I also assert that femme bisexual women’s lives provide valuable insight on how one subject can simultaneously experience privilege and oppression, noting that we must become more conscious of these complexities. We cannot simply disregard people’s experiences and voices merely because they appear to come from a place of privilege.

Understanding how patriarchy is upheld by the prioritization of visibility and monosexism is central to understanding this project. A primary reason for biphobia, the invalidation of bisexuals, is that we exist in a Western culture which privileges visibility; we navigate society

under the assumption that we can identify and hierarchize individuals through a glance. In her chapter “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” Oyeronke Oyewumi explains our notions of selfhood and personhood as deeply rooted in an ethnocentric and Eurocentric investment in physicality: “Our Western body forms are considered expressions of an interior, not inscriptions on a flat surface... the body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into” (qtd. in Oyewumi 2). She contrasts our privileging of the visual with the African Yoruba culture’s privileging of sound. Prioritizing different sensations creates entirely different social orders. In the West, much of how we make sense of ourselves and others is through reading and labelling one another as we go about our day. We have stereotypes around how various genders, races, and sexualities present themselves — i.e., heterosexual men are traditionally masculine and do not over-accessorize or wear makeup, whereas gay men are often perceived as the reverse. So if, as Oyewumi states, “differences and hierarchy are enshrined on the body,” what does it mean for one to claim an identity that is invisible, that is not legibly “enshrined on the body,” and that therefore comes as a shock to normative sensibilities? (7).

Patriarchal Western culture is not only obsessed with stability and visibility as necessary for maintaining hierarchy, but also with women’s subordination and containment. Allan G. Johnson writes that “to live in a patriarchal culture is to breathe in misogynist images of women as objectified sexual property valued primarily for their usefulness to men” (7). Patriarchal culture defines men as human and women as other, men as active and women as passive, men as subjects and women as objects. Patriarchy means that women serve and adore men, and that women who love other women are objectified and sexualized for male pleasure. In a patriarchal social system, both men and women’s gender and sexuality are rigidly policed according to these rules. Bisexual activist Shiri Eisner summarizes Judith Butler’s foundational gender theory: “in

order to be understood by society, one needs to embody a ‘coherent continuity of sex (male or female), gender, (man or woman), and sexuality (heterosexual)’ (147). Accordingly, as objects to be consumed by men, women who reject femininity are considered deviant, undesirable, and in need of correction, and women who perform femininity are expected to be heterosexual and cisgender.

Certain identities including bisexuality (and especially in the case of femme bisexual women, I will later argue) throw somewhat of a wrench into the logic of visibility and normative gender continuity, threatening to disrupt the very hierarchies upon which our society is founded. It is hard to stereotype and dehumanize a group of people when it is virtually impossible to identify its members. Activist Heather McAlister notes that bisexuality’s “resistance to categorization is part of the reason bisexuality is so outcast. There are no real stereotypes to identify bisexuals” (28). Unless a person walks around yelling, “Hey, I’m a bisexual!” on the daily, chances are no one will know or assume that they are bisexual.

As several women I interviewed point out, heteropatriarchy needs people to be monosexual, or attracted to only one gender, in order to neatly hierarchize. It is rather difficult to maintain the disenfranchisement of a group if that group is incoherent, with its members presenting in different ways that shift, slip, and take on a variety of meanings. The notion that women can be attracted to men, women, and other genders simultaneously is a threat, because it points to the fact that perhaps masculinity and femininity, men and women, are not such polar opposites at all... and if men are not the powerful, aggressive, dominant opposites of women, why should they be at the top of the hierarchy? If masculinity is not the opposite of femininity, then perhaps all men are more intimately related to femininity than they would like to think. This line of thought destabilizes the patriarchal order, so monosexism and biphobia punish bisexuals

for their attraction to multiple genders — and more specifically, for destabilizing the gender binary. Bisexuality must be erased, invisible, and invalid because it threatens core values of patriarchy that organize and define our culture. According to the common narratives, bisexuality means one is excess, greedy, immature, selfish, confused, childish, hypersexual, disloyal, and untrustworthy. All of the stereotypes that have been constructed regarding bisexuality are meant to dissuade people from identifying as bisexual and from supporting others who identify in such a way.

As individuals who have been socialized to perceive patriarchally constructed gender and sexual identities as the norm, it makes sense that we walk about life assuming that everyone lines up with this norm until they indicate otherwise. Our fixation on visibility and our conception of gender logics makes us believe that because someone appears to be a woman and appears to be performing traditional femininity, she must also be heterosexual. We assume this until we see her deviate from this normative continuity — until she kisses her girlfriend or wears a rainbow “love wins” t-shirt, and then we may assume that she is a lesbian. We believe that her outward presentation is a sign of her “inner” identity, and that her sexual identity can only be one of two options: gay or straight. Because we live in a monosexist culture, the possibility of attraction to multiple genders does not often occur to us.

(In)visibility is a complex issue for bisexuals. It allows them privilege in some spaces, threatens normativity in others, and creates loneliness in still others. Bisexuals are frequently rejected and erased from both heterosexual and homosexual circles, with their identity often dismissed by even their non-bisexual partners. Jennifer Baumgardner, author of *Look Both Ways: Bisexual Politics*, describes a “corelessness” that bisexuals experience: “In a critical way, people’s sexuality is viewed not by who they are but by which gender they sleep with at the

present moment — as if there is no heart, no core to their human sexuality” (59). While gay couples are pro-LGBT rights and while sexual orientation is not a source of conflict or division in straight couples, bisexuals often experience a peculiar invalidation from their own partners, who might not take the time and energy to concern themselves with their partner’s sexual orientation. The partner’s lack of concern for the bisexual’s identity stems from the emphasis placed on visibility as the ultimate dictator of identity. For instance, Baumgardner’s boyfriend was disinterested in issues of bisexuality because he saw them as irrelevant so long as they were in a “heterosexual-presenting” relationship. A person who identifies as bisexual might feel estranged and alienated by society and by their own intimate relationships and feel coerced into identifying with a monosexual label instead.

### *1.1.1. Scope of the Project*

I theorize that part of why bisexuality remains so controversial and in need of correction is due to its impossibility and illegibility under current Western formations of gender and sexuality: rigid, naturalized binaries of man/women, heterosexual/homosexual. I find that bisexuality has experienced such backlash from multiple sexual communities — not just heterosexual ones — because it cannot be read and understood through these existing binaries. To claim bisexuality is then to embody the impossible. If the “impossibility” of existing outside of such hegemonic dichotomies is understood as possible, ideological frameworks upon which society depends for hierarchization could crumble. I argue that bisexuals experience tremendous invalidation from all sides: because they threaten powerful frameworks that function to privilege and oppress. Attempting to place bisexuality within the binary of heterosexual and homosexual is attempting to “normalize” the sexuality by recuperating it as a part of normativity rather than a threat to normativity. Efforts to reconstitute bisexuality through such binaries work as normalizing and

disciplining technologies, seeking to “correct” bisexuality by defining it as a heterosexual or homosexual’s moment of confusion.

Under these definitions, bisexuals are always already on a trajectory of monosexual normalization, in which, after properly maturing, the bisexual is inevitably hailed into a “real” heterosexual or homosexual identity. Transgender bisexual activist and scholar, Julia Serano, explains that bi-invisibility is a disciplining technology that pushes bisexuals to instead identify with a monosexual community: “bi-invisibility leads many of us to identify more with the straight, lesbian, or gay communities we exist in (and rely upon) than with other bisexual, multisexual, no label, omnisexual, pansexual, polysexual, and queer folks” (83). Serano further notes that being unable to identify with other non-monosexual folks and pressured to “blend into monosexual communities we exist in,” explains why even people with whom the term resonates often avoid the label of bisexual (86).

Additionally, I attempt to place narratives around bisexuality as either “too respectable” or “too radical” in a historical context, exploring how these ideologies ignore the lived experience of bisexuals. I argue that the reason why bisexuality is often understood as a “respectable” sexuality is because of its misreading and recuperation. Normalization efforts flatten and homogenize bisexuality into one static meaning — as an attraction to both men and women (cisgender men and women, especially), and this is how bisexuality becomes regarded with disdain by queer theorists and the radical queer community. The respectability reading of bisexuality is exacerbated by many bisexual people’s apparent adherence to norms in their gender expression; the bisexual often does not appear “monstrous,” “abject,” or visibly “queer” enough to experience full acceptance into the queer community.



One of the ways in which bisexuality has been invalidated by queer circles has been through the accusation that the identity reinforces the gender binary — the very same thing that bisexuality seems to most clearly disrupt. On one side there is the argument that because of bisexuality is threatening because bisexuals embrace various configurations of gender (or lack thereof) and sexualities, but from the other side there is an argument that bisexuality is problematic *because* it reinforces these binaries. According to *Everyday Feminism*, pansexuality became popularized as a term referring to sexual attraction regardless of gender in the early to mid 1990s. According to Google Trends data, “an internet presence for “pansexuality” began in September 2007, a little over a year after an internet presence for “genderqueer” began” (Jakubowski). As an avid Tumblr user in my teenage years between 2010 and 2014, I noticed pansexuality becoming increasingly popular across the platform. With this increasing popularity came constant debates about pansexuality versus bisexuality — what were the differences? Which one was “better?” Which was more inclusive? These debates are still occurring to this day, and while in 2010 people were constantly asking me if I was sexually attracted to pans (I identified with the term for about a year), pansexuality has increasingly become an everyday term in the queer community and has gained considerable respect since those days. I asked my subjects about why they chose to identify as bisexual, and many of them brought up pansexuality as a consideration or even as something that they currently identify with in addition to bisexuality. However, many of them expressed frustration at the ways in which bisexuality has fallen even more out of the queer community’s favor as pansexuality has arisen as a seemingly more “queer” term that does not include a limiting “bi” in it that could potentially “reinforce the gender binary.”

One of the key myths and criticisms of bisexuality is that the identity is transphobic because it only acknowledges the gender binary of men and women. Thus, many people have preferred to identify with pansexual, as it is considered an all-inclusive term of attraction regardless of gender. However, when actually examined, the argument that bisexuality should not exist because it is transphobic makes little to no sense. In fact, it seems that bisexuals in particular would not be transphobic because they have no preference regarding what their partner's genitals should look like. It is very common for gay men to express disgust toward vaginas and lesbians to be repulsed by penises. However, bisexuals can be attracted to both types of genitals — I would go further to say that this leaves them open to attraction to any configuration of genitals, rather than falling into the limiting category of attraction to women defined through vaginas and attracted to men through penises. Many bisexuals, of course, do understand gender as a binary (just as many gay and straight people do), but theoretically, bisexuality embraces transgender and intersex people just as much as it does cisgender men and women, and bisexuals are no more transphobic than other queers. Kaylee describes how mundane the conversations about bisexuality as transphobic have become:

I remember talking in high school to bisexual friends about whether they would date trans or non-binary people, and that was a distinction between if you were bisexual and if you were pansexual... For a while I was identifying as pansexual and then when I kind of analyzed my reasoning for that I realized that I was just trying to get away from the “transphobic” properties of being bisexual, of what it meant to be bisexual. When I realized that I was thinking “I am bisexual, I just don't identify with the transphobic aspect” that some people did — I don't know if that's a really common thing anymore. I had a recent interaction on Facebook where someone was talking about their fluidity of attraction and I was like, “Yay, bisexuality” and someone immediately commented, “Oh, I prefer pansexuality,” and I don't know... Definitely have considered and identified as pansexual, for all the reasons listed. And even now, like if there was some reason I had to identify as pansexual it would fit, it wouldn't be wrong but... I definitely feel more connection to bisexuality.

As Kaylee points out, bisexuality is an older term than pansexuality, and pansexuality is now often seen as the new and improved model of bisexuality — perhaps the more intersectional one. Accordingly, those who choose to stick with the term bisexual seem dated, traditional, stuck in the past rather toward progressing to a future free of gender roles in comparison. Natalie echoed Kaylee’s frustration, stating:

I honestly have a hard time distinguishing between pansexual and bisexual anyway. I’m not against the term “pansexual,” but I don’t use it for myself because most of the engagement that I had with it was people using it in this way where they were claiming that bisexuality is inherently transphobic and enforces a gender binary, so I think that is the baggage that the term “pansexual” has — and also the fact that so many people don’t know what it means is the reason that I don’t really identify with that. I do identify with the term “queer” but I think the reason I distanced myself from the term bisexual was because of its stigma, and so for me I’m like, “if that’s the reason why I don’t want to identify with it when it fits so well then that’s the reason why I should.”

Interestingly, Jessica avoids the label “pansexual” because she is attracted exclusively to masculinity: “I wouldn’t identify as pansexual or anything else. With pansexual, the gender identity or gender at all is not really a factor in your attraction to the person. And for me it is, so that doesn’t fit either. Because I don’t like all men, I like masculine men, and I don’t like all women, I like masculine women, so it’s definitely a gender thing, which is why I’d have to say that it’s bi as opposed to pan or anything like that.” When I asked Jessica if she would be open to dating non-men and non-women people, she agreed that she would if they presented masculine. Alice responded that she had identified as pansexual at one point in time, and she describes the mental gymnastics involved with identifying as bisexual:

Then I kind of launched into pansexual for a while because I was like: “Well, I just like people and I’m attracted to people,” but no one knows what the fuck pansexual is anyway, so why do I even try? And then it goes to, “I should just start telling people I’m queer and then I would not have to explain anything,” because they’re like: “O-oh, okay, sure. That person’s strange,” which is literally what I think the term came from is just like “strange.” I also think about the way that my mom defines queer as just being strange like “Queer? What does that mean? When I use the word ‘queer’ it just means strange.” And I’m like “Yep, that’s kind of how I identify, just like, strange.” Yeah, I’ve gone through

different iterations where I was kind of more so bicurious, and then bisexual, and then I was like “Well, I don’t know if that’s really what it is because I don’t just like men and women, I like all iterations of men and women, I just like people in general” so pansexual, and then I was like “Nobody knows what pansexual is.” They’re like “Pansexual? You mean you like kitchen utensils? You like cooking instruments?” And then more recently I’ve been wanting to venture into queer because I feel like it’s a more whole way of describing myself because it’s not just sexuality — queer is like personhood, almost, as well, and so I like that a little bit more. But then I’m like: “But I don’t experience the same kinds of discrimination that they do and I don’t want to take any validity away from them. I don’t want to co-opt anything, yada, yada, yada — I don’t want to interfere.”

It becomes evident that the narrative of bisexuality as transphobic has caused many bisexuals to doubt the morality and validity of their identities. Alice’s comment that “queer” resonates with her — she feels “strange” and she likes the notion of queer as more than just an identifier of sexuality, but an identifier of subjectivity. However, she refuses to identify as queer because she is concerned that she would be taking away from the validity of queerness by identifying as queer when she passes as heterosexual and therefore does not experience the types of discrimination that she feels people whose gender is more clearly deviant experience. Alice’s remarks here touch on that notion of an essential queerness — of queerness as being defined through visible rejection of normative ideals, which leaves many LGBT+ people out of the category of queer.

Finally, I asked Belle why she felt that bisexual is a better fit for her than other identity labels. She discussed pansexuality from the perspective of a bisexual who did not grow up with “pansexual” as an identity option:

I’m not sure that it’s a “better fit,” but it’s the word that was accessible to me — I mean, I may be older than some of the other folks you’re interviewing. I’m 36, I was born in 1982. I didn’t start hearing words like “pansexual” — you know, I heard “queer” and queer is definitely something that I also identify as. I think I use the word “queer” as much as I use the word “bisexual.” I also identify with pan, and I think I probably would identify more as pan if I were ten or fifteen years younger, and if that had been in the lexicon when I was coming into my identity, but I think now I choose the word “bisexual” kind of in a defiant way because it is so stigmatized, and because I want to be

part of changing that and making it a word that people don't automatically stereotype, or cringe at, or whatever, so I guess it's a political statement as well.

The women primarily seemed to label themselves as bisexual because they felt that the term has deeper historical roots, because they had access to the language when “pansexual” was not yet a common term, or because they did not like being asked if they were attracted to cookware. None of them held particular animosity toward pansexuality, and some of them even felt it resonated with them, so the tension around bisexuality versus pansexuality seems to be founded in biphobic myths. Upon considering it further, bisexuality might imply attraction to people because of their gender or gender presentation, whereas pansexuality implies attraction regardless of someone's gender presentation — so it makes sense that Jessica, who is attracted to a very specific presentation of masculinity, would feel more comfortable with the term bisexual than pansexual. However, the terms overlap in many ways, so the debate about which identity is the most progressive seem unproductive at best, and harmful and biphobic at worst. It seems that many bisexual people feel guilty about identifying as bisexual because of those myths around it and the more recent discourse of pansexuality as a more progressive identity. These feelings of guilt, shame, and the constant questioning of if your identity is contributing to the oppression of others characterize bi femme women's experiences in so many ways, and the bisexuality versus pansexuality debacle is just one of them.

The bisexual, however, is also too radical and threatening to be accepted into heteronormative society, which relies upon two distinct and unequal genders, clearly and neatly delineated through monosexuality. To be attracted to more than one gender threatens the distinct and oppositional understanding of what it means to be man and woman. While bisexuality threatens heteronormative society in this way, it also threatens homonormative gays and lesbians who seek assimilation into heteronormativity, often by deploying the “born this way” narrative

that bisexual theory disrupts. Gays and lesbians are invested in the clear, oppositional distinction between man and woman that constructs their attractions, as maintaining this distinction allows them some level of acceptance in a heteronormative society. We can also see this dedication to an oppositional construction of gender in the transphobia of many gays and lesbians. Thus, gays and lesbians frequently also reject bisexuality as too radical and threatening.

In this research project I want to reconceptualize bisexuality, looking at attempts at recuperation that stem from a widespread fear of the possibilities and spaces that bisexuality may open up, even in its most seemingly “normative” presentations. Specifically, I am observing femme women’s experiences of bisexuality and the pressure of monosexual normalization that they experience. Bisexuality is perceived as an immature, untrustworthy, and underdeveloped identity due to its medical/psychiatric history (Erickson-Shroth). Womanhood and femininity have also been stereotyped as untrustworthy, infantilized, and immature. We see these notions around femininity in micro ways in today’s narratives, such as in the popular meme that you have to “take your girl swimming” on the first date to see how unattractive she is beneath her layers of makeup before going on a second date (Spelman). Another example of the infantilization of womanhood and femininity is clear in the phenomenon of mansplaining: when men assume that women need concepts spoon-fed to them — often concepts that the women already have (perhaps even greater) knowledge of — because of the cultural belief that women are irrational and childlike with excess emotions and a lack of logic. Thus, the layers of womanhood and femme on bisexuality exacerbate and exaggerate the stigmatization that already haunts bisexuality. It is especially urgent for femme bisexual women to be recuperated into dominant narratives and “corrected,” because to possess a non-monosexual identity is an act of resistance and transgression that must be particularly repressed in women. Women must remain

docile and subordinate in order for the patriarchal framework to remain strong. Bisexuality threatens the traditional ideals of femininity associated with innocence, purity, and deference to men. Bisexuality constitutes a threat to male ownership of women, a resistance to what patriarchy dictates a woman should be. Therefore, I want to consider how femme bisexual women might be among the most invisible and erased, yet simultaneously also among the most intensely transgressive sexually marginalized identities.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

### **BISEXUALITY**

#### **History**

The term “bisexual” originated in 1866 — not as a term to describe sexual orientation, but rather, as a description of sex. In their essay entitled “Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters,” Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell provide a brief background on the history of bisexuality, explaining how Alexander Kovalevsky, a Russian embryologist, first “used the term bisexual to describe a hermaphroditic ascidian, or sea squirt, that he had discovered” (110-111). The reason that he used the word “bisexual” is because he perceived the animal as a combination of male and female sexes — thus, bisexuality in its first use referred not to sexual orientation, but instead to a figure that could not be neatly categorized as male or female. In this way, the history of bisexuality is closely linked to that of the intersex community. Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell then trace the history of bisexuality to Charles Darwin, who believed that a physical distinction between male and female was indicative of an evolved creature: “Darwin argued that the more dissimilar the two sexes, the more evolutionarily

advanced the species” (111). Those species with clear sex dissimilarities were no longer “bisexual” (111).

