



Bi
Notes for a
Bisexual Revolution

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CHAPTER 3:

Bisexuality, Privilege,
and Passing

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when the words *bisexuality* and *privilege* appear together, it is more often than not in the context of bisexual access to heterosexual privilege. This is often based on bisexual in/visibility inside the **heterosexual matrix**. In this chapter, I will examine and try to redefine the discourse about the relationship between bisexuality, privilege, and passing.

There are three consensus opinions about bisexuality and privilege: First, among monosexual people (and especially lesbians and gay men), the consensus opinion seems to be that bisexuals hold unquestionable access to heterosexual privilege. This relies on the popular idea that "bisexuals can choose" to be straight, meaning that bis are able to make a conscious

choice regarding who to date or establish relationships with. It is then assumed that since different-gender (or "straight") relationships are more socially acceptable, bisexuals would inevitably make the "easy" choice, prioritizing privilege, comfort, and pleasure over what is often perceived as a life of discrimination and hardship. This argument, of course, places bisexuals in the role of oppressors, as

well as being informed by the stereotype of bisexuals as careless hedonists. On a deeper level, this sort of thinking marks social anxieties about the distribution of privilege and the subversion of hierarchical categories.

Second, within mainstream bisexual movements, bisexual access to heterosexual privilege is considered a stereotype or a "myth," to be rebutted using the familiar mantra of "that's not true"! The way this rebuttal goes, bisexuals have no access at all to heterosexual privilege because they are not heterosexual. However, rather than elaborated, this point is constantly repeated. For example, in the book *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries, and Visions*, the term "heterosexual privilege" appears in at least twenty different places, but is only seriously engaged with in two texts. One of the places where this point is repeated is Liz A. Highleyman's essay, "Identity and Ideas: Strategies for Bisexuals," where she writes, "Some gay men and some lesbians see bisexuals as partakers of heterosexual privilege." Later on in the same text, she references the same notion again, writing about "the assumption that bisexuals choose other-sex [sic] partners to gain mainstream acceptance or social privilege." This belief appears isolated from context. Rather than explaining why and how this isn't true, the fact is simply assumed. Even when the question does receive more attention, the explanation often remains incomplete.

The heterosexual matrix is a term coined by Judith Butler. In biology, "matrix" is the material existing between cells, meaning that it is an all-present environment. This term emphasizes how heteronormativity comprises an all-present environment in minority-world cultures.

The most popular counterargument used by bisexual writers in this context might be exemplified by the essay "If Half of You Dodges a Bullet, All of You Ends Up Dead" by Orna Izakson, which is also one of the two texts to engage with privilege in *Bisexual Politics* in any substantial way. As evident by the title itself, it is claimed that bisexuals are equally vulnerable to homophobia as gays and lesbians by virtue of queer identification and visibility. Izakson writes:

Those who would criminalize same-sex [sic] sexual activities don't care how often or exclusively you do it. Bisexual folks suffer from these laws just as surely as the lesbian or gay man who never, ever, has an opposite-sex [sic] partner. Queer-bashers don't care that sometimes bi folks sleep with opposite-sex [sic] partners. In their eyes there is no such thing as half-queer.

According to this rebuttal, and in the tradition of bisexual discourse on biphobia and oppression, bisexuals are only oppressed inasmuch as their experience resembles that of gays and lesbians. Bisexuals, it appears, suffer only *homophobia* (rather than biphobia or monosexism) by the straight population, and, it is assumed, only suffer *biphobia* at the hands of gay and lesbian communities.

The third consensus opinion around privilege in bisexual discourses is that bisexuals do, indeed, have access to heterosexual privilege, and that as allies to the lesbian and gay movement, we should be accountable and take responsibility for the privileges that we receive. This, too, is mentioned in passing by many writers, presuming the correctness of the fact rather than explaining why it is so. For example, in her essay "Traitors to the Cause? Understanding the Lesbian/Gay 'Bisexuality Debates'" Elizabeth Armstrong mentions that:

Some bisexual activists . . . try to emphasize the alignment of bisexuals with gays and lesbians by emphasizing the

vulnerability of bisexuals to homophobia and gay-bashing from straights, while acknowledging that bisexuals do have access to heterosexual privilege.

In yet another essay from the same book, Brenda Blaisingame writes that she expects "heterosexual-identified bisexuals" to "own their access to power and privilege," but at no point takes the time to tell her readers what "heterosexual-identified bisexuals" exactly are, and what sort of privileges they are presumed to carry.

Two rare