In German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s 1892 work on deviant sexuality entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis*, he theorized that all fetuses are bisexual until they reach a stage of differentiation into male or female, and through this essential differentiation they then develop all of the characteristics associated with their gender. Krafft-Ebing believed that the failure of proper sexual differentiation in fetal development — thus, the remaining of the fetus as underdeveloped and “bisexual” — could determine whether one would become attracted to the same sex. He noted that: “In rare cases—apparently in strongly developed bi-sexuality—signs of inverted sexuality may appear” (47). The failure of the “hermaphroditic” bisexual was a gateway into the perversion of same-sex attraction. So even before the term bisexual became a description of sexual attraction to men and women, the notion of a “combination” of male and female, or a blurring and bridging of the binary, became strongly associated with “underdevelopment” and “immaturity” (Erickson-Shroth 112). This association became even more prominent when 19<sup>th</sup> century sexologist, Havelock Ellis, theorized that the “sexual orientation-strand” of bisexuality is always inherent in the “intersex-strand” bisexual fetus until it properly develops: “He theorized that every fetus started off ‘bisexual,’ in that it was attracted to men and women, just as it started off ‘intersex,’ or hermaphroditic. The mature fetus reached its final destination as a complete male or female heterosexual person, whereas the immature fetus produced an adult bisexual” (Erickson-Schroth 111). Ellis’ assertion that visually ambiguous bodies were indicative of perverted sexuality strongly influenced Western conceptualizations of sexuality.

Under the logic of Ellis’ sexology, the individual’s physical development process is central to their ability to become normative Western subjects. If the body fails to “properly” develop, the



psyche also fails to properly develop. The logic of sexology underlies many of the ways in which we understand sexuality: for example, coming out is perceived as an essential part of the individual's developmental process in becoming a legible subject. We now define bisexuality exclusively as a sexual orientation and intersex as the condition of having sex characteristics that do not fit what we typically understand as male and female. Even as the popular understanding of bisexuality shifted to "bisexuality as the condition of being attracted to both genders" (Barker 173), the stigma of underdevelopment and immaturity continued to haunt bisexuals. We often see specter today in narratives of bisexuality as a phase, merely a point in one's confused but imminent journey to a solidly and safely monosexual identity of gay or straight. Bisexuality is often associated with college-age experimentation (especially by women for the male gaze, recuperated into heteropatriarchal norms), or a stage of conflict that one might experience as they develop from teenager to adult. The notion of a person with a non-normative sexuality as someone whose life "went wrong" at some point, or whose parents failed them, or who was just born messed up continues. There is a clear connection between the stigmatizing narratives of LGBTQ+ individuals as failing to develop normatively and therefore being "born this way," and the history dating back to the 1800s of the bisexual fetus as constituted by the failure to properly develop as male or female, ultimately resulting in perverted sexuality.

### **In Academia**

As I began this research, I was already rather aware of the fact that bisexuality has a history of being erased from mainstream media. For instance, Erickson-Shroth and Mitchell note that: "In an Internet search of the content of six popular newspapers and magazines from 1990 to 1999, one author finds that the term bisexuality appeared only 80 times, while the term homosexuality appeared 5,458 times" (107). They then go on to discuss research that has been

published in a 2005 issue of *Psychological Science*: “researchers exposed a group of self-identified homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual men to pornography involving either men or women and then measured their genital arousal (by penile circumference) to each of the stimuli. The study was unabashedly hoping to demonstrate that bisexual men do not exist” (108). The researchers came to the indeterminate conclusion that ““it remains to be shown that male bisexuality exists”” (qtd. in Erickson-Shroth 109). The research methods lack nuance and comprehension of the complexities of sexuality, conflating the social identity of bisexuality with the men’s ability to be sexually aroused by both genders. Additionally, the research conflates manhood with penises and womanhood with vaginas — a rather transphobic assumption. Finally, the researchers also make the flawed assumption that all bisexuals must be equally attracted to men and women in order to be considered bisexual. The fact that bisexuality is generally overlooked or misconstrued by academia does not surprise me, but what does surprise me is the extent to which bisexuality has been overlooked and misconstrued by gender studies and queer theory.

As mentioned earlier, it seems that bisexuality is always caught somewhere between “too respectable” to queers and “too radical” to homonormative gays and/or heterosexuals. There is a frustrating lack of interrogation into the history of bisexuality. It seems that the distrust and policing of bisexuality has even leaked into gender studies. Under heteronormativity, bisexuality is a challenge that must either be recuperated or annihilated — either way, it must disappear. Its disappearance has reached so far as to even erase bisexuality as a legitimate sexuality worthy of scholarly pursuits in what is understood as one of the most sexually radical disciplines. Furthermore, bisexuality is stigmatized and ignored in the field of psychoanalysis. In “Bisexuality in Psychoanalytic Theory: Interpreting the Resistance,” Esther Rapoport states that

a “legacy of viewing the non-normative, not simply as inferior or crazy, but as prior in time to the normative, lives on in contemporary psychoanalysis” (91). In the article “Is Bisexuality Invisible? A Review of Sexualities Scholarship 1970-2015,” Sally Hines, Surya Monro, and Antony Osborne take a look at the history of how bisexuality has been treated by sexualities scholarship. They note that “Lesbian and gay studies seem to have been far more successful than bisexuality studies in becoming established, as has transgender studies” (671). The authors find that 16 in 73 scholarly texts produced over decades have been inclusive of bisexuals to the same extent that they have included gay and lesbian identities. The extreme neglect of bisexuality in academia contributes to the erasure of femme bisexual women, but it also explains why my research is important by clearly illustrating the gap I seek to fill. If only 16 in 73 texts were inclusive of bisexuals, I imagine hardly any of these would have mentioned femme bisexuality specifically. I hope that this project can contribute to the minimal amount of research that has been performed on the shifting meanings of bisexuality from its inception in 1866, to its current usage and future possibilities.

## **FEMME AND FEMININITY**

### **2nd Wave Feminism**

Historically, radical feminist critiques of femininity have done little to dispel the heteronormative myth of femininity as artificial and deceitful. Feminist scholars including Sandra Bartky, Iris Marion Young, and Susan Brownmiller have contributed to the notion of femininity as artificial in their works. They understand the gender expression as a manifestation of patriarchal power over women, a sign that women have internalized patriarchal messages to such an extent that they believe they desire the form of self-expression for themselves rather than

as a result of a disempowering gendered socialization. Femininity, according to these scholars, renders women weak and distracted in order to keep them unaware of their oppression.

In “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Bartky describes femininity as inherently oppressive to women, a form of patriarchal surveillance. She employs Foucault’s theory of power internalization through the panopticon to clarify the ways in which women embody feminine ideals and aspire to feminine qualities as a means of survival, gaining social approval and minor privilege through strict adherence to feminine regulation. From Bartky’s stance, the woman who regularly reapplies her lipstick or worries about her hair frizzing in humid weather has developed a docile female body: “This ‘state of conscious and permanent visibility’ is a sign that the tight, disciplinary control of the body has gotten a hold on the mind as well” (63). She contends that women have internalized and embodied docility more so than men: “To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed” (Bartky 64). Similarly, in Brownmiller’s prologue to *Femininity* alone, she repeatedly describes femininity using words such as indulgence, decorative, illusion, trivial, and fakery:

There is no reason to deny that indulgence in the art of feminine illusion can be reassuring to a woman, if she happens to be good at it... affirmation can arise from such identifiable but trivial feminine activities as buying a new eyeliner, experimenting with the latest shade of nail color, or bursting into tears at the outcome of a popular romance novel. Is there anything destructive in this? Time and cost factors, a deflection of energy, and an absorption in fakery spring quickly to mind (17).

Feminists such as Bartky perceive femininity as a performance constructed through visibility, designed specifically to consume a woman’s time and energy: “Femininity deserves some hard reckoning, and this is what I have tried to do” (Brownmiller 18).

While Bartky and Brownmiller present important (though somewhat over-simplified) theories on hegemonic and heterosexual femininities, they fail to mention alternative

embodiments of femininity. For instance, the datedness, essentialism, and lacking complexity within Bartky's analysis becomes immediately apparent in this statement: "We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement" (64). While it is generally agreed upon that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, many modern feminists have asserted that sexed categories of male and female are equally as socially constructed as masculinity and femininity, with sex being coercively assigned at birth rather than inherent.

In her work "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," Iris Marion Young details the ways in which "women experience the body as a burden" (29). Young argues that feminine socialization has taught women to navigate the world taking up as little space as possible. They moving delicately and without the vigor and confidence of their masculine counterparts: "Women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy" (34). Young claims that the uniquely feminine feeling of the body as an object constitutes a passive, docile body that is unsure in its movements: "In summary, the modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing — a fragile thing, which must be picked and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as looked at and acted upon" (39). Young understands these self-objectified women's bodies as moving with what she calls an *inhibited intentionality*: "Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her, in such a way that the space that belongs to her and is available to her grasp and manipulation is constricted and the space beyond is not available to her movement" (40).

Another example of feminist disdain for femininity and masculinity is clear in Sheila Jeffreys 1990 essay “Eroticizing Women’s Subordination.” In this piece, Jeffreys displays her contempt for butch/femme relationships, stating that “Butch and femme is beginning to take over any kind of possible analysis of lesbian sexuality right now, and I find this very alarming” (134). She further argues that the “part played by the femme here is terribly similar to the role of the heterosexual femme” and that “the eroticizing of inequality is not necessary to lesbianism” (134). Jeffreys frames femme as equivalent to compulsory femininity, and she frames femininity as an expression of a women’s internalized oppression — one that is monolithic, always appearing the same regardless of the feminine actor’s conceptualization of her own performance.

### **Femme Reclamation**

The scholarship of Bartky and Brownmiller falls short of acknowledging the lesbian experience of “femme,” an experience typically defining femininity as a chosen performance and identity. Jeffreys considers femme/butch relationships to be replications of oppressive heterosexual power dynamics, so she, along with many other 2nd wave feminists, supported a more “androgynous” and “egalitarian” form of lesbianism. Many femme lesbians endure femme erasure and invisibility within lesbian circles. Femme lesbians have noted that embracing femme can engender feelings of isolation and invalidity rather than achievement: “Constantly being mistaken for heterosexual bothers me. It’s a dismissal of my identity that shoves me into the closet, unwillingly, over and over” (O’Hara). They are questioned about their qualifications as lesbians, subjected to a presumption that femmes will eventually return to men. Lesbian doubts around the “heterosexual” implications of femininity are most blatantly illustrated in their distrust of bisexuals who they often believe will (following the monosexual trajectory I described earlier and their “feminine inclinations”) eventually choose heterosexuality. Much has been

written about the isolation of being a femme lesbian, and little has been written about the feelings of being a femme bisexual. Bisexual femmes may appear to make femme lesbians appear less “authentically” lesbian, so distancing themselves from bisexual femmes has become a technique through which femme lesbians may assert their lesbian legitimacy: “The status of the femme as lesbian is ensured only by detaching her from her ‘bisexual’ past” (Hemmings 93).

Femmes have subverted narratives of femininity as inherently oppressive by historically holding power and control in their intimate relationships with their masculine counterparts: “For most butches the main purpose in making love was to please their fems, a position usually associated with femininity. The femme was the more receptive partner; however, she knew exactly what she wanted, and was not shy in pursuing it, a position usually associated with masculinity” (Davis 22). Femmes took an active role in exploring their sexuality, pleasure, and autonomy. In “Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage the 1950s,” Joan Nestle pushes against Jeffreys’ argument that butch and femme are oppressive replications of heterosexuality: “There was and still is a butch sexuality and a femme sexuality, not a woman-acting-like-a-man or a woman-acting-like-a-woman sexuality, but a developed Lesbian-specific sexuality that has a historical setting and a cultural function” (104). Note that “femme” is typically considered a “lesbian” word. The combination of “femme” and “bisexual” in a text is hard to come by, and Nestle fails to mention bisexuality, of course, but she does describe how “femme” is often conflated with femininity although they are not the same phenomenon.

We must also consider how even within identity categories, there is always some degree of fluidity in each individual’s performance. For instance, each person possesses multiple identities, and at times, depending upon the situation, one identity may take precedence over the other. How we perform our identities also shifts situationally, so it can be argued that there is always

some level of “slipperiness” inherent in even the most seemingly stable of identities. Savannah Shange’s essay entitled “A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Back Femmecee,” explores Nicki Minaj’s slippery black femme gender performance. Shange argues that Nicki Minaj plays with and evades gender in various ways, constructing herself as a “femmecee,” or, “a rapper whose critical strategic performance of queer femininity is inextricably linked to the production and reception of their rhymes” (34). Minaj avoids neatly fitting into the categories of straight or queer, instead tacitly moving between and outside of these labels. Nicki Minaj frequently alludes to sexual interactions with other women in her music, and she has also implied homoerotic attractions in her interviews, yet she avoids directly answering questions that aim to pin down her sexuality. This essay is useful in considering how femme sexualities are often slippery and read differently depending on the situation. Shange also discusses how Minaj’s performances are recuperated into heteronormativity — I will be exploring this phenomenon as it relates to femme bisexuality — but also simultaneously become a method to attain power, liberation, and/or agency. Shange references Kara Keelings work: “the black femme currently is a reminder that the set of what appears is never perfectly closed and that something different might appear therein at any-instant-whatever” (39). Minaj’s performance of gender and sexuality is complex, and one could draw either “positive” or “negative” conclusions about how her performances impact (or, by her evasion of labeling and direct conversation, fail to impact) the queer femme community. However, as Keeling states, the existence of black femmes like Minaj (and similarly, femme bisexuals) keeps space open for resistance to the pulls of homonationalism and respectability.

Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarsinaha’s “On Being a Bi-Sexual Femme,” is a narrative/memoir about her experience of growing up and navigating her bisexual femme identity. At twelve years



old, she comes out as bisexual to her mother, who responds with: “Fine. As long as they don’t look like truck drivers” (138). Albrecht-Samarasinha notes that her mother was fine with her bisexuality, yet scared of butch/femme, and accepted her daughter’s identity so long as she was “straight queer” (138). She talks about the pressures to conform to what a feminist “should be,” stating: “I knew there was something weird about me saying I was queer but not being a baby butch. I also longed to be a correct woman-identified egalitarian lesbian feminist in junior high... But I knew I was still attracted to some boys, and that was just too strong to go away” (139). She recalls lesbians accusing her of betrayal by sleeping with men. Additionally, she briefly touches on the stigmatization of bisexual femmes (as opposed to lesbian femmes): “The argument says that real femmes are not bisexual; all the many, many femme girls who started out by fucking boys had horrible experiences with them... As a bisexual femme in the 1990s, I understand the struggles of femmes in the seventies and eighties to be seen as real lesbians; but now, for me, I want to expand the definition of femme to one that names my life powerfully” (140). Once again, we see the expected monosexual trajectory at work in the narrative that “real femmes” are not bisexual but are merely confused lesbians or straight women. In her book *Looking Both Ways*, Jennifer Baumgardner echoes this sentiment noting that when one lesbian brought up previously identifying as bisexual, “Every other woman in the room nodded her head, indicating that she, too, remembered when she was less evolved in her sense of being gay and felt okay only to come out as bi” (53-54).

## **IDENTITY**

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks that I utilize primarily stem from Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Admittedly, the works I use from these theorists do not result from their own

exploration of bisexuality. In fact, these theorists have arguably contributed to the invisibility of bisexuals. In “Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory,” April S. Callis argues that prominent queer theorists have avoided addressing bisexuality. She aims to directly “write bisexuality into” *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler and *The History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, remarking that “Although queer theory is dedicated to the deconstruction of the naturalized binary of heterosexual and homosexual, bisexuality, which seems to aid in this deconstruction, is rarely a topic of interest or inquiry for queer theorists” (214). Still, as Callis notes, the works of Foucault and Butler can be utilized as a theoretical lens to examine bisexuality in ways that are relevant to my project.

In Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, she explains the concept of gender as performative. Performativity means that gender can only be perceived as existing via a constant and stable “act” of what society has deemed to be an appropriate gender presentation. The hegemonic and appropriate version of gender performance requires an alignment of gender, sex, and sexual orientation. For women to be appropriately performing gender, they must be feminine, cisgender, and attracted solely to men. The possibilities for queering gender lie in destabilizing the alignment of this performance, as well as in smaller transgressions that make visible the performativity of gender. Butler also remarks that these neat, binary, clearly distinguishable genders are responsible for the humanization of individuals, stating that, “Indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right. Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (139).

I theorize that femme bisexuality points to the social constructedness and fragility of gender. Butler further states that “Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (141). I consider bisexual femme women as performing a *failed* gender act — a failure to accomplish the neatly aligned and socially agreed upon stylizations of womanhood.

In her essay “In Defense of Ambiguity: Understanding Bisexuality’s Invisibility Through Cognitive Psychology,” Heather Macalister writes: “Bisexuality alone is too ambiguous for many people to accept” (26). Macalister focuses on how bisexuality is “cognitively problematic” because it does not fit neatly into an established category or stereotype and because anyone could be bisexual regardless of how normative they may appear, making it “easy to be homophobic but... harder to be bi-phobic when we don’t know what we’re looking for!” She poses the question that disturbs many people “What if she looks one way but ‘is’ the other?” (28). Butler’s concept of performativity theorizes identity itself as constituted and formed through symbolic/linguistic actions, behaviors, and gestures. Without linguistic/symbolic legibility, there can be no subject, and because bisexuality itself is illegible within monosexual culture, the femme bisexual woman is an impossible subject. There is something about the illegibility of bisexuals, particularly those who appear to be legible under the guise of heteronormativity — femme women and masculine men — that brings out a sort of societal distress due to the inability to hierarchize people on sight.

Femme bisexuals may appear to conform to normative gender roles (i.e. those who are not read as queer), are typically perceived as neatly heterosexual (i.e. cisgender, straight, feminine),

and might even vocalize attraction to men... yet upon displaying intimacy with a woman, people are often jarred by her discontinuity. This discontinuity becomes threatening to the norms of hegemonic society which rely upon the fiction of gender as natural, inherent, and dichotomous. I argue that widespread discomfort with bisexuality is because the sexuality points to gender as a social fiction that requires continuous, stable hegemonic repetitions in order to be constituted as “natural.” Femme bisexual women especially experience such strong stigma because they have the ability to fit into the traditionally aligned expectations of womanhood while simultaneously throwing others off guard through their unexpected and jolting queerness. Femme bisexual women perform a gender that is frequently read as heterosexual, yet they throw off this performance through affirming their identity as bisexual. The ability to blend so seamlessly into normativity is why femme bisexual women are threatening to regimes of heteropatriarchy; because they bring to the surface how gender and sexual performance is not inherent and can easily be disrupted by the most unsuspecting of individuals — individuals who are often read as relatively docile at first glance. As I have previously mentioned, womanhood, femininity, and bisexuality are all expressions/identities that have histories of being seen as “in need of correction,” and untrustworthy. Thus, femmephobia and misogyny are undoubtedly entangled with the biphobia that femme bisexual women experience.

As has probably become clear, an integral concept in of this project is that of Foucault’s “individual to be corrected.” The biphobia stemming from both the gay community and hegemonic society functions as a disciplinary technique to push bisexuals into a socially acceptable monosexuality. Femme bisexuality disrupts the “sedimentation” of gender norms that produce “the peculiar phenomenon of a ‘natural sex’ or a ‘real woman’ or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions” (Butler 140). It is through their failure to govern

themselves according to the proscribed scripts of proper gender, sexuality, and womanhood that femme bisexuals are prevented from becoming socially legible. They are instead constituted as the individual to be corrected with the goal of correction/recuperation into legibility. Butler explains gender as “a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture” (139). For bisexuals who blur the distinctions of gender and sexuality, disciplinary techniques are enforced frequently through negative social sanctions in the form of biphobia.

### **Visibility Politics, Passing, and Misrecognition**

In the book *Sexual Deceit: The Ethics of Passing*, Kelby Harrison discusses the multiple meanings of passing, noting that passing “ruptures our common ordinary understandings of authenticity and natural identities” (33). Something I found useful in Harrison’s chapter is her concept of the double vs. binary logic of identity. Under binary logic, the individual’s identity and the passing identity are categorized as separate entities that do not “layer” — they are an “either/or kind of option” (36). Using double logic, we can look more complexly at how the two identities (one labeled as “authentic” and the other as “passing”) both shape the individual. Both logics of passing require a duality through the idea that there are two stable identities working either together or separately. Similarly to how Butler conceives performativity, Pamela Caughie notes that “identity is something that we do, not something that we are” (36). Caughie also states that by understanding passing through double logic, we can see how “the passer does not relinquish one preexisting identity to move into another more highly valued one,” as would be the case if we only conceive of passing in a binary logic in which the two identities never intersect (qtd. in Harrison 36). Harrison argues that a heterosexual person and a person who

passes as heterosexual experience different ways of interacting with the construct of heterosexual identity (37).

Harrison focuses on the notion of embodiment/corporeality. She writes that “The role of visible bodies in the creation of identity must be something we take into consideration for passing both theoretically and politically” (42). Harrison discusses the beginnings of medical and scientific inquiry into homosexuality — how in the early 19th century there was a focus on finding visible difference manifested on the body, a search for a blatant indicator of homosexuality through comparative anatomy. Even in the creation of the “homosexual” visible differences were always a requirement in order to identify and attempt to contain non-normativity. Harrison writes: “We can’t be duped by the passing subject if we know the biological markers or the physiognomy of the people we want to be able to identify” (43). She goes on to note that “Some see passing as the thing that can be done with identity that ‘destabilizes identities predicated on the visible to reveal how they are constructed’” (43).

Harrison discusses the isolation produced by existing in a liminal space: “The liminal is a middle space, an intermediate, barely perceptible sensory threshold. It is the experience of a transitional space of being an X as Y in a space only for Ys, where X as Y isn’t a recognizable category, and the discovery of X as Y status would produce social outrage. The phenomenological reality of the ‘passing’ agent is one unrecognizable by those who can’t, or otherwise haven’t thought about passing. This is a unique isolation embedded in the social” (48). This quote speaks to the experience of isolation that bisexual femmes might feel in heterosexual spaces, in which they are read as straight, and the thought never even occurs to their heterosexual counterparts that they might not be straight — and even if the thought did arise, it is difficult to comprehend how someone who “appears” to be straight could actually identify with a non-

normative sexuality. The isolation of misrecognition is interesting especially because it is “deeply embedded in the social” — the feelings of isolation occur while the passer interacts with her peers while knowing their assumptions of her identity.

Harrison clarifies the difference between “active passing” and “passive passing.” Active passing is that passing which is purposeful — perhaps for a politician to get approval from hegemonic society, for example. However, for my project, I am more interested in experiences of invisibility and misrecognition, thus, “passive passing” is what I find useful. Passive passing is complicated by its lack of intentionality — one simply passes because of how they look. She states: “Resolving passive passing in these situations requires an awkward discursive revelation” (50). Passive passing can cause deep frustration in the passing individual due to feelings of invisibility and lack of inclusion in the desired group identity.

Finally, Harrison describes her conversation with Judith Butler about passing. Butler warns against the “true and false dichotomy that underpins passing” (54). Butler is referring to the idea that there is one “true” or “authentic” identity underneath the “false” passing identity. Harrison states that it is hard to reconcile passing with performativity, as performativity does not conceive of an interiority within the self. This means that “identity cannot have two aspects during passing: a subjective interior sense, and an objectively projected and received exterior sense” and “all we have during passing is a movement through one coextensive state (in which we are framed and received as one kind of identity) followed by a movement into another coextensive state (in which we are framed and received as a different kind of identity)” (55). While working on this project I had to navigate the challenge of analyzing experiences of misrecognition, invisibility, and passing without reinforcing essentialist narratives.

In “Passing at the Margins of Race and Sex” Nancy Argen McHugh is interested in “the inner experiences” of passing, focusing on how “these narratives make clear the danger of essentialist notions of identity and their manifestation in the imposed pass: “My purpose is to make clear that the kind of management forced upon people so that they pass is done so under the misguided and dangerous belief that bodily stability, reflective of an inner self, can be achieved and is necessarily desirable” (21). McHugh discusses how passing was a threat to European class and race boundaries as it “‘showed how tenuous the boundaries in the social order were.’ The fear that someone could pass for something they ‘were not’ became a source of social fear and anxiety... it subversively illustrated the instability of the European self. Passing causes the dominant group anxiety because it shows tenuousness of the boundaries of social order — “European identity was continually re-inscribed by the threat from passing” (21). McHugh’s point here resonates with my argument that bisexuality threatens a social order that relies upon monosexuality.

McHugh also mentions the concept of “boundary crossing,” arguing that passing brings out cultural anxieties through the individual’s ability to fit into perhaps a higher place on the social hierarchy than society would permit if the individual were clearly the marginalized identity. She asserts: “Passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or imposition. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced in boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about spectacularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (qtd. in McHugh 22). The ability to pass yet “secretly” be another identity threatens dominant senses of safety.



McHugh problematizes the conception of identity as the effect of essence that is “inside” us and stable rather than fluid and relational. She points to how the belief that we have an essential self is itself a social construct that we have internalized: “Sometimes socialization alone is enough to create very deep kinds of self-awareness and a fundamental sense of one’s identity and place in the world” (qtd in McHugh 23). McHugh describes “essence” and “essential nature” as the product of socialization. McHugh made me take a step back and question the foundations of this project and my dedication to social constructionism by stating that: “Because passing requires that there are stable, fixed, essential categories of identity, it needs a belief in essences to even exist” (24).

In “‘These Shoes Are Definitely Bicurious’: More Thoughts on the Politics of Fashion,” Samantha Brennan warns us of the danger of visibility politics. She discusses how identity is read relationally, giving an example of how marriage is viewed as heterosexual or homosexual, even if there is a bisexual person (or two) in the marriage (173). This relational reading of identity results in bisexual (and femme) erasure: “Being seen as bisexual can be difficult, especially for women, especially again for femme women” (174). She then questions: “How easy is it for bisexuals to be out? What’s required of us in the name of visibility?” (174) She is critical of the LGBTQ+ community’s strategy of visibility because she believes that it privileges only those who have the ability to be visible and places burden on each individual to “represent” the community: “There is both an optimism and an individualism that I find disturbing in visibility as a strategy: individualism in that we each have an obligation to be visible — even though that achievement is much easier for some than for others — and optimism in that it assumes that a world in which there was greater visibility is a world in which sexual minorities would be more justly treated” (176). Initially, when I began brainstorming on misrecognition and femme

bisexual women, I saw their invisibility as purely a negative thing. However, Harrison made me reconsider visibility politics: “The political strategy of visibility has its dangers and those dangers extend beyond the LGBT movement... certain assumptions about the correlation between appearance and identity have resulted in an often exclusive focus on visibility as both the basis of community and the means of enacting social change” (179). Throughout this project I challenge the prioritization of visibility as a means for social change while also acknowledging the important role that visibility plays in creating moments of solidarity.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How do those with invisible marginalized identities transgress and “fail” at gender?
2. If identities are always social, what is the affective value of attachments to an identity that is socially invisible/erased or constantly misrecognized?
3. How do femme bisexual women disrupt heteropatriarchy and identity politics?

### **1.4 Methods**

One of my primary concerns while setting out on this research project was my potential as an academic and a researcher — a status which results in an undeniable position of power — to perpetuate the same distanced, objectifying gaze toward femme bisexuals that feminists and queer theorists have historically utilized. Jessa Lingel details academia’s well-meaning but often dehumanizing use of bisexuality: “Although feminist and queer theory have appropriated bisexuality as an illustrative, epistemological tool, they have frequently failed to recognize the subjectivity and psychological complexity of bisexual bodies, even as their explicit aim was to demonstrate the validity of the marginalized” (213). In response to the feminist and queer theorist failure to attend to lived experiences of bisexual embodiment, I oriented my research around the voices of femme bisexual women by engaging in semi-structured interviews. I sought

to disrupt the cold, distanced high theory of academia and use my research not only as a means of knowledge production, but as a form of activism focused on advocating and consciousness raising for the group that I study.

Another important aspect of my research that has allowed me to subvert the use of bisexuality as a disembodied analytical tool in feminist/queer theory is my own positionality and reflexivity: I am a femme bisexual woman. In addition to speaking with other femme bisexual women, I include my own voice — various scenes and glimpses at intimate moments throughout my life that I feel have been defining or deeply valuable in developing my identity. As Elizabeth Ettorre notes, “Simply, knowledge comes from political understandings of one’s social positioning as well as experiences of the cultural freedoms and constraints one encounters” (2).

This research project is also aimed at de-centering masculinity within both hegemonic and queer/gay subcultures. Femmes, women, and femme women are all too used to being defined through their relationships with men and masculine counterparts such as the butch or the stud. This de-centering is a challenge, however, as the femme activist in me desired to subvert this relationally definitional tendency, yet the queer theorist in me wanted to interrogate the model of identity as a relational achievement that “situates identities in interaction” (Adams 207). While I wished to explore how the women experience themselves as read through/against masculinity or masculine partners, I did not want to reinforce masculinity’s dominance and privileging in both queer and hegemonic discourses and communities.

Within Women’s Studies, there have been many debates about the legitimacy of producing knowledge through experience. Criticisms of an epistemology of experience often come from the notion that experience should not be treated as factual and from an understanding that experiences can only be felt and expressed through specific cultural languages and ideas —

therefore, there is no objective narrative of experience and what one can experience is culturally constrained. In my research, I portray and communicate a multiplicity of experiences (and accordingly, a multiplicity of knowledges) about femme bisexual women's lives and the varying affects that accompany their slippery and socially illegible image.

I acknowledge that there is no essential, universal category of woman — I also believe that there is no universal category of femme or bisexual. These categories are socially and relationally constructed, fluid and shifting. Some bisexuals claim their bisexuality means attraction to men and women, while other bisexuals state that they have the potential to be more broadly attracted to “the same and other” genders. In Abi Alone and Allyson Mitchell's essay “Big Fat Femmes: Squeezing a Lot of Identity into One Pair of Control Top Nylons,” they write: “Someone asked me what I did that made me femme and I found it almost impossible to answer — meaning, I do what I do aesthetically because it feels right, comfortable, and sexy” (104). For them, femme is an aesthetic, for others femme is “a particularly femme strength of openness, vulnerability, and need” (Albrecht-Samarasinha 143). I sought to avoid the pitfalls of gatekeeping in my project by inviting anyone who feels that these identity labels resonate with them to be a part of my series of interviews. I agree that “any one person's experience will be limited, partial and socially located, and so cannot be taken as general knowledge of how social phenomena are organized as social relations” (Holland 125). Still, I do not believe that this makes researching and recording experiences valueless or less necessary than calculating quantitative data. Although the field has become deeply philosophical and theoretical, Women's Studies remains rooted in activism, and the concept of the “personal is political” is still a powerful one. Ettorre explains, “I am not making truth claims in my stories. I am merely representing ‘my truths’ which others may or may not see as their truths in my stories” (17). By

telling our own stories, we can reach out to others who might relate and feel a sense of solidarity and belonging. For me, feminist research is a method to elevate marginalized voices and hear often silenced stories.

Of course, as a MA student, my research was limited by time and money constraints. I confined the participants in my interviews to a micro-community of bisexual femmes of Atlanta, who of course will experience their femme bisexuality differently than people from other areas of the world might. Additionally, all of my accounts of these women are mediated by my subjectivity, my experience. Whether acknowledged or not, the researcher is always present in her work, and I merely hope to make that presence accessible and clear to my readers. I also believe in advocating for feminist researchers themselves, particularly when we too come from marginalized communities. As Ettore contends, “We as feminists no longer ‘insist on being dispassionate or positioned outside the hermeneutic circle in order to make valid contributions to knowledge’” (4). We deserve to have our experiences acknowledged, and we owe our readers and subjects an accountability of our presence within our research.

As has likely become evident, my interest in this project lies more in affect, embodied emotions, experience (which is always subjective), and the perpetual process of identity construction as “subjects who are constituted through experience” (Holland 126) than in searching for objective facts and truths. While I cannot make absolute truth claims, the goal of my thesis project is to question what we think we know to be true — more specifically, the hegemonic and heteronormative assumptions that are projected onto bisexual femme women on the basis of how their gender, sex, and sexuality may appear to align. Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland remark, “Re-visualisations of realities according to alternative ontologies are also a part of feminist projects for change” (Holland 38). I grounded my feminist ontology in an

awareness of how bisexual femme women have been silenced, and I inquired into what carving room for their existences might look, sound, or feel like. By collecting narratives of femme bisexual women's experiences and exposing knowledges of subjugation and subjugated knowledges, I hope to encourage my readers to question what they have come to understand as the realities of gender, sex, and sexual orientation.

## 2 CHAPTER 1: THE NORMS OF NON-NORMATIVE SEXUALITY (AND HOW BI FEMMES BREAK THEM)

*“Issues of visibility and privilege of passing are complicated to navigate if one is solely bisexual or femme, never mind being both.”*

*“Drop a femme into a straight bridal shower and she’ll stand out as much as a drag queen would.”*

*- Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha*

### 2.1 Creating Normative Gender: Essentialism and Social Constructionism

Queerness is theorized through an understanding of gender, sex, and sexuality as social constructions rather than natural realities. Judith Butler describes gender as, “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (141). This “coming to believe” occurs through the constant performance of categorizing and adhering to the signifiers of “woman” and “man.” Riki Wilchins describes gender as “a system of meanings,” which is productive in constructing our social worlds and how we navigate them. We do not conceptualize gender, sex, and sexuality as culturally taught to us because we never take classes that blatantly state how to behave as men and women. Yet we all know what is associated with womanhood — the expectation that you will have a vagina, for instance, and perform femininity by wearing dresses and crossing your legs. We anticipate women to be nurturers who are eager to become mothers, as this is considered to be a part of the “feminine essence” that resides within them based on the fact that they have a vagina.

The gender binary is perceived as a social reality despite the many intersex infants born every year. In fact, these infants are typically operated upon in order to neatly fit the categories of male or female so that they can “properly” grow to become boys or girls with all of the roles, statuses, and expressions associated with those genders. Suzanne Kessler’s piece “The Medical

Construction of Gender” interrogates how the “natural” categories of sex and gender are maintained by the pathologization of intersex infants as in need of surgical correction. Kessler points out the irony of the naturalization of sex by noting all of the cultural decisions that physicians make when selecting which sex to assign an intersex infant. Already centering male pleasure, such concerns as the ability to be penetrated by a penis or the ability of a penis to penetrate a vagina are central to the infant’s sex and gender assignment. These decisions are made through the heteropatriarchal cultural framework that assigns heterosexuality to all genders as the norm. Kessler states: “the medical management of intersexuality, instead of illustrating nature’s failure to ordain gender in these isolated, ‘unfortunate’ instances, illustrates physicians’ and Western society’s failure of imagination — the failure to imagine that each of their management decisions is a moment when a specific instance of biological ‘sex’ is transformed into a culturally constructed gender” (32). Altering the natural state of genitals to conform to the “natural” binary of male/female, man/woman tells us that these binaries that we perceive as natural truths — that then determine our future and acceptance to society — are actually culturally constructed, along with all of the meanings vested in them.

## **2.2 Homonormativity and Essentialism**

The investment in gender, sex, and sexuality as categories that are naturally aligned in specific ways — penis, male, man, masculine, and vagina, female, woman, feminine, with both being heterosexual — stigmatizes LGBTQIA+ individuals because they are understood as perverse, deviating from the roles that nature has assigned them (or, for social constructionists the roles culturally assigned). Thus, the homonormative LGBT community has sought empathy, assimilation, and rights through a narrative of “born this way.” Using the born this way narrative, LGBT people are able to garner some sympathy by implying that they were born sexually faulty,



and because sexuality is natural and cannot be changed (according to Western logic), they cannot become straight, so a moral society must treat them humanely. Many LGBT people truly believe that they were born that way, and to be fair, that belief cannot definitively be refuted. However, it is worth noting that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between our production as cultural subjects and our “natural” inclinations. It is quite common for LGBT people to find this narrative empowering, but our realities are always shaped by and through socially constructed norms. If the norm in Western society is that sexual orientation comes from a biological interiority, then it makes sense then that LGBT people would subscribe to these ideals as well and feel normalized by them.

One must consider that in a heteropatriarchal society everyone is socialized as heterosexual, regardless of whether or not these are the individual’s “natural” inclinations. Butler remarks that “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (384). Through their existence, LGBTQIA+ people disrupt the appearance that heterosexuality is natural — an appearance which is integral to systems of power such as heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. The ideal family in the West has traditionally been white, heterosexual, and serves the purpose of transmitting dominant cultural norms to offspring. These norms include gender roles and what it means to be a productive, good citizen. I did a quick Google search for “Gay family values” and the first result was a YouTube channel with over 40,000 subscribers that is literally named “Gay Family Values.” The family who runs the channel, coincidentally, is raising their children to be Christian. The same family values that are treasured by heteronormativity are also supported by homonormative gays and lesbians. Many gays and lesbians seek to conform to family values that support the social hierarchy, presenting an assimilationist and sanitized image of gay desires. Therefore, although the Right has

vocalized heterosexual anxieties over the years and gay marriage has become legalized, we have not seen a dramatic shift in the values of Western culture. Instead, we see further iterations of the heteropatriarchal family with many gays seeking inclusion in the privileged class of normativity.

In Janet Jakobsen's piece "Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization as We Know It?" she seriously considers claims made by the Christian Right that homosexuality demoralizes society and disrupts the tenants of Western citizenship: productivity, family values, and religion. The Right has often argued that legalization of gay marriage would initiate a slippery slope, culminating in a crumbling of society as we know it, with all sorts of deviant behaviors promoted. Accordingly, LGBT people seeking acceptance in the current societal framework must reassure heteropatriarchal anxieties by utilizing the "born this way" narrative, and in doing so support the naturalization of sexuality and the pathologization of intersexuality and queer or fluid desires. Not only does this biological determinist narrative reinforce the notion of sexuality as inherent, but it also reinforces the idea of sexuality as stable, never-changing, an identity that we are born with and that accordingly, can never be fluid: "Not only does it actually perpetuate normativity, it also fully accepts that those who control the normativity are obviously fully 'normal'" (Harsis). Homonormative gays aim to replicate heterosexuality to tame the threat that gay identity presents. It should be noted that although they want to assimilate into a heteronormative society, they do not typically seek to pass as heterosexual. The master narrative of gay identity in the West has become taking on the "born this way" narrative as a form of pride and empowerment. This logic is very clear in the lyrics to Lady Gaga's song "Born This Way:"

"There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"  
 She said, "Cause he made you perfect, babe"  
 "So hold your head up girl and you'll go far,  
 Listen to me when I say"  
 I'm beautiful in my way  
 'Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way  
 Don't hide yourself in regret  
 Just love yourself and you're set  
 I'm on the right track, baby  
 I was born this way (Born this way).

It is apparent that this song not only supports the notion of identity as stable, fixed, and unchangeable, but that it also supports the idea that these fixed identities are created by a male God (more than likely she is referring to Christian religion here). This song is a clear example of how the born this way narrative has become popularized as a form of empowerment that is situated in Western normativity — from Western constructions of identity to Western religious norms. The song functions to encourage LGBT groups by claiming that these identities are natural and created by God in the same way that heterosexuality is overwhelmingly understood. Ultimately, the song ends up reinforcing the norms that have contributed to the disempowerment of LGBTQ+ groups, and particularly, to the stigma around identities that are perceived as fluid or as phases, such as bisexuality. Implicitly, the song promotes the idea of shifting sexual desires (bisexual and queer) as invalid in contrast to seemingly biologically rooted fixed identities (gay and lesbian). One might try to make the argument that some people are born with fluid sexualities, but that still reinforces the idea that sexuality is biologically determined. These same ideologies are reinforced by lyrics such as “I can’t change / even if I tried / even if I wanted to” from Mary Lambert’s “She Keeps Me Warm,” and “Girls love girls and boys / And love is not a choice” from Panic! At the Disco’s “Girls/Girls/Boys.” Without a doubt, these lyrics are representative of the mainstream homonormative approach to LGBT rights.

### **2.3 Queer Essentialism: The Boundaries of Queerness**

In Cathy Cohen’s seminal work “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” she argues that “a truly radical or transformative politics has not

resulted from queer activism. In many instances, instead of destabilizing the assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity, queer politics have served to reinforce simple dichotomies between the heterosexual and everything ‘queer.’” I opened this chapter with an excerpt from Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha’s essay “On Being a Bisexual Femme” because I believe her statements illustrate that there is a notion of what constitutes queerness that is now so widespread it is bordering on essentialism. Just as there is an essentialist idea of the characteristics of normative men and women within the heterosexual world, there is an essentialist idea of the characteristics of queers within the queer world. One of the bisexual women I interviewed, Alice, described how she is treated in queer spaces:

There are people who are going to be less enthusiastic because they’ll be like, “You’re not really doing anything for the community, you’re not recognizable within the community, so you don’t have as big a space as other people do within the community.” And I think that’s where it comes down to... how much space you’re allowed to have within the community as a bisexual person who specifically presents as cisgender. Because if I’m a bisexual woman who shaves my head and dresses in masculine clothes, that’s going to be more visible as “not normal” than I would be. So it’s specifically with bisexual people who can be read as cisgender and heterosexual instead of non-normative.

Alice makes the point that people who pass as heterosexual are perceived as less strategically useful for the revolutionary, gender-bending goals of the queer community. There is a unified look and feel associated with queerness, which then creates boundaries which determine who fits in the queer community and who does not: “What seems to make queer activists unique, at this particular moment, is their willingness to confront normalizing power by emphasizing and exaggerating their own anti-normative characteristics and nonstable behavior” (Cohen). Cohen argues that the postmodern, anti-identity politics theories of queer scholars shifted into emotion-fueled queer activism, and at some point, became extremely polarizing, reifying the very binaries to which queer theory is ideologically opposed. While queers target heteronormativity as an oppressive social system which limits and punishes according to strict gender norms, they often

end up reinforcing monolithic, dichotomizing, and essentializing notions of heterosexuality as the marker of the “enemy,” and they may objectify or fetishize other queer bodies and subjectivities as tools for revolution. The tacit question around who gets to identify as queer seems to be: “If queers do not present as tools of subversion, are they really a part of the community? And if so, on what tier?” Cohen cites a reductionist leaflet spread at a 1990 New York pride march, which quite literally states: “Straight people are your enemy.”

In this project, I want to take this angry queer affect into account in a variety of ways: for one thing, I will discuss the ways in which these kinds of statements take away the important nuance and complexity necessary to our ability to effectively theorize and organize for social change. In fact, this polarizing and essentializing queer sentiment has resulted in the marginalization of femmes, bisexuals, and femme bisexuals within queer spaces. These expressions and identities have been taken to indicate a disloyalty to the LGBTQIA+ and/or feminist communities due to their visual parallels with traditional heteronormative performance. This project centers around a critique of the ways in which appearing privileged does not equate having privilege or even wanting privilege — I will venture the argument that in certain spaces the appearance of having privilege actually multiply marginalizes individuals. Those in queer circles who do not perform the queer aesthetic may not experience a sense of community because they do not appear entirely dedicated to the queer cause of deconstructing gender. Samantha Brennan states, “It’s worth noting that if a queer aesthetic works at all, then by necessity it does so by way of inclusion and exclusion. Think about your own judgments about sexual orientation. Some people get counted in and others out on the basis of such factors as handbag style, lipstick color, fingernail length and amount of hair styling product used” (178).

Clearly queers such as those who wrote the leaflet passed out at the 1990 NY pride parade must have had a way of judging who belonged to that privileged class of heterosexuality. Often this judgement seems to occur according to the degree to which an individual appears to be gender conforming — are they holding hands with someone who appears to be of the “opposite” gender? Do they look like a man and spread their legs when they sit? Are they wearing a dress? As we move into 2019, discussions around non-binary identities and the inability to mark identity according to stereotypes have been spreading. As queers, it is high time that we re-evaluate our perceptions of what heterosexual (and heteronormative) looks and sounds like and if this is a useful way of judging people at all. In order to re-evaluate these perceptions, the question of what constitutes “gender conforming” and “gender non-conforming” must be considered. In following with Butler’s notion of gender identity, sex, sexuality, gender expression, and gender roles all aligning according to the norms and ideals of a heteropatriarchal society, anyone who breaks the neat alignment of those ideals would be considered gender non-conforming. Recently, I got into this conversation with a friend who is doing work on black queer female masculinity, interrogating in the ways the studs’ failure to conform to gender norms shapes their self-image and experiences. During our discussion it occurred to me that it is inaccurate to say that studs or butches are gender non-conforming and that femmes *are* gender conforming. When using the logic of queer theory, a woman who performs femininity but is romantically or sexually attracted to other women or non-men is failing to conform to heteronormative gender norms — regardless of how much she may appear to conform to those norms when we see her shopping at a grocery store in a pink dress. So, what does gender non-conforming really mean? Is it fair to evaluate queer experience according to the extent to which one is gender conforming or gender non-conforming when we all break the rules of normative

gender at some point in our lives (yes, even heterosexuals)? Throughout my interviews and research, I have found that the struggles of invalidation and erasure that femme bisexual women face all center around this notion of the gender conformity and the boundaries of queer.

According to GLAAD's resource "Reporting on the Bisexual Community," gender non-conforming is:

that fact alone does not make them transgender. Many transgender men and women have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Simply being transgender does not make someone gender non-conforming. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as gender non-conforming.

As I stated previously, we all express gender in some non-normative way during our lives, but that does not make us gender non-conforming, according to GLAAD. What makes a person gender non-conforming is whether or not they *identify* as gender non-conforming. So what if a bisexual femme woman who passes as heterosexual identifies as gender non-conforming? Is she still gender conforming because she "looks" like it? Or is she gender non-conforming because she claims it (which in itself is an act of gender non-conformity)? It seems that the most inclusive and radical way to conceptualize gender non-conformity and queerness is to listen to how people self-identify and label accordingly.

Albrecht-Samarasinha is a bisexual femme woman who is critical of queer politics founded on the notion of a unified queer aesthetic, yet she simultaneously (and probably without noticing) reinforces this idea of a queer appearance or specifically queer way of being in statements such as: "Drop a femme into a straight bridal shower and she'll stand out as much as a drag queen would" (142). She conflates specific traits such as "brassy, ballsy, loud, obnoxious" with femme bisexual women's gender performance, marking these characteristics as indicative of femme identity. I point her statement out not because I believe Albrecht-Samarasinha is

necessarily wrong in her observations — certainly, that is a common performance of femme identity — but rather to bring to attention how notions of identity always rely on some aspect of essentialist logic; there must be a uniform performance that connects people who claim membership to an identity category. As we conceive of identity as homogenous, we then begin to enact identity politics, drawing boundaries across what identities look like and who is permitted membership to those identity-based communities.

In my own experience, I have found that femme identity is defined through a conscious knowledge of gender performance. Often femme identity is differentiated from femininity by its hyper-femininity and exaggerated characteristics. While femininity is about women's natural essence — wearing pretty dresses, light makeup, crossing your legs delicately — femme is about an awareness of the socially constructed nature of gender expression and is often juxtaposed with traditionally masculine norms (having leg or armpit hair, for example) or hyper, campy femininity (wearing hot pink, glitter, and chunky platform heels at the grocery store). Neither of these forms of femme are negative, but problems arise when only those exaggerated or blatantly “gender jumbled” femme performances are the ones that are considered “queer enough” to be accepted in the queer community: they then become a means of leaving some queers on the margins of the LGBTQIA+ community.

For this thesis, I interviewed five bisexual women who identify, to varying degrees, as femme. The extent to which my participants identify as femme is based on their own understanding of how their gender performance and experiences fit their parameters of “femme.” In particular, I selected femme bisexual women whose femme performance appears virtually the same as the performance of femininity, in that they blend in with normative feminine women and do not generally actively or consciously break feminine gender norms in their femme



presentations. I asked these women about their membership to both the bisexual and femme communities, and I often received hesitant and unsure answers indicating an insecurity in whether or not they can be considered a part of LGBTQIA+ community if they perform seemingly normative femininity and are in relationships with straight men. As some subjects pointed out, “femme” has also traditionally been associated with “lipstick lesbian,” a descriptor for feminine women who are exclusively attracted to other women. Through further research and conversations I have learned that femme is typically conceived of as: A) Someone who juxtaposes masculine characteristics on their hyper-femininity, B) Someone performs campy hyper or high femininity, C) A feminine woman who is attracted exclusively to other women and identifies as a lesbian, or D) Someone who believes gender is performative and chooses to perform femininity. Regarding my latter point, another question arises: how do we know if a woman is “choosing” to perform femininity? We cannot know this without having a conversation with her on the topic, so she more than likely continues to be perceived as normatively feminine and not belonging to the queer community. For the most part, the women I interviewed do not fall into any of these categories except D), and as a result they are often read as heterosexual and stereotypically feminine, leading them to a uniquely bi-femme experience of marginalization and erasure within heteronormative, gay and lesbian, and queer spaces. I divided these unique experiences into the sections that make up the rest of this thesis.

### 3 CHAPTER 2: “SHE OCCUPIES NORMALITY ABNORMALLY”: THE AFFECT OF MISRECOGNITION

*“I’ve been wanting to try to identify as queer, but I also feel like that’s taking away from queer identity. Like, me as a person who passes so well. I walk down the street and nobody would even think that I’m anything but a straight female, and so I think that me identifying as queer takes away from queer people.” — Alice*

*“I think a lot of bisexual women, or bisexual people, question the authenticity of their sexuality or how it fits in or even — you have to ask yourself ‘Am I faking this attraction? Am I making this up? Is this something that’s real?’” — Kaylee*

*“I’m treated like a straight person, my identity is erased, people assume I’m an ally and not a member of the community, and I got my fill of that in my twenties, you know? I’m done. I don’t feel at home in a purely straight cis environment as well as most LGBT spaces.” — Belle*

Initially when I began this project I was concerned that it would be difficult to find women who identify as both femme and bisexual, but upon posting a call for participants on an LGBTQ+ women’s Facebook group I was surprised at the number of women who quickly and eagerly responded. Bisexual femme women were suddenly coming out of the woodworks and were excited about it — one woman even suggested that all of the bisexual femme women who responded get together for a party, to which other women enthusiastically agreed. One reason I started this project was because I know that bisexual femme women are a silenced and seemingly (I say “seemingly” because we are surrounded by one another but invisible to each other) small minority in the community, but upon receiving immediate feedback from so many women, it hit me even harder that bi femme invisibility is an issue that needs to be addressed. Seeing all of these responses and discussing bi femme issues with the women I interviewed made it clear to me that bisexual femme women’s experiences have been bottled up, tucked away, and deeply internalized. These hidden affects are ready to spill out but continue to be held in because many bi femme women continue to believe that they do not have the right to their frustrations and experiences of oppression. Because their erasure can simultaneously lend them privilege, many

bi femme women do not feel as though they have the right to feel erased or to complain about being pushed to the margins of the LGT and queer communities.

### 3.1 Coming Out As Monosexual vs. Coming Out As Polysexual

Coming out of the closet is a key point of “plot progression” in the Western master-narrative of gay culture. Nowadays, coming out is painted as a brave, bold move toward progress and freedom, empowering the individual through the relief of no longer hiding in shame and secrecy — of course, this is an extremely romanticized and in most cases inaccurate narrative of what it means to tell someone that you are LGBTQ+. In reality, coming out is messy, constant, and a kind of responsibility: you can tell your family that you are gay, but then you also have to tell everyone who becomes important in your life. Pre-Stonewall, coming out was generally discouraged because being gay was considered shameful, but in the present day, coming out is almost expected of any real or proper LGBT individual (Harrison). Coming out is a contradictory phenomenon because while the West emphasizes the citizen’s right to privacy and coming out is considered a personal decision, it is almost *owed* in a way, as queer identities are associated with deceit and the transition to respectable citizenship means cleansing oneself of perversion and deception. Additionally, gays who choose to stay closeted may also be accused of perpetuating “the invisibility that fuels anti-gay stereotypes... [and] reinforces the belief that homosexuality is shameful” (Harrison 184).

Accepting a lifelong orientation and feeling validation through coming out is easier for some than others: monosexual orientations are most accepted, as they make the most sense in our current sexual schema. Polysexual orientations such as bisexuality, however, are often not given the same level of reverence that monosexual coming-outs receive. Because the West appreciates fixed identities, coming out as bisexual is a sort of paradox: one is coming out as an identity that

is perceived as changeable and unstable, and frequently, untrustworthy. Accordingly, even bisexuals who follow the respectable coming out narrative cannot shake their association with deceit. People who come out as bisexual may be perceived as straight people who are appropriating gay culture as a rebellious phase. One of my interview participants, Jessica, detailed how this problem has affected her life, explaining: “I know from personal experience that a lot of lesbian women think that this is just a fun phase for us. They think their same-gender attractions and desires are more valid and more legitimate because those are their only attractions and desires, and somehow ours are watered-down, and it’s not as real, and it’s not as authentic.” While this is a popular notion in the LG community, the majority of the women I interviewed have identified as non-heterosexual as far back as their middle or high school years. Another participant, Natalie, described coming to terms with her identity as a conflicted experience:

I think I was twelve when I first realized that I was also attracted to women. I was in this weird space where I thought everyone just felt like that. And then when I was seventeen I came out to myself as bisexual but immediately freaked out. I wrote in my journal this beautiful journal entry that I still have, all about how I didn’t feel the need to choose between genders and I liked different things about different genders. All this really insightful stuff about not feeling like I had to be monogamous. It was really beautiful, and it’s interesting to see how far away from that I got and then ended up returning to it. Then at nineteen I came out to my friends and people at college as bisexual but quickly kind of then labeled myself as a lesbian — for a whole bunch of reasons and I don’t want to necessarily blame the community there, but I do feel that if I would have been in a community that was more supportive of bisexuals I would have been more comfortable identifying as bisexual because I didn’t re-identify as bisexual again until a year ago.

Because bisexuality is often not warmly embraced within lesbian and gay circles, Natalie felt obligated to identify with lesbianism, only returning to a bisexual identity years later. Natalie’s story of rejecting her bisexual identity in exchange for a lesbian one is not unique. For example, a biracial bisexual activist, Lani Ka’ahumana, identified as a lesbian during a period of the 2nd wave feminist movement. Ka’ahumana fell in love with a man and struggled with naming herself as bisexual because she knew lesbian feminists would perceive her as a traitor. Believing the

common saying of “feminism is the theory and lesbianism the practice,” she avoided the B-word, instead calling herself a lesbian with “unfinished business.” Over time Ka’ahumana shifted to calling herself bisexual, then to describing herself as ““a lesbian who fell from grace’” (Iloveannone). She eventually became a prominent bisexual activist, writing about the biphobia she experienced and advocating for bisexuals to be viewed as members of the lesbian, gay, and queer communities.

While Ka’ahumana’s shameful transition from lesbianism to bisexuality occurred in the 1980s, we still see this kind of shame around bisexuality today. Natalie explained that “My last ex-girlfriend hinted that if I ever came out as bisexual that it would be embarrassing to her. That it would almost negate everything we had and make it seem like it was an experiment even though I’ve been dating women a lot longer than she had. If I ever came out as bisexual, that would be embarrassing to her.” In *Public Sex*, Pat Califia considers why she avoids calling herself bisexual despite her opposite-sex sexual partners: “Why not simply identify as bi? That’s a complicated question . . . . A self-identified bisexual is saying, ‘Men and women are of equal importance to me.’ That’s simply not true of me. . . . [W]hen I turn on to a man it’s because he shares some aspect of my sexuality (like S/M or fisting) that turns me on despite his biological sex” (qtd. in Hemmings 96). It seems that much of the avoidance of the term “bisexual” comes from a misunderstanding of the potential that the term holds — in this example, Califia avoids the term bisexual because she understands it to be a 50/50 attraction to men and women, with both genders being of equal value and attractiveness. Many, if not most, bisexuals do not experience an equal attraction to men and women, and they also experience attraction outside of those categories: “Even for those of us who are certain of our bisexual identity, being bisexual does not mean that one is attracted to both sexes equally. Some may find that their sexual desires

and emotional/romantic/affective desires pull in different directions” (Brennan 173). Natalie defines bisexuality as “a very expansive identity that incorporates my attraction to a lot of different kinds of people and a lot of people who identify with various different understandings of gender,” summarizing that, “to me it’s just attraction to people whose gender is the same and different as my own.” Another interview participant, Belle, explained her definition of bisexuality similarly:

I’m an activist so I’m partial to Robyn Och’s definition that I call myself bisexual because I have a capacity to be attracted to more than one gender, and she also includes that there are different kinds of attractions — romantically, sexually, etc. So yeah, I would define it as being attracted across gender identity, regardless of gender identity — that’s just not a factor so much in my attraction.

Jessica described her bisexuality a bit differently: “I’d identify bisexual as having a sexual or romantic attraction to two genders.” She then clarified that for her, bisexuality means attraction to two genders, although those genders may be *neither* man nor woman. Then Alice compared the “mainstream” definition of bisexuality with her personal definition: “I think society defines bi as someone who likes women and men, and I think I would also kind of define it that way, but I would also include like — it’s not just cis people — it’s anybody who identifies as male or female, woman or man, and a person who likes all iterations of that spectrum.” Kaylee explained her understanding of bisexuality as similar to pansexuality (more on that later): “I would define bisexual as being attracted to kind of...I guess the two or more genders. I don’t like that. I feel like my idea of bisexuality is just what pansexuality is, but just being open to attraction to people whether they’re men, women, non-binary.” All of these women’s understandings of bisexuality echo that of a 1990 bisexual manifesto entitled “Anything That Moves:” “Bisexuality is a whole, fluid identity. Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we have

'two' sides or that we must be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don't assume that there are only two genders."

It becomes clear that from the '90s through to the present day, bisexuality has held many different meanings, but primarily it has meant attraction beyond binaries, so Califia's feminist lesbian critique that "A self-identified bisexual is saying, 'Men and women are of equal importance to me,'" is historically inaccurate and an overwhelming generalization and misconception of the many meanings that have been associated with the term. In David Halperin's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bisexual," he lists thirteen different ways in which bisexuality has been defined by bisexuals and bisexual theorists, remarking that, "I shall not purport to say what bisexuality really means or try to indicate how it should be understood. I'll content myself with merely noting that the reason there has been so much argument over the meaning of bisexuality is that the word signifies different things to different people. Even more important, it keeps getting used in different ways or to refer to different things" (Halperin 260).

Belle recalled the first woman she fell in love with and the biphobia that riddled and ultimately ended that relationship. Her partner would question her, "Why can't you just be a lesbian?" Belle rolled her eyes at the memory: "She's lesbian-identified but she's now on her third long term relationship with a man and refuses to identify as bisexual." While the politics of identifying as lesbian and dating men are up for debate, this story provides an example of how internalized biphobia becomes externalized. Belle's partner felt the stigma around the B-Word and accordingly, associating the term with shame and distrust, avoided labeling herself as bisexual. She internalized this biphobia, refusing to identify herself as bisexual, but she then externalized her biphobia by projecting it onto Belle; she wanted to avoid association with that word to the extent that she destroyed her relationship over it.

Bisexuals often feel pressured to distance themselves from all of the stereotypes associated with bisexuality. Natalie expressed this extra pressure that coming out as bisexual — especially as a bisexual who doesn't label her attractions within the man/woman dichotomy — put on her: “When I was coming out to my mom, I prefaced it with: ‘Just put all the stereotypes you have in your mind about bisexual people out of your mind for a second, just listen to what I'm saying to you. I am attracted to a lot of different kinds of people, and whoever I'm with doesn't negate all the other kinds of attraction I have.’ And so that's kind of how I explained it to her.” Because they have the ability to experience “normative” attractions (i.e., be in heterosexual-presenting relationships), bisexuals might receive intense denial of their sexuality and disbelief by family and friends. As Macalister notes, “Bisexuality alone is too ambiguous for many people to accept. That's why people keep trying to deny its existence, saying bisexuals are ‘really’ gay but too afraid to accept it, or ‘really’ straight but trying to be rebellious or ‘going through a phase.’ We prefer for everything to fit neatly into a category instead of straddling more than one” (26). I would also add that bisexuality is so often frowned upon because of the restricted style of Western relationships. If we could remove the stigma from being perceived as hyper-sexual or non-monogamous, for instance, then associating these concepts with bisexuality would not harm bisexuals. If we could embrace and de-stigmatizing the stereotypes rather than distancing ourselves from them, perhaps we could open up space for all kinds of configurations of relationships that are not bound by heteronormative Western standards. Much of the stigma around bisexuality comes from the idea that bisexuals are not going to “settle down” with a life partner because they are too sexual or have too many conflicting attractions. If we instead challenged the stigma of these stereotypes then bisexuality would be rendered even more threatening to heteropatriarchy — if bisexuals were to say: “Yeah, maybe some of us are into



different configurations of relationships, and maybe we don't seek a life partner. Maybe we want to move through society with more freedom and fluidity.”

For those who are at home in a heteronormative world, there seems to be an assumption that if one can be attracted to normativity one should choose to disregard any non-normative attractions. The limits of the born this way logic are clear here: if gays are apologetic for being born gay and would never have chosen to be gay if they had had the option, then why are people choosing to be bisexual? For example, as a queer woman who tends to date masculine women, I have received questions like, “Why can't you just date men?” There is an assumption that because I am attracted to masculinity, I should choose men because men's masculinity is inherently more valid and legitimate than women's masculinity. In a patriarchal culture a woman should always choose men above other women. This logic applies to bisexuals, decreeing that if a woman has the potential to be attracted to men it does not make sense that she would choose to act on other desires.

As mentioned in Chapter One, essentialism is key to Western conceptualizations of identity, and our current understanding of sexuality and gender is an essentialist dichotomy: gay or straight, man or woman. The liminal status of bisexuality presents a challenge to our ways of constructing identity, and can then lead us to the frightening consideration of how we have constructed our own identity as heterosexuals or homosexuals — the vastness and uncontainability of bisexuality is alarming to those of us who are comfortable in binaries, and the majority of us have been socialized to believe that these binaries are natural, inherent, and essential. If bisexuality blurs the binaries, it also disrupts the idea that sexual binaries — and sexuality as a whole — are natural essences within us and the Western notion that whatever is natural is sacred (unless it is intersex infants, of course). Because of the threat that bisexuality

presents to our very ways of knowing ourselves and navigating the world, “Friends and acquaintances will stop at nothing to straighten it all out and discover the ‘truth’” (Macalister 28).

The valorization of coming out reveals the West’s adoration for stable identities and the legibility that is assumed to accompany such identities. There is an accompanying notion that when one comes out as having a specific sexual orientation, they are then tied to that orientation for the rest of their lives. This conceptualization of identity as a stable, non-fluid essence limits bisexuals. In Western culture, bisexuality is still in such a marginal status because of its label as a “noncommittal” type of identity — an identity that is itself always in-between the two “real” identity poles of gay and straight. Bisexuals might be seen as gays who are perpetuating the idea that homosexuality is shameful, rather than as people expressing an identity separate from homosexuality: “Within gay and lesbian communities bisexuality is often figured as a ‘phase’ or ‘cover’ for a ‘truer’ gay or lesbian identity” (Alexander 3). These notions of a “truer” identity that falls into a binary are rooted in Western constructions of identity that support systems of power such as heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Because, as Jonathan Alexander and Serena Anderlini-Onofrio note, “Bisexuality seems to point to how reductive the social construct of sexuality really is” (5), the sexual orientation must be torn down, erased, and stigmatized. In order for a heteropatriarchal framework reliant upon binaries to maintain its power, bisexuality must not be viewed as a potential option with which to identify.

It seems that one of the most prominent ways in which bisexuality points to the reductiveness of sexual constructs is through its resistance to binaries and binary opposition. I asked my interview subjects why they believe that heteropatriarchy needs binaries and Jessica responded:

Patriarchy requires binaries because binaries are what have built it, essentially. As soon as you separate yourself from something, you create a binary of “me” and “them,” and so if you separate men and non-men and assign a hierarchy and a value and have said “Okay, this group is better,” the inherent opposite side to that coin in this logic is that “this side is worse.” The entire logic behind patriarchal thinking is dominance: who’s better, stronger, bigger, badder, and who’s weaker, smaller, worse, less valuable. That’s essentially what patriarchy is. Binaries inherently create difference and that difference is almost always hierarchical, and patriarchy is a system of hierarchy, and patriarchy couldn’t even stand without this shit supporting it. Patriarchy is the ultimate effect of all of these binary causes — I think that these happened first and then patriarchy became the result of all of these logics.

If, as Jessica states, patriarchy relies on binaries because they are inherently oppositional and distribute an overwhelming amount of power to the masculine side, then bisexuality is threatening to patriarchy because it deconstructs, transgresses, and subverts these binaries. The very fact that bisexuals can hold attraction for both sides of the binary skews the hierarchizing of man/woman. When asked why bisexuality and polysexuality more broadly threaten heteropatriarchy, Natalie’s response was almost a direct commentary building upon Jessica’s statement that patriarchy functions through binaries:

I think what makes straight people and a heteronormative society comfortable is believing that queer people are kind of siloed and that we have two separate worlds, and straight people date, and cohabit, and reproduce with straight people, and queer people are in their own part of society — and yeah, we overlap, but when it comes to our intimate connections we are separate... and so polysexual people really fuck that up because we do partner with both gay and straight people, and we do make it apparent that you actually don’t have to pick a side, so to speak. Heteronormativity is very invested in making it seem like heterosexuality is not only the natural sexuality, but the preferred one, and this conditional acceptance of gay people as being separate from them helps to bolster that, but what polysexuality actually does is say like, “No, people can date, and couple, and reproduce or not, in all kinds of different ways,” and I think that represents a pretty significant threat to the heterosexual order.

For Natalie, the binary of hetero/homo is constructed through a repudiation of bisexuality and polysexuality. These binaries constructed through repudiation of bisexuality uphold a heteropatriarchal societal framework of domination. Clare Hemmings explains repudiation as central to Butler’s theorizing of identity formation: “what makes butch-femme and drag so

potentially subversive is their very closeness to heterosexuality, their making conscious of the mechanism of repudiation in sustaining our identities” (93). This same subversive potential lies in bisexuality, which can make conscious the mechanism of repudiation in sustaining heteronormative identities, and by extension, heteronormativity. While we do not consciously realize our identities are constructed through the repudiation of other identities, the question of what would happen if “proper” identities were no longer constructed through the repudiation of “improper” is actually threatening — it presents a loss of privilege for normative groups, and loss of privilege is often felt as discrimination.

Identity is constructed through repudiation of the abject, which Julia Kristeva explains as, “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). As evidenced in Natalie’s comment, bisexuality certainly disturbs identity and social order by blurring borders and established meanings of identity, attraction, and power, making it abject and repudiated — something that Western identity is constructed against. Abjection is attached to the fear of ambiguity and as Macalister points out, bisexuality is frightening in its ambiguity (26). Jessica connected abjection with bisexuality when she discussed what causes biphobia: “That’s why you’re so scared of it and so repulsed by it... I think that might be some of it of just — ‘Oh my God, if bisexuals exist what does that mean for me? Do I really have these desires?’ It makes people think about things perhaps that they wouldn’t otherwise.” She later commented:

I think if you understand that bisexuality is a natural thing for at least some people, that means that it could be natural for you. And then you have to stop and re-evaluate what you thought you knew about yourself. And I think in that same logic a bisexual’s existence is obviously a threat in the same way it might to be the individual thinking about their sexuality, it’s a threat to hegemonic straightness because then that has to be re-evaluated — or hegemonic monosexuality, I would say, predominantly straightness. It’s a threat to both the individual and the system.

Similarly, Barbara Ehrenreich describes how reducing sexuality to a straight-gay binary: “denies the true plasticity of human sexuality, and in so doing, helps heterosexuals evade that which they really fear. And what heterosexuals really fear is not that ‘they’—an alien subgroup with perverse tastes in bedfellows—are getting an undue share of power and attention, but that ‘they’ might well be us” (qtd. in Baumgardner 52). Not only is there a fear that bisexuals could potentially subvert binaries and systems of power, there is a strong repudiation because of the fear that this potential is already within the most normative of individuals — this fear haunts us and must be silenced, which becomes difficult to do when bisexuals are an increasingly substantial population. A research study conducted in 2013 showed that 40% of LGBT-identified Americans label themselves as bisexual (Brown). Unsurprisingly, bisexuals are less likely to be out than gay people — only 28% of bisexual people surveyed in 2013 said that they are out versus the 71% of lesbians and 77% of gay men (Mercado).

Because for Butler gender is something we do and therefore something that we can fail at or disrupt, we all end up failing gender at some point, regardless of how normative we may appear. I find Marilyn Frye’s following statement from *The Politics of Reality* to be an example of how men constantly fail at masculinity with the specter of abject homoeroticism always so close:

To say that straight men are heterosexual is only to say that they engage in sex (fucking exclusively with the other sex, i.e., women). All or almost all of that which pertains to love, most straight men reserve exclusively for other men. The people whom they admire, respect, adore, revere, honor, whom they imitate, idolize, and form profound attachments to, whom they are willing to teach and from whom they are willing to learn, and whose respect, admiration, recognition, honor, reverence and love they desire... those are, overwhelmingly, other men. In their relations with women, what passes for respect is kindness, generosity or paternalism; what passes for honor is removal to the pedestal. From women they want devotion, service and sex. Heterosexual male culture is homoerotic; it is man-loving.

Frye makes a bold claim that even the most heteronormative men dedicate their love and emotions toward other men. It could be debated whether an essential part of heteronormative manhood requires this dedication of affection toward other men, or whether this dedication toward other men could constitute a subversion or a failing of gender under those scripts in which men are supposed to be in constant competition with one another — simultaneous subversion and reification of these narratives could very well be at work. Men undoubtedly experience deep erotic attractions toward one another, so it becomes necessary to violently shun any potential for labels such as “queer” or “fag” to be placed upon them (we hear this all the time in one of men’s favorite way to compliment each other — “no homo”), or for them to be perceived as sexually attracted to one another, which would then put them in the weaker position of the feminine. It is far easier to distinguish themselves from homosexuality, which would mean they are only attracted to men, than it is to distinguish themselves from bisexuality, which would allow them to be in relationships with women while also having emotional and/or physical attractions to men. It is simpler to define oneself against a straightforward monosexual identity than a messy identity such as bisexuality which could easily apply to men who have experienced affections for both men and women yet choose the label of heterosexuality.

In Elline Lipkin’s book *Girls Studies*, she explains that “For long before they love boys, girls love each other, and with great passion” (Lipkin 108). To some degree, girls’ and women’s intimacy is accepted or overlooked in our culture because it is considered indicative of the nurturing and frivolous nature associated with feminine gender performance, yet Lipkin describes the ways in which patriarchy and heteronormativity separate women and encourage relational aggression among girls as they grow older. Girls are expected to become competitive for male attention and to focus all of their nurturing energies on their husbands and children:

“Anything up to that life stage is assumed to be practice, if not insignificant” (108). Girls’ intimate prioritizing of one another is not meant to expire as they mature into women who put all of their attention toward men: “many girls experience connection with a ‘best friend’ in childhood in a way akin to falling in love for the very first time, as one first feels validated through another’s eyes. Yet...girls may feel ‘hampered’ by the threat of crossing a line into the appearance of lesbianism and transgressing codes of sexual and gender ‘normalcy’” (Lipkin 108). As girls grow older, they are policed into heterosexuality and the option of bisexuality, which would allow them to distribute sexual and emotional energy toward both men and women, is withheld.

Both heterosexual men and women experience homoerotic attachments at some point in their lives, or even as a lasting pattern. At the same time, homosexuals often experience erotic or sexual relationships with people of another gender or with heterosexuals, yet through all of these blurry interactions the attachment to monosexuality remains and the potentiality of bisexuality is repudiated: “We often engage in bi-erotic behavior, engaging members of both sexes, while asserting a sexual identity oriented toward one sex or the other—not both” (Alexander 4). As discussed earlier, Pat Califia explains that although she has sexual interactions with men, she still identifies as a lesbian because she prioritizes women and her interactions with men beyond sex are meaningless. But what about the homosexuals and heterosexuals who do feel messy desires? There are those who feel emotional attractions to various configurations of genders yet continue to identify with monosexuality.

Many of us have felt some erotic attraction to genders outside of a heterosexual or homosexual binary, and that can be alarming to our sense of safety and order, but to go further, the existence of bisexuality not only makes us question our own monosexual sexual orientations,

but it also makes us question the construct of sexual orientation as a whole: “bisexuality becomes... a kind of ‘ghostly other’ to sexuality itself—there in the shadowy background but ultimately something that must be denied in pursuit of more mature sexual expressions. The persistence of bisexuality in this ghostly role embodies cultural fears that ‘sexuality’ per se, may not exist, that it may be nothing but a cultural construct that helps modern institutions to control people’s multiple talents and possibilities for love” (Alexander 6). Systems of domination often remain so powerful because we do not realize that they are not natural realities — that they are socially constructed, and accordingly, are changeable. Allan G. Johnson declares that “Patriarchy only exists through people’s lives... It’s an ongoing process that is continually shaped and reshaped” (31). Using this queer theorist lens, it becomes clear that social systems operate much in the same way as gender performativity: they only appear normative and stable because we give them that status, and part of their power is preventing us from realizing how easily subversion might occur, or realizing the subversion that is already happening within them. Bisexuality is repudiated because it is a signifier of the cultural anxieties that threaten systems of domination — it points out the constructedness of sexuality. Essentially, bisexuality can clarify to us that in so far as sexuality is concerned: “We have some freedom to break the rules and construct everyday life in different ways, which means that the paths that we choose to follow can do as much to change patriarchy as they can to perpetuate it” (Johnson 31-32). If binary, monosexual sexuality is not constituted as the natural, biologically determined norm and ideal, then sexuality becomes an outlet for queer expression and desire rather than a rigid and controlling form of societal surveillance and discipline.

Sexuality serves as a form of surveillance and discipline largely through the powerful script of monogamy. Alice noted, “The ideal marriage is monogamy. So once you’re a person



that could potentially break those rules you become a threat. I think that's just the underlying current — that monogamy is normal, monogamy is moral, and you're only supposed to love one person." Jessica remarked: "We live in a monogamous society where morality is inherently connected to monogamy." Despite the fact that all of these interviews were done individually, each woman pointed to monogamy and morality as central causes of biphobia. Their comments make it important to consider what constitutes hegemonic morality in the West. If proper citizenship is associated with conforming to norms around gender, race, class, and so on, and with never questioning how we are socialized to support and work within systems of domination, then without a doubt, bisexuality, which positions the gay and straight worlds intimately and uncomfortably together, does not align with hegemonic understandings of moral citizenship. Alice summed it up well when she stated that, "Monogamy is essentially a man owning a woman, and that's essentially what patriarchy, and especially heteropatriarchy is. It is men owning things." Alice, who is engaged to a heterosexual man, explained that in her relationship:

We have an agreement that I can have sex with women if I want to, I just have to tell him first. But I don't know how he would feel if I was like 'So I also want to bring this person into our relationship' because of that whole monogamy thing. I don't know how he would be if I was like 'I want a girlfriend too.' I don't know. We haven't had that conversation yet but that's because I haven't found anybody.

Alice's point that her relationship is constrained by heteronormative relationship ideals that accompany partnership with a heterosexual man touches on an issue that I found is extremely common among bisexual women — a disconnect between their desires and their partner's desires, and a disconnect that accompanies dating a monosexual as a polysexual: straight men in particular still tend to perceive their bisexual partner as straight, reading their partner's identity through the relationship and prioritizing the visibility of the relationship above the self-proclaimed identity of their partner. It seems that because so often bisexuality is not brought up

in every day conversations, monosexual partners tend to forget that bisexuality is often an integral part of their partner's identity and their own relationship.

### ***3.1.1 Case Study: Bisexuality, Immorality, and the AIDS Epidemic***

When asked about the moral implications of bisexuality, Natalie stated:

Everyone hates bisexuals period, but the hatred kind of expresses itself differently for bisexual men vs. bisexual women. So I think for bisexual women, we're seen as duplicitous, attention-seeking, hypersexualized, but also being seen as straight women lite, especially by the queer community and straight people just think that we're... I don't even know... like a fun experiment, but also refusing to grow up and maybe a step away from being "fully developed women," like straight women. And for bisexual men they're just seen as being gay and not able to accept it — which bi women get a little bit of, but I think it's directed in a different way toward bisexual men. And a lot of the stigma that still is simmering from the AIDS crisis — the ongoing AIDS crisis. This idea that bisexuals are disease vectors who are contaminating straight or gay communities. I think that stigma applies to both but I think where bi women are hypersexualized and seen as being straight and in denial, bisexual men are seen as being gay and in denial.

Bisexuality has been associated with a lack of monogamy and a lack of morality, with bisexuals historically labeled as primary transmitters of disease, particularly around the AIDS epidemic.

While many gays are trying to conform to family values that support the social hierarchy, bisexuals present a threat of tainting the sanitized image that lesbians and gays have worked so hard to achieve. Bisexual activist Shiri Eisner writes "In the case of bisexuals, it is necessary to erase us from the campaign because we fail to fit in with heteronormativity, or indeed homonormativity. The promiscuous and traitorous image of bisexuals is likely to cause difficulties for the campaign" (297). In the past (and still to a degree today), gay men have been stigmatized as vectors of disease. For homosexuals who are trying to be perceived as good, productive, "clean" citizens, there is a need to distance themselves from this image, and therefore, a need to be distanced from bisexuals who are viewed as promiscuous. Gays are trying to shake off the "'dangerous' specter of gay cruising, casual sex, and other deliciously indecent spectacles," yet, "bisexuality looms around the corner to return all of this and more back into the

picture” (297). These fears around bisexuality tainting homonationalism are perfectly exemplified during an episode of the reality TV show *Big Brother*. In this episode, white gay actor Christopher Biggins explains his opinion on the AIDS epidemic: “I think it was a bisexual disease...and what they didn’t realise is that a lot of bisexuals went to those countries and had sex with those people and then brought it back to their own families in America. And that’s how it became such a worldwide disease” (Polson). These biphobic stereotypes have actually prevented many bisexual men from coming out and being tested for HIV, which has caused bisexual men to be disproportionately affected by the virus (Cruz).

### **3.2 The Privilege of Misrecognition**

Going back to the debate between essentialism and social constructionism detailed in Chapter One, for queer theorists a fundamental problem that we continually run up against when discussing issues of misrecognition and passing is the very idea that there is an “authentic” identity that can become misrecognized: “‘Passing’ designates a successful self-presentation in line with a socially favored identity at the expense of an ‘authentic’ one” (Harrison 1). It seems that the notion of an authentic identity must only stem from essentialist logic — that idea that there is a “real” you who is underneath your everyday social performances. In order to be “true to ourselves,” we must then align our real self with our performed “fake”self — at least, this is a mainstream narrative within the US which is repeated in hundreds of teen dramas and self-help videos. Butler refutes the notion that butch-femme dynamics are a replication of heterosexuality, arguing that heterosexuality is a replication of itself: “[t]he replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Hemmings 93). Is it possible to have a socially constructed authentic self? What draws us

in to identifying as butch or femme or bisexual or queer? It seems that some of the flack that bisexuals receive is based on the (I would argue, not incorrect) idea that bisexuals have socially constructed their identities — that they have observed that homosexuality and heterosexuality are “real” options, and they have then chosen to mesh these identities together into some sort of greedy, promiscuous, immature Frankenstein’s monster of a sexual orientation. In order to refute the claim that some sexualities are real and others are made-up, one has to consider where our “authentic” identities come from. As I spoke with the women I interviewed, I realized that several of them also questioned the authenticity of both their bisexual and their femme identities, as well as the morality of their femme and bisexual identities. The bi femme women I spoke with tended to worry playing a role in oppressing other members of the LGTQ+ community, belittling their own experiences of oppression in contrast to those that LGTQ+ people experience.

While homophobia is a widely understood term, biphobia is still a relatively unexplored phenomenon. Even the bisexual women I interviewed had some difficulty with the language of biphobia and homophobia. They were unsure where their experiences of oppression fell between these terms, and where the terms coincided and differed — of how even people who experience homophobia can be biphobic. Furthermore, I saw much insecurity from participants over whether or not they even have the right to use such terms. The bisexual community is riddled with insecurity and instability, which is further exacerbated by women’s socialization. In Iris Marion Young’s “Throwing Like a Girl,” she notes how socialization as a woman instills a hesitance of movement, a shrinking and lack of confidence in their abilities because women simultaneously experience their bodies as object and subject. Young describes women’s physical movements: “Feminine bodily existence is an inhibited intentionality, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-

imposed ‘I cannot’” (146). Young’s observations here of how women experience a physical “inhibited intentionality” marked by insecurity and objectification can be mapped on to the specific ways in which women perform and experience their femme bisexuality. I found that because women who are femme appear to be fitting into hegemonic feminine gender norms and because they may be in a relationship which appears heteronormative, they experienced a kind of inhibited intentionality in their efforts to access queer spaces. Even if bi femme women desire to join queer spaces, they pull back, afraid of tainting the sanctity of the community. Monosexual identities such as gay and lesbian tend to function through the frame of “uninhibited intentionality,” in which “the aim to be accomplished connects the body’s motion toward that end in an unbroken directedness which organizes and unifies the body’s activity. The body’s capacity and motion structure its surroundings and project meaningful possibilities of movement and action, which in turn call the body’s motion forth to enact them” (Young 146). Once again, Young is referring to the confident, active movement of the body, which I argue reflects the ways in which monosexual gays and lesbians view and work within queer spaces, knowing that their queer identities are stable and ultimately unquestionable — without the inhibited intentionality that bisexual women perform.

### **3.3 Passing as Heterosexual and “Straight” Relationships**

While I had many inquires as to how the bisexual femme women I interviewed felt about their experiences in queer and homonormative communities, I also wanted to know how they felt about their experiences in the heterosexual world. My curiosity here was peaked by feminist and bisexual activist Jennifer Baumgardner’s story of her relationship with a boyfriend. As a queer woman who has had relationships with heterosexual cisgender men, I found that my experience aligned almost perfectly with Baumgardner’s:

If I had to greatly simplify the problem, I would say I had ‘gay expectations’: I wanted him to be my partner but I had very little confidence in my ability to have an ‘equal’ relationship with a man. I wanted to have the intimacy I felt from Anastasia from a man who I was worried was an old-school, can’t-teach-an-old-dog-new-tricks type of guy. Another issue was about bisexuality. He was very comfortable (as in, he never mentioned it, really) that my ex was a girl, yet he appeared to have no stake in gay rights (30).

Baumgardner describes her experience with men as alienating in contrast to her experiences with women, with whom she felt more emotionally and intimately connected, although she notes that with women she struggled with some internalized misogyny (33). An “awkward” aspect of bisexuality is that one can be dating someone deeply invested in queer activism one week and someone who doesn’t know what “queer” means the next week, and because biphobia is so dominant in heteronormative and homonormative communities alike, the bisexual individual may never feel full acceptance with partners of either orientation. While homosexual people may better understand the experience of being sexually non-normative, neither homosexuals nor heterosexuals entirely comprehend the lived experience of polysexuality. A large percentage of bisexual women are in relationships with heterosexual partners because there are straight men everywhere and most of them have been socialized to pursue women. On the other hand, other queer people may be harder to find, especially in certain locations, and they may also be closeted. There is no way to detect if someone is queer or not, so even when queers are nearby they are unlikely to recognize and approach one another. All of these factors contribute to so many bisexual femme women being in relationships with heterosexual cisgender men — not because they prefer men over women, but because in a heteronormative world men chase after women and assume that all women have the potential to be sexually attracted to them.

Baumgardner explains that while she loved Steven, her boyfriend at the time, he did not share her political interests, didn’t like her friends, and said “I’m not really the rally type — which made me worry that he couldn’t appreciate or participate in ‘my’ world and that our

common world... was just too small” (29). While in the heteronormative world there are very specific and distinct gender roles assigned to men and women, they share heterosexual and monosexual privilege in that they do not have to worry about being rejected in society because of their sexuality. When a bisexual dates a heterosexual, the bisexual is sexually marginalized and the heterosexual is both privileged by virtue of their heterosexuality and their monosexuality. Circumstances such as Baumgardner’s alienate bisexual women because they feel that they exist in a separate world from their partner and that their partner is not actively using their privilege to make life easier for the bisexual. Privilege allows people to be passive about the issues that directly impact the lives of others, and that is often at work in the dynamics of a bisexual-heterosexual relationship, and often it damages these relationships and makes identifying as bisexual even more difficult. Baumgardner recalls a specific instance in which she and Steven’s friend were debating same-sex marriage shortly after the Defense of Marriage Act was signed in 1996: “My throat tightened. I debated with him for a while in a cajoling tone, waiting for Marcelle or Steven to back me up. Finally, feeling alone, I decided to go for the extreme: ‘Look, *I’m* gay. This is not an abstraction to me. You are saying that if I fall in love with a woman and want to get married, I can’t.’ Steven looked at me as if I had said ‘Look, I’m from Mars. My robot Zorc and I would like to get hitched” (30). Only after Baumgardner goes to the “extreme” of asserting that she is gay does Steven pay her sexuality any attention, asking her “Who am I to you?” later that night. Baumgardner’s bisexuality took a backseat in Steven’s mind — was an abstraction to him — because as far as outward appearances are concerned, it seemed irrelevant to her current life. Baumgardner remarks: “I wanted Steven but I hated how our relationship made me feel: like an idiot, a needy, theatrically political idiot” (30). While in homosexual couples only one person might feel politicized about their sexuality, there is still a common

desire to live in a world free of homophobia, so that individual's desire is understood by their partner on a level of lived experience. When bisexuals date homosexuals there is also a common desire to eradicate homophobia, but a heterosexual might have zero regard for the gay rights movement or might even be homophobic and biphobic, directly violating the existence of their partner and creating a disconnect and an unhealthy relationship dynamic: "Studies show that 61 percent of bisexual women experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner – a higher rate than both straight women and lesbians. About 90 percent of these survivors' abusive partners were men" (M. Johnson).

The experience of feeling erased, stifled, and foolish that Baumgardner describes is not terribly uncommon among bisexual women, and this is a unique form of oppression experienced intensely by bisexual femme women that I find to be overlooked — perhaps one reason why a 2013 Pew Research Center Survey found that "Gays and lesbians are also more likely than bisexuals to say their sexual orientation is a positive factor in their lives" ("A Survey of..."). Much of the discomfort that bisexual women feel in relationships with heterosexuals seems to stem from their partner's lack of investment in the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, it seems that their partners may want to ignore that aspect entirely or disregard it as unimportant. The atmosphere may become tense (men might feel that their masculinity is threatened when their partner expresses attraction to other women) or the conversation may be brushed aside when the topic of bisexuality is brought up.

Some bisexuals may feel uncomfortable bringing a heterosexual into LGBTQ+ spaces, so the bisexual's identity and the non-heteronormative status of the relationship goes unrecognized and the cycle of misrecognition continues. Some queer spaces may ban heterosexuals from entering completely, as Dana Sitar accounts: "Consider my recent experience with the Madison,



Wisconsin-based DJ collective Queer Pressure, which sometimes hosts queer-exclusive events. I asked if my boyfriend would be able to come to one of their queer-only events and was told he could not if he didn't identify as queer." Sitar argues that queer spaces that reject the heterosexual partners of bisexuals are inherently biphobic. While the contact added that: "queer spaces allow us to 'curate our own beautiful queer utopia, even if it's just for a night,'" Sitar asserts, "queer spaces can be far from utopian when you're not the right kind of queer." Natalie expressed this sentiment: "I feel some degree of discomfort and like I don't fully belong here because I have somewhat of straight passing privilege — even though I don't think anybody meets me and thinks I'm straight. There are some queer community events that I bring my boyfriend to but mostly I wouldn't, and I feel like once people know you're dating a man they're making all these assumptions about you based on these stereotypes about bisexual women." Sitar argues: "A queer space that says I'm only welcome without my partner isn't welcoming all of me. It's no better than the rest of the world that blissfully ignores my queerness as long as I've got a man on my arm. I'm finally free to be gay—but at the expense of who I *actually* am. Embracing bisexuality means embracing a community that includes straight people, because we fall in love with them all of the time —and they with us, which, you could argue, puts them in a queer relationship." Alice told me: "It gets strange because then the person you're with doesn't feel welcomed in your social groups. The funniest thing that I ever did with my partner was at the former job I was at they did a drag night and he fucking loved it. It's nice to have a partner who's accepting of that and is not afraid to be in queer spaces." Sitar presents an idea that seems rarely considered in bi-hetero couples — at least on the heterosexual's side — that the heterosexual is in a queer relationship just as much as the queer is in a heterosexual relationship. I find that even heterosexual people who state that they are accepting of LGBTQ+ people often

have hidden homophobic beliefs — beliefs that show when they themselves are labeled as “queer,” and would rather their relationship is read as heterosexual, invalidating their bisexual partner, than have themselves be labeled/misread as non-heterosexual.

I asked the women I interviewed how they would rather be read if they had a choice between gay or straight and all of them responded “gay.” Natalie explained that there is a specific feeling of frustration in the heteronormative scripts that women who pass as straight are expected to follow — that when she casually dated men there were “definitely so many times where it was like, ‘Oh, you are thinking of me as a straight person, and I’m not a straight person and there are all these ways that that makes us something that can’t happen.’” As someone who has dated cisgender heterosexual men myself, I agree with Natalie’s statements here and feel that there is a specific kind of disdain directed toward women who appear to be in a heterosexual relationship who then disrupt the script of heteronormativity in random jarring moments (moments that are only jarring because partners and friends continually forget that the bisexual’s very existence fails to adhere to heteronormative scripts). In a *Bustle* article titled “7 Struggles of Being a Bisexual Woman in a Heterosexual Relationship” the author points out that one struggle is when “You realize that your partner is (theoretically) more threatened by your old boyfriends than your old girlfriends. This does not happen with every relationship, and it’s often (or always) subconscious, but it becomes apparent that most people don’t take lesbian relationships ‘seriously,’ especially not when you’ve been with a man before” (Wiest). I have found this to be accurate, as even men I have dated in the past have told me that my relationships with women were “hot” right before instructing me not to flirt with men when we were out and they had to use the restroom. Even though prior to dating a specific man, I was only in relationships with women, he felt most threatened by other men (who I am typically neither sexually nor

romantically attracted to) and unconcerned with my deeply erotic and meaningful history of relationships with women. The trivializing of women's relationships and the notion that only a man is a true threat to another man's property recuperates bisexual women into the monosexual, monogamous, heteronormative scripts of gender.

When I asked Natalie if there is a specific feeling to being perceived as straight, she agreed:

I think it's hard for people who are monosexual to understand what that even means. I don't mind as much being seen as a gay person, but I'm also not, you know? I think that's hard for people... when you have such duality, for lack of a better word, it's hard for people to understand that there are a lot of things that are important to you and there is such depth to how you identify and it's important to be understood as how you are, and not how it makes sense to see you in whatever context you are in.

When I dated a cisgender heterosexual man, I found myself in arguments with him frequently, shouting things like: "Stop treating me like a straight girl!" My feminist politics, rejection of traditional gender roles, and romantic and sexual attractions to women were suffocated by this man's heteronormative needs and desires; he once used the word "queer" as an insult and clearly tokenized feminine men. During pride weekend he said that he had contacted a gay male friend to see where all the LGBTQ+ partying was occurring. I was disgusted at this not only because he was a straight man using the LGBTQ+ community's space to get wasted, but also because I was part of the community and instead of asking me, he asked a gay man. This was one of those alienating moments in which I realized that he was reading me as straight because I was with him. I questioned what I had done to deserve a relationship in which my partner did not give a shit about my identity, and I found myself constantly exhausted in educating and fighting him. When I first read Baumgardner's statement here, I was shocked at how well she was able to describe my exact feelings in that relationship: "If I had to characterize what was missing in my relationship with Steven, I'd say it was a lack of intimacy. I had no sense that it was within my power to alter the relationship from its current script, and the disconnect I felt between the equal,

confident relationship I wanted and the way I had to dance around him was torture” (32). It felt like my values and identities were stifled by the constant reminder of how deeply ingrained heteronormativity is in every aspect of our lives — that even while this person claimed to care deeply about me, he did not understand what it feels like to have your sexuality invalidated and your community marginalized nor did he make any effort to understand. I asked Jessica if she has had any similar experiences, and she remarked:

It was so weird, I was talking to this guy in January and we took a walk in Piedmont Park and he held my hand and my reaction was to pull away at first because I was like, “Oh shit, they’re going to think we’re together.” And then I was like “Oh wait, we are together. Oh, okay.” Because I didn’t want them to be like — I’m not the straight girl here. I think that bi-ness in terms of what that identity encompasses is a lot closer to the gay identity and experience than the straight experience, and so there’s that relatedness there — even if it’s perceived community, it’s like, “I would rather be read as gay because it’s part of my community.”

Jessica makes an important point that the lesbian and gay community is much closer to bisexuals than the heterosexual world. While heterosexuals have no concept of what it feels like to be sexually marginalized, lesbian and gay people have directly experienced that. We can be certain that our LG partners are supportive of gay rights, while when getting to know a straight person we must evaluate if it is even safe to inform them of our sexuality. It is undoubtedly a hard pill for many heterosexuals in relationships with bisexuals to admit: “A relationship with a bisexual in it isn’t ever really “straight” anyway—by virtue of the fact that there’s at least one person in there queering the whole thing up. At our best, bisexuals are queer ambassadors: We’re out here injecting queer sensibilities into the straight world, one conversation and one relationship at a time” (Marusic).

### **3.4 Bisexual Femme Women and Community Building**

Clearly, based upon the number of women offering to be interviewed, there are quite a few women who identify as both bisexual and femme even just within the Atlanta Area. Throughout

this project I have discussed reasons why bisexual femme women are excluded from LGBT, queer, and heteronormative spaces, but as I worked on this project I began to wonder why bisexual women (even without the femme identifier to narrow down the group) have not built their own communities. I assert that there are several reasons for this: 1) Historically, “femme” is a word that has often been associated with and inhabited by lesbians, 2) Bisexual people have so many different configurations of experiences that may not feel unified, 3) Biphobia is internalized and bisexual femme women may express that internalized biphobia toward one another, and 4) As stated throughout this project, bisexual femme women pass as heterosexual all the time, so it becomes difficult to find one another. Lani Ka’ahumanu describes bisexuality as caught between the poles of heterosexism and homosexuality: “The polarized heterosexist ‘norm’ and, to a lesser degree, the homosexual ‘norm’ sees bisexuality exclusively as a ‘phase’ from one to the other and perhaps back again, invalidating it as a way to be, a chosen sexuality per se” (Ka’ahumanu). In biphobic logic, because bisexuality is so often considered a phase in identity development, it does not make sense to then build a community around it — around an identity that is not truly an identity because it is not stable, essential, or monosexual.

### ***3.4.1 Lack of Historical Connection***

When we consider the Gay Rights Movement, there is a tendency to recall the Stonewall Riots of 1969, and these days we are even taking into account that key activists in the riots such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were transwomen of color. However, bisexuality is immensely overlooked in this history, or at least, most bisexuals do not seem to be aware of a bisexual-specific history. Before beginning this project I had hardly even considered the notion that there might be a history specific to bisexual identity and, based on my interviews, it seems that bisexuals who do not study sexuality and engage in regular activism have not considered a

bisexual history either — or have just assumed that there is not one. I asked Kaylee if she knows if there is a bisexual history and she responded: “I think there is, and I don’t really know much about it. It’s harder to see because we put people in an ‘if you’re bisexual, you’re gay’ category. But I don’t know much about it, I wouldn’t know.” Alice remarked that she has never tried to discover a bisexual history because she does not believe it exists or has been given the opportunity to exist apart from the Gay Rights Movement:

I feel like for the same reasons that bi people get so much flack is the same reason that there might not be as much of a history of bisexuality as there is with homosexuality — because, yes, we do get some privileges because we can present as a straight couple potentially. If I’m a bi woman dating a man it just looks normal — even if we go home and have sex with women on the side. Because a lot of what happens with bisexuality is potentially behind closed doors and out in the world nobody sees it, nobody cares. Because it’s like: “Oh, that’s just a man and a woman,” “Oh, that’s just a regular couple.” And so, because it has the ability to pass as “normal,” people don’t talk about it that much and people don’t expect to see it that much.

For Alice, bisexuals have blended and assimilated into the gay community and/or the straight world, but they have not created a stand-alone history that can be solidly named “bisexual,” or that is known across the LGBTQ+ community. She continues:

And I think it also has to do with the fact that bisexual people are part of the queer community and they don’t want to take away that pride and that space for people who obviously suffer more than we do — like, suffer more discrimination because we know that that’s really important, and an important part of their identity, and it’s important that they be recognized and valorized for the strength that they have. So it’s this weird in-between position of: “I want to valorize myself — I know that my identity is important and I know that I am just as much a part of this queer space as you are, but I also understand the privilege that I have being someone that could potentially pass as ‘normal’, as heteronormative, and I don’t want to take away your voice.

Alice finds that because bisexuals tend to experience privilege in passing, they have chosen to remain relatively silent within the queer community in order to allow those who more blatantly break the rules of gender to have a louder voice. For her, bisexuals’ respectful silence is one reason that there is not a noticeable bisexual history that stands outside of lesbian, gay, and queer

history. Next, I asked Belle for her thoughts on whether or not there is a bisexual history and I got quite a different response:

There is, but I'm probably like one of the five people on the planet who know this, so I'm probably not a good representative for your sample of random bisexual femmes, but yeah, there's definitely a bisexual history and I'm actually low-key trying to write a book about it because I'm a historian and nobody else is writing this. I mean, there were bi people in every LGBT organization from the dawn of time. The problem with talking about bi history and identifying bi history is that so many people in bi history are called gay. Freddy Mercury is a current very prominent example of someone who self-identified as bisexual to multiple people at multiple junctures in his life. James Baldwin is another example of somebody who is routinely called gay in the history books as well as popular culture. And both of them were bisexual, both of them used the word bisexual to identify themselves, both of them were behaviorally bisexual in terms of their relationships, but they're considered famous gay men. So bisexual people — just as we are invisible to each other, our history is invisible to us because bisexual people's identities are erased. So yeah, I'm going to write that book and get back to you. What you're doing right now and the reason why I was like: "Oh hey, yeah, I'll do this interview" — this is the first time these studies are being done at an academic level. There was nothing when I was writing my dissertation.

Belle's comments here directly speak to Kaylee and Alice's observations that a bisexual history either does not exist or is difficult to discover. She makes an important point here that even though bisexuals have been involved in queer and LGBT activism since the Stonewall Riots, they are not acknowledged as bisexuals — rather, they are seen through a monosexual lens of gay or lesbian. Just as earlier I was discussing how even in intimate relationships the monosexual partner might disregard their bisexual partner's polysexuality, this also occurs on the more systemic level of the history of the LGBT social movement and the figures that have been deemed prominent in the movement. Because of this erasure of bisexual and polysexual people from the history of the gay rights movement, many bisexual people feel unattached to LGBT history and the LGBT community, as they do not feel represented or deserving of a central rather than marginal membership to the community. Or bisexual people might feel rejected by the community because the only narratives that have been popularized around bisexuals were those of bisexuals spreading HIV, for example. Belle has dedicated her life to bisexual activism and

research, so she is extremely knowledgeable on bisexuals' roles in the LGBT movement, but people whose work does not revolve around the identity, such as Alice and Kaylee, tend to feel as though there is little to no bi-specific history.

It is undeniable that our affective connections to identities and communities are strengthened and circulated through a shared history which then creates a shared identity and experience — so if bisexuals do not see themselves as having a prominent historical role in the liberation of LGBT people or in their own bi-specific movements, it makes sense that they might constantly question their right to take up space in the LGBT community, even in the present day. If as an LGBT community we were to reflect on our history, surfacing and re-writing the narratives that have been left out regarding transgender people and bisexual people, these groups might feel less marginalized within the LGBT community.

Like Belle, Natalie also recognized that there is a bisexual history — in fact, she described it as a part of why she chose to identify as bisexual rather than pansexual:

Yeah, a history in terms of there's been bisexual activism since the '60s and '70s, and so we can refer back to all that. And there are groups, and books that have been written, and organizations, and all that kind of stuff. There's this attitude that we popped up out of nowhere in the '90s, but our history is so much longer than that as a community, and with our activism and the things that we've written.

But Natalie is a PhD student in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Belle is a bisexual activist with a PhD. It seems that the knowledge of a specific bisexual history may be common within these circles that focus more on studying sexuality, but for those outside of academia and activism, bisexuality may seem like it is something that, as Natalie notes, "popped up out of nowhere," giving the identity a feeling of detachment and homelessness. Bisexuals are often frowned upon by the LGT, queer, and heteronormative worlds, so while they might feel more attached to the LGBT community, they ultimately lack strong attachment to any sexuality-based



communities except their own, and “their own” does not seem to be experienced as a reality for many bisexuals.

### ***3.4.2 Bisexual Relationship Configurations and Community Fragmentation***

I have not found any information that considers how the variety of what bisexual relationships look like might weaken a bi-specific community. The thought occurred to me upon recalling my own experiences and internalized biphobia. My first relationships were with women and I only began dating men years later. Accordingly, I always felt more attached to the “attracted to women” facet of bisexuality. However, my friends and most of the women I interviewed tended toward being in relationships with men before they were in relationships with women, or they were engaged to men at the time of the interview. I believe there are many reasons that I prioritize women in my iteration of bisexuality — reasons which may include my studies and my politics — but I can’t help but feel that because my sexuality started by forming attractions in relation to women, my bisexuality is differently positioned from that of bisexual women whose attractions began with men. For example, I absolutely detest being read as heterosexual, but Alice, who has only been in relationships with men, stated:

I think because I’m literally misread all the time it doesn’t bother me as much because I’ve always been misread. So I’ve kind of come to terms with the fact that no one’s going to read me that way because I’m going to be marrying a dude, and I’ve only been in relationships with men, and I don’t have any majorly defining features about how I present that would identify as queer, or bi, or even being a part of the LGBTQ community.

Perhaps my attitude toward misrecognition may be related to the fact that I only dated women for the first few years of my dating life and I have only ever been used to (and grown comfortable with) being read as a lesbian or as a queer woman. So the abrupt jump to being read as heterosexual feels deeply disturbing to me, as it is although my queer identity has been pushed aside for a heterosexual one. Of course, this is not true — it is all in the misrecognition — but it

certainly feels that way. Thus, in my own experience it is difficult to understand how women like Alice are not deeply bothered by being misread as heterosexual. Our positions as bisexual women differ because my bisexual identity was formed through relationships with women and hers was formed through relationships with men. This is not to say that any iteration of bisexuality is better or “queerer” than the other, but that the community might be fractured by the fact that people have different affective connections and identity formations within the term “bisexual,” as well as starkly different sexual and romantic lives as bisexuals. Within monosexual communities such as the lesbian community, one knows that the rule of lesbianism is being a woman attraction to women exclusively, so there is a certain bond and solidarity developed through that shared understanding, even though intersections may create different lesbian experiences. However, with bisexuality one may be a man, a woman, non-binary, and so on, so there is not an inherent connection across gendered experiences, and one may also have different degrees of attraction to genders, as well as have had relationships exclusively with one gender or another. The vast variety of bisexual experience makes it difficult to develop one unified, monolithic bisexual identity in the same way that we perceive gays and lesbians. I will note, however, that bisexuals should be able to draw connections across a common experience of misrecognition, regardless of their gender identity and gender performance. Additionally, if bisexuality is a scale of attraction to more than one gender, then it has infinite meanings and while those meanings open up subversive possibilities, they may also fracture the community because there is no agreed upon rule or definition of what exactly constitutes “bisexual” — think of Jessica’s notion that bisexual is attraction to any two genders, and Belle’s definition of bisexual as attraction to same and other genders. Belle has the potential to be attracted to anyone, while Jessica is only attracted to masculine men and women.

### 3.4.3 *Internalized Biphobia*

Internalized biphobia prevents community building. When bisexuals are consistently told that their identity does not exist, they may begin to believe it or believe that they do not have the right to exist (or make that existence known). When bisexuals do form communities, as Belle has experienced in her nonprofit work, issues can arise:

But it's exhausting though, because bisexual people are incredibly traumatized and we bring that trauma into our spaces and we don't deal with it a lot of times, and hurt people hurt people, and there are a lot of really difficult and frustrating human beings in the bisexual community, and we have not even begun to deal with the ways biphobia has traumatized us. You see this in the lesbian, gay, and trans communities as well — obviously being a marginalized identity is traumatic. But with bi folks I don't think we've had the space, and the resources, and the language to talk about biphobia specifically and deal with the specifically biphobic trauma, and so I think that is something that makes the bi community kind of a double edged sword. It's sometimes a hard space to be in.

Femme bisexual women may also experience internalized misogyny and femmephobia — they might buy into the phenomenon of the “Cool Girl” who is friends with men and perceives women as frivolous and shallow. Eisner writes about the very real traumas that result from biphobia:

Monosexism kills. Biphobia kills. Bisexual people commit suicide, bisexual people get sick, bisexual people lose our homes, our families, our friends, our communities, our support, our jobs, our money, our education; bisexual people suffer violence and sexual violence; we are beaten, brutalized, bullied, bashed, raped, and sexually assaulted; we get STIs, no information, and no treatment; we get exploited, alienated, marginalized, disempowered, dismissed, erased, derided. And after all of this, we are told jay it's all in our heads, that mono sexism and biphobia do not exist, that those problems are our personal problems: We are pathologized. Our experiences, our lives, our pain, and our oppression are written out and wiped clean of history, culture, and community (64).

### 3.4.4 *Invisibility to One Another*

As I discussed in earlier sections, bisexual femme women pass as normative heterosexual feminine women all the time. While I want to problematize how we categorize people into sexuality and gender groups based on visibility, I also find that there is a problem here — if there is no visible signifier of one's communal belonging, how are we to know that they are a friend

when we walk by them or sit next to them at a bar? Brennan notes that “To dress in a feminine fashion is, in many spaces and places in the world to invite being misread as straight” (176) — or perhaps be perceived by others as desiring to be read as straight. If we cannot mark queers as a friend on sight, then how do we know how guarded we need to be in terms of personal safety as queers? The only answer here seems to be intuition (based on what though?) and/or assuming that everyone is either potentially dangerous or potentially a friend. Neither of these answers seem particularly viable because although many people claim “gaydar” exists there are no “real” or biological indicators of LGBTQ+ identity on the body. Additionally, with more people identifying as non-binary, genderqueer, and agender, it becomes even more troublesome to label people through visibility. Someone who identifies as non-binary might be misread as lesbian, for instance, merely because they pass as female and dress in stereotypically lesbian flannel and snapbacks. Brennan notes that “Fashion is one way we recognize one another, but what do lesbians wear? Obviously this varies across times, places, and generations. It also varies from subculture to subculture” (178). In addition to this variation, it is becoming increasingly common for people who “look” like lesbians to identify as non-binary. Increasingly, as non-normative iterations of gender proliferate, it becomes more important for us to find alternative ways of “seeing” gender. In the Chapter One I discussed the controversy over what constitutes “gender non-conforming,” and came to the conclusion that someone is gender non-conforming if they claim that identity, but beyond that, any assumptions made about the degree to which someone is gender (non)conforming merely reinforce a limited gender binary that determines gender conformity by how masculine an assigned female at birth person looks and how feminine an assigned male at birth person looks. Some people are beginning to advocate the use of “they” pronouns until we introduce ourselves to the individual and learn about what pronouns they

prefer and their relationship with gender and sexuality — this might be one way to begin to address the problem of assuming people’s genders and sexuality, but it is only the beginning. Bi-blogger Amy Andre writes:

How can someone wear their bisexuality on their sleeve if people’s assumptions about our sexuality are based on things like haircuts? Especially if those haircuts are also being assumed to only belong to monosexuals... The only conclusion I could draw is: we need a bisexual haircut! I think the community needs to come together and decide on one hair-style, and that will be the bi hair style. Then, we need to be able to advertise the fact that that is the bi hair style, so that people can recognize us... But what I’m talking about here is developing a signifier, an aesthetic, a queer/clear marker for bisexuality (qtd. in Brennan 178).

What Andre suggests here is a way to visibly manifest bisexuality so that bisexuals can recognize one another and others in the LGBTQ+ community can recognize bisexuals. However, I would argue that perpetuating the notion of an “aesthetic” as an identity marker will not liberate bisexuals, but instead creates yet another form of policing and surveillance — what of the bisexuals who do not want to express themselves with this haircut? They would continue to be on the margins of the LGBTQ+ community.

The notion of a queer aesthetic and gay stereotypes of women as butch and men as feminine has served the purpose of limiting and excluding individuals who do not fit these stereotypes from the community. It has also painted those who do fit these stereotypes as caricatures of the LGBTQ+ world. However, I will not deny that visibility has benefitted community-building at the same time that it has excluded and harmed those who cannot be read as members of the community. Brennan writes: The political strategy of visibility has its dangers and those dangers extend beyond the LGBT movement. Ellen Samuels (2003) compares the problems faced by femme lesbians to the problems of those with invisible disabilities: ‘In the dominant cultural discourse, as well as in lesbian and disability subcultures, certain assumptions about the correlation between appearance and identity have resulted in an often exclusive focus on visibility as both the basis of community and the means of enacting social change. Discourses of coming out and passing are central to visibility politics, in which coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist. Thus vigilant resistance to external stereotypes of disability and lesbianism has not kept our subcultures from enacting dynamics of disability and lesbianism has not kept our subcultures from enacting dynamics of execution and surveillance over their members. Nor does a challenge to those dynamics necessarily imply a wish on my part to discard visibility politics or a rejection of the value and importance of visibility for marginalized communities (qtd. in Brennan 179).

I am reminded of the Human Rights Campaign volunteers who often stand on the street corners on the Georgia State University campus asking students if they would take a moment to listen to gay rights issues. I have been stopped multiple times by these volunteers, responded with: “I’m gay,” and continued walking to class. Reacting in such a way is problematic of me, as I am assuming that because I am queer/gay/bi I am inherently knowledgeable on whatever these volunteers might have to share with me — obviously an incorrect assumption when thinking intersectionally. Yet I get a bit miffed because in the moment it feels like I am being read as a straight person who has no knowledge of the issues that impact the LGBTQ+ community when I myself experience these issues day-to-day. While these volunteers are working to support the LGBTQ+ community, they are also reminding us of the salience of visibility: they might stop someone who portrays the queer aesthetic, but I would wager that it is far more likely for them to stop someone who appears, for example, to be a normatively feminine woman — to look straight.

I cannot say I am arguing for or against visibility politics in this project, all I can say for sure is that we need to problematize our notions of conformation to socially constructed images as indicative of one’s “inner” identity. It is common that heterosexual men tell femme lesbians “You’re too pretty to be gay,” just as it is common for butch lesbians to distrust femme lesbians because they appear to be performing something resembling heteronormative femininity. So while visibility politics have such negative repercussions for bisexual femme women, we must ask if community building is important and further, how to build those communities with other women who appear heterosexual. The answer might lie in the very kinds of projects that Belle is developing — a bisexual specific organization, in which everyone involved is validated in their identity regardless of their gender presentation. However, many bisexual femme women are also

not politically active or cannot dedicate time or resources to these efforts, so there is still the question of how we can support or community-build with those women.

#### 4 CHAPTER 3: THE (BI) FEMME FATALE

*“I will go to war in a red dress,  
trample your ashes in high heels,  
look for my lipstick stain on your collar  
when I lean forwards not to kiss you,  
but to whisper:  
‘I win.’”*  
— *I AM WOMAN* - A.J.

In the end of 2016 I began receiving notifications on Twitter that random men were tweeting at me. Confused, I opened the app and found men informing me that I am a “childish, unhinged girl” and a “psycho harpy,” among other things. I found links through these tweets to several articles that an almost 60-year-old white far-right man had written about me without my knowledge. These articles used me to exemplify the “dangers” of modern-day feminism, particularly within the university. The man stalked my tweets over the course of three years, collecting and compiling any tweets that he deemed queer, feminist, or “man-hating.” These social media spaces were an outlet in which I could express frustration as an undergraduate who was regularly harassed and catcalled by men while walking around the city (aka my college campus); furthermore, as someone who (at this point in time) identified as a femme lesbian, these instances were experienced as particularly violating and invalidating of an identity I held close. Accordingly, quite a few of my posts as a teenager and young adult reflected those feelings of exhaustion and exasperation that I could not very well express to the men yelling demeaning things at me — without putting myself in direct harm's way, at least. This man took my photos, tweets, Instagram posts, departmental and academic information, and wrote what he considered to be exposés on how the liberal university is producing young feminists en masse. One particular article, which has since been deleted from *Medium* (I believe the website banned



him), was titled “Pretty Poison” and featured the music video and lyrics to Bon Jovi’s “You Give Love a Bad Name.” Here is an excerpt of the lyrics in this song:

An angel's smile is what you sell  
You promise me heaven, then put me through hell  
Chains of love got a hold on me  
When passion's a prison, you can't break free

Paint your smile on your lips  
Blood red nails on your fingertips  
A school boy's dream, you act so shy  
Your very first kiss was your first kiss goodbye.

This was all entertaining to me because the author of the articles did not realize that Bon Jovi is my favorite band. I was rather complimented that he would insinuate that the song is about me or women like me. However, the reason he used this Bon Jovi song in an article featuring my queer and feminist online statements and photographs was to make the argument that lesbians and feminists are becoming “conventionally” attractive, and he believed this to be incredibly dangerous to heteropatriarchy. He perceived his blogs as an alert to men to be on guard for wolves in sheep's clothing women like me. I am slim, I wear crop tops, short shorts, wing my eyeliner, and always have nail polish and lipstick on. He compared my pictures to photographs of Andrea Dworkin, who he deemed to be the stereotypical image that comes to men’s minds when they hear the words “lesbian feminist”: fat, hairy, unfashionable. In these men’s absurd logic, feminists and lesbians are produced out of the bitterness that such women feel when they are tossed aside and unwanted by men. Accordingly, queer women and feminists always look like Dworkin in their narrow minds. He argued that young, attractive, hyper-feminine women like me — women who you would never suspect of being radicalized — are now internalizing the beliefs of those Dworkin-style man-hating lesbian feminists. His articles about me received hundreds of comments from scared, angry men who claimed that I should be locked up on an

island somewhere with other “crazy” feminists. One man said he would fuck me and then throw me to the curb, I was compared to objects, and I was told I would become an old cat lady once my youthful good looks were gone. Essentially, these men notified me that I was only worth my attractiveness and that once that was gone, I would be nothing but a stereotypical, hideous, shriveled up former threat to heteropatriarchy who would no longer be given any attention or taken seriously.

What truly interests me here is how I was deemed particularly threatening because of my apparent adherence to traditional standards of femininity juxtaposed with my queerness and feminist beliefs. These men were *mad*. One man found my Facebook account and confirmed that I had once had purple hair — ahh, a reassuring visual indicator that I was one of *those* women; one of those pesky women who keep trying to mess with their misogynistic fun. At this point in time, I was also writing my undergraduate thesis on the topic of femme fatales. I discovered that a consistent theme across the archetype of the femme fatale is that the woman is deemed a dangerous, feminine, sexy, voluptuous temptress who could attract any man she desired and play with him like a toy. In the end of film noir femme fatale movies, the femme fatale always gets murdered or otherwise contained into her proper feminine role. This character reflected post-World War II cultural anxieties that women were gaining too much freedom and were no longer confined to the household, which endangered men’s monopoly on society. Similarly, I found that the author and commenters on these articles deemed me to be a siren seducing men to their doom — of course they ignored the fact that I was an out lesbian who had only ever publicly expressed attraction to women. That didn’t matter, apparently, because my femininity allowed them to trivialize my sexuality and they could not comprehend the idea that a woman could perform femininity that is not directed toward the male gaze. They could not understand the concept of

“femme” or of being in control of your own femininity. I was attractive due to my appearance of adherence to heteropatriarchal gender norms, yet my blatant ideological rebellion against these same gender norms was terrifying to them. I was deemed dangerous enough to require exposure as a sort of Feminist 2.0 — not the old ugly model, but the shiny new model with mirrored ideology and a completely misleading gender performance to which, unfortunately, unsuspecting men might “fall victim.” Just as in film noir movies with the dangerous femme fatale, the author was attempting to “contain” me by portraying me as a naive, indoctrinated woman in need of correction.

I recount this story because it is an excellent example of the kind of threat that bisexual femme women present to heteropatriarchy. Throughout these chapters I have outlined the ways in which bisexuals, femmes, women, and particularly bisexual femme women have been outcast from sexuality-based communities, invalidated, questioned, parodied, and shamed. All of these complex experiences of invalidation stem from fear that the boundaries of gender will be blurred, fear that they are already being blurred ubiquitously under our very noses — and this fear is most blatantly encapsulated and iconized by femme bisexual women. As Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri state in their anthology *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity*: “Femme is the blade — fatally sharp; a mirror reflecting back fatal illusions” (Camilleri 12). I argue that femme, in its plethora of meanings, is fatal to gender norms because if we conceptualize femininity as a bondage to which women are bound, as Bartky argues, then femmes appear to embrace, rework, and reframe that bondage to turn it into something autonomous and uncontrollable. While Bartky argues that femininity requires “disciplinary practices that produce a body which in feature and appearance is recognizably feminine” (132), she fails to take into account the femmes who are recognizably feminine yet transgress the disciplinary practices of

femininity, or who pick and choose to which disciplinary practice they are in the mood to adhere. Bisexual femme women in particular are subverting femininity by expressing desire for women and other genders despite their attraction to men. They often pick other genders over men, and part of the script of femininity is to prize and nurture men above all else. While lesbians completely reject attraction to men, bisexual women can be attracted to men but then find partnership with a woman. Through bisexuality and femme, women's femininity is no longer constituted as confinement, but instead as playful, chosen, and fluid to move within and beyond gender, to prioritize women above men, other genders above the gender binary: "We are dangerous and pleasure-seeking, we are volatile matter. We find danger in our search for pleasure, on our own terms. We give good danger, we warn, we warn of danger, of dangerous times. We are harbingers, harlots, heroes. We are troubled and troubling. Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of femininity. Here, we indelibly mark ourselves femme" (Camilleri 12).

Lisa Duggan notes that the femme has haunted the feminine, directly contradicting the historical dictates of femininity: "Historically, the feminine arises apparently ego-less, bereft of active drives, agency, mobility, thought. The fem(me) haunts this historical aberration from within and without" (Duggan 166). The femme is constructed in contrast to the expectations of properly feminine women (to be ego-less, passive, follow their men, not think for themselves), yet has the ability to blend into that "properly feminine" group and has always haunted that group. I believe even the most conventionally feminine women have experienced fleeting moments of femme desire. The ability to blend into groups of normative women means that femmes can spread their ideologies to the "pure" women who are feminine, heterosexual, and subservient to men — also a terrifying notion to men like the one who wrote those articles about me. Because bisexuality points to the constructedness of gender and sexuality, bisexual femme

women might inspire heterosexual women to experiment sexually. These women might become aware of options beyond compulsory femininity, they may realize that “queer” is not simultaneous with the loss of femininity, but rather, with the reclaiming of femininity. Bisexual femme women can encourage “normative” women to transgress their normativity, which makes them deeply threatening. Additionally, bisexual femme women can make cisgender heterosexual men’s relationships less enjoyably dominant, insisting on a level of agency which men are not accustomed to seeing from heterosexual cisgender women. As discussed earlier, heterosexual men in relationships with bisexual femme women may wish to read the relationship as heterosexual, may wish to ignore that aspect of their partner’s identity because it is too much trouble to try to understand and seems irrelevant, but as the bi women I interviewed have stated, it is essential that their heterosexual male partners make efforts to accommodate and understand their partner’s bisexuality. What may prove particularly difficult for men is the fact that they themselves have entered into a queer relationship: “I often correct people who say of me that I’m in a heterosexual marriage...If instead what you mean by ‘heterosexual marriage’ is a marriage of two heterosexuals, then the claim is false. The same error occurs when two women marry — even if both women are bisexual, people will still tend to refer to them as in a lesbian marriage” (Brennan 172-173).

The femme bisexual woman may become privy to the homophobia and biphobia of those around her who have assumed that everyone in their midst is heterosexual:

The femme, like a member of an ethnic or racial minority who passes as white, is more likely to be directly privy to the goings on of more dominant, or in the case of traditional feminine women, mainstream culture. People who don’t know her are likely to say sexist or homophobic things around her that they wouldn’t say if they knew who she was. Not only is she thus given more opportunities to refute prejudicial comments, but she also subverts the mainstream ideas about what a feminist is or, if she is queer, what a queer woman is (Tweedy 67).

She may demand that such people be held accountable for their statements, jarring their sense of existing within a heteronormative bubble: “In short the femme confuses things. Confusion can be very powerful in blowing apart stereotypes and constrictive categories generally... The femme is a shapeshifter of sorts, but rather than changing her own shape, she re-forms the concepts that are the building blocks of our culture” (Tweedy 67). The femme is the abject that shifts our reality. Femme bisexuality also presents a threat to lesbianism, which is perhaps why the identity is so outcast from the lesbian community. In years past, femmes have been constructed as queer/lesbian through their relationships with butches (the only times that they were visibly recognized as not heterosexual), their relationship threatening the quiet respectability that the lesbian community was aiming for: “The butch-femme couple embarrassed other Lesbians (and still does) because they made Lesbians culturally visible, a terrifying act for the 1950s” (Nestle 101). In those days the femme was seen as threatening rather than assimilationist because she was so visible as lesbian when accompanied by a butch. Judith Halberstam asserts: “Perhaps this perverse coupling is precisely the problem; when butch-femme is a coupled subject, butch represents visibility and lends queerness to the femme and the femme is rendered completely butch-dependent. The construction also privileges the couple form and establishes gender as the primary, indeed the only, dynamic of difference at work” (60). Many bisexual femme women are doing something a bit more complex with “femme.” While Halberstam argues that defining femme through butch prioritizes gender and coupledness, bisexual femme women are often asserting their femme identity without a butch, even and especially in their most “heterosexual-presenting” relationships. By asserting femme identity without existing within a monosexual lesbian framework, without seeking another woman through which to gain visibility, bisexual femme women are making a statement that a woman does not require butchness, or partnership,

or even visibility to identify as femme. Take Tweedy who passes as heterosexual and even got kicked off of a butch-femme mailing list for being read as heterosexual:

In my own case, as a polyamorous queer femme who married a man, the erroneous assumptions are quite plentiful. When people hear I am married, for instance, they often put me into the straight, monogamous box, and it can sometimes take a very direct statement to disabuse them of this negative assumption. For example, a reference to ‘my girlfriend’ is more likely to be read to refer to a platonic friend than it would be if uttered by a single person (Tweedy 69).

Tweedy rejects the privileging of partnership (which can often lead to possessive and unhealthy dynamics) and does not rely upon a butch for visibility. For this, she is punished as a heterosexual woman, yet she is a polyamorous polysexual. Tweedy experiences privilege and oppression simultaneously — experiences privilege *as* oppression.

Femme lesbians have experienced a similar invalidation of their sexuality as femme bisexuals, but femme lesbians can “prove” their lesbianism by only being with other women, and they have worked hard to make it clear that their femmeness has nothing to do with men. Thus, femme bisexual women pose a bit of a problem for femme lesbians because femme bisexuals appear to reinforce the myth that femme lesbians are actually straight, or will eventually be with a man: “The status of the femme as lesbian is ensured only by detaching her from her ‘bisexual’ past, it seems. As femme writer Amber Hollibaugh suggests: ‘it’s absolutely critical to understand that femmes are women to women and dykes to men in the straight world.’ The femme becomes a contemporary subject by insisting on her absolute difference from the bisexual” (Hemmings 93).

Because femme lesbians have fought so hard to be perceived as “complete” lesbians, there can be tension between femme lesbians and bisexuals. For example, this poem written by a femme:

Being a successful femme  
Means making a butch desire you  
And then enduring when that lust  
Turns into suspicion.  
‘If you want me,’ she sneers,

‘You must really want a man.’  
Nobody knows how much it hurts  
When you go out on the street  
And straight men tell you  
The same damned thing (Hemmings 94).

Yet at the core of both the femme lesbian and the femme bisexual woman’s struggles is the femmephobia pervasive in gay and queer circles. While there is a tension between femme lesbians and femme bisexuals because femme bisexuals appear to invalidate femme lesbians’ argument that femme is entirely a woman-loving-woman identity, there can be a solidarity and a mutual understanding because both identities are oppressed by the ways in which the femininity of the femme is read as heterosexuality. Despite her protests, she is read as having an essential, heterosexual inner self that will eventually grow tired of women and return to men.



## CONCLUSION: REFRAMING PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION THROUGH BISEXUAL THEORY

*“And now, in the postmodern reign of *The Queer*, the fem(me) reappears, signifier of another kind of gender trouble. Not a performer of legible gender transgression, like the butch and his sister the drag queen, but a betrayer of legibility itself. Seemingly ‘normal’ she responds to ‘normal’ expectations with a sucker punch — she occupies normality abnormally”*

— Lisa Duggan

Throughout this project, I have asserted two main claims: 1) That femme bisexual women present a complication to the normative definitions and boundaries of gender and sexuality, and therefore are uniquely threatening to heteropatriarchy and 2) That femme bisexual women exemplify the complex ways in which privilege and oppression interact and impact the individual; that an identity can be privileged and oppressed at once. I have argued that this experience of privilege as oppression and oppression as privilege can alienate and isolate those groups who appear to be privileged by the misreading or misrecognition of their identities. These “in-between” groups (such as bisexuals or biracial people) experience a simultaneous insider and outsidership in any social situation that cannot be fully comprehended except by others who also experience that in-betweenness. Jessica brought this up concerning both her biracial and bisexual identity:

I think it’s also cool because it makes me feel like a chameleon. Like, I can shape-shift and fit into a straight space — I’m not entirely comfortable in straight spaces necessarily, but I can definitely pass as if I’m comfortable, and I can definitely be comfortable in queer spaces. In the same way with my race, I don’t love white spaces, but I’m not out of place in them. I mean, if it’s a shitty white space. But some people don’t know that I’m not white, as stupid as that sounds. In that same way, you get insider status in both groups, and you’re also an outsider in both. So I would say that that’s pretty unique — being a chameleon in that sense.

This insider/outsider status seems to provide a sense of freedom in fluidity, yet when the boundaries are policed, one is reminded that they do not quite fit in either side. Accordingly, it is essential that people who do not fit a “queer aesthetic” or LGBTQ+ stereotypes are not pushed to

the margins of these communities, but rather, must be given a voice to express the dualities of the intermingling of privilege and oppression and the struggles of existing in-between. Femme bisexual women's experience of privilege and oppression through misrecognition shed light on the dangers of a politics of liberation that requires a specific performance and aesthetic. However, I also acknowledged the difficulty in community-building if there is no common signifier of one's membership to that community. Thus, while there are specific trends that queers and lesbians tend to follow because they are not restricted to the confines of heteronormativity, there must also be an understanding that one's identity cannot be read on their physicality (unless their shirt says "lesbian" or something along those lines). I have exemplified how queer and homonormative policing of identity pushes bisexual femme women into a category of heteronormativity in which they do not fit — often because their heterosexual partner cannot acknowledge the queerness of the relationship because he sees it is simply as a man/woman situation and therefore, inherently heterosexual. I asserted that the "coming-out-as-freedom" narrative is largely mythical, and when it does apply, it is typically only for monosexuals. Using my own experience to narrate, I showed how queer femme women present a femme-fatale style threat that must be contained, corrected, and recuperated.

I want to end this project by considering why it is that women identify as bisexual femmes despite the trials they face in a culture that devalues femme/femininity and bisexuality. Natalie described how bisexuality has affected her life: "I think it's definitely a really beautiful gift of sight and being able to see beauty in a lot of different kinds of people and it feels — I don't want to say that anyone else's sexuality is limiting, but identifying as bisexual for me has been a very liberating experience because my identity doesn't have to change based on being attracted to a different kind of person." All of my participants described their bisexuality as

contributing to them becoming more whole, understanding and empathetic humans. They know what it feels like to be invisible, erased, judged and excluded according to incorrect judgements, and having had this experience has given them a better understanding of what oppression feels like in its many intersections. While throughout this project I have explored the ways in which bisexual femme women are, in a sense, imprisoned by others' judgements, at the same time bisexual femme women are liberated by their freedom of expression and willingness to express gender and sexuality in ways that resonate with them, regardless of the punishments and mistreatment that comes from monosexual communities. Natalie described how her bisexuality has given her empathy in "understanding both the gay and straight worlds and having such a broad range of experiences when it comes to relationships, and almost kind of being a double agent and existing in both spaces and being accepted and understood in both spaces." She immediately also noted the drawbacks in "also being this figure of contempt and confusion for almost everybody except for other bisexuals, is I think a pretty common bisexual experience especially for women." Kaylee echoed this sentiment, describing her bisexuality as allowing her to "relate differently" to people: "You kind of understand experiences that different people have or understand their attractions." Alice added that being bisexual gave her "a greater understanding of the world and a greater understanding of the people in the world instead of just having these blinders on to everything else, so I think it makes me more open to new experiences and wanting to try new things — all of those things, I think it literally shapes the way I live my life." Finally, Belle remarked:

Obviously there are a lot of negative unique experiences that we have discussed, but I would say that on the positive end I find bisexual people and the bisexual community to be the most accepting of difference and willing to build bridges across difference in a way that monosexual people are not. And the most obvious is to love and have relationships across genders, but for me my bisexuality translates into kind of a overarching realization that the boundaries that we create between ourselves and other

people based on various differences are all bullshit, and they're not important unless we make them important. And I think that makes me able to love more openly and trust more openly, and brings more fulfilling relationships and experiences into my life. I think my life is richer because I'm bisexual, because I don't give a shit about a lot of the things that people give a shit about that they shouldn't.

Being able to hear the firsthand perspectives of five femme bisexual women gave me a lot of insight beyond my own, but it also confirmed patterns that I suspected others experience too, such as never feeling quite comfortable in relationships with monosexuals. For me, these interviews have confirmed that there are many issues with visibility politics — while some people gain increased freedoms, others are pushed further down the social hierarchy. However, I acknowledge that I do not have the answer for how to solve this problem in We could try to agree on a bisexual haircut, but that is just another form of restriction and policing. These questions around recognition and policing are becoming increasingly important: nowadays conversations regarding pronoun usage, for example, are becoming quite common. With non-binary and genderqueer identities becoming increasingly common, cultural anxieties regarding the boundaries of gender and legibility are becoming increasingly more apparent. Throughout this project, I have asserted that the femme bisexual woman has combatted the notion of identity as visually manifested on the body, and this fight has pushed her to the margins of the LGBTQ+ community. In recent years, many people have begun identifying their genders in ways that are different from how they are read — or disidentifying with gender completely. Perhaps this increase of people in positions of “abnormal normality” will give femme bisexual women solidarity in the fight for the right to be acknowledged for who they assert themselves to be rather than who others think they are.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

#### PART 1: On Bisexuality

When did you first know you were bi?

How would you define “bisexual?”

Why do you feel that “bisexual” is a better fit than other sexual orientation labels?

How has your sexual orientation affected your life? Can you give some examples or stories?

Would you consider your sexual orientation a large part of your identity?

What are some unique experiences that you feel come from your bisexual identity?

Do you think being a woman affects how bisexuality is perceived? Do you think the gender of the bisexual person matters in how they are received by society?

Do you feel a sense of community with the LGTQ community? If so, why? If not, why?

What do you perceive the lesbian and gay community’s general feeling is toward bisexuals?

How do you talk to other people about your sexuality? Is there a difference in how you approach/discuss your sexuality depending on your relationship with the person?

How have your partners felt about your sexuality?

What do your straight friends think of your sexuality?

Do you feel that you have a bisexual community?

Have you ever considered using a different label to define your sexuality? Why or why not?

#### PART 2: On Femme

What differentiates “femme” from femininity and feminine?

How would you define femme, femininity, and feminine?

Do you personally identify with any of these words? If so, why? If not, why? Why do you think other people identify that way?

Do you feel that “femme” is an accepted label in the LGBTQ+ community? In mainstream society?

How does being (or not being) femme affect your experience as a bisexual?

What unique experiences accompany being femme - particularly as a bisexual woman?

Can you give me a story from your life that most strongly describes what being a bisexual femme is like for you?

What are the downsides of identifying as femme?

#### PART 3: Other Intersections

Do you think that other social positions (race, ability, class, age, etc) affect your experience as a bisexual woman? If so, how?

How has race shaped your experience of bisexuality and/or femme?

How has been cisgender or transgender shaped your experience of bisexuality and/or femme

How does being a bisexual and/or femme woman affect your membership to other communities?

The communities to which I am referring may be grounded in social identities or positions such as race, gender, age, or in ideologies such as feminism or anti-racism.

## Appendix B: Interview Subject Profiles

**Alice:**

Age: 27 at time of interview

Class Background: Lower middle class

Current job/Student Status: Anthropology graduate student

Appearance: Average height overweight curvy girl with confidence.

Area where I grew up: Metro Atlanta suburbs in a lower economic status area that is majority black.

**Kaylee:** I am a 24 year old Administrative Assistant with a Bachelor of Music in Performance. I grew up in a sheltered suburb of Atlanta, and relocating to the city when I turned 18 granted me a space to explore my identity.

**Natalie:** Mid-20s black Ph.D student from Atlanta.

**Jessica:** Early 20s biracial graduate student in Atlanta.

**Belle:** I'm a 36 year old bisexual/queer cis white woman from the South. I grew up an only child in suburban Gainesville, FL, in a middle-class family of Southern Baptist ministers going back to the colonial era in Georgia and Florida. I came out to friends at 16, and to my family at 19. I have a PhD in US and African American History and I work as a writer and editor in Atlanta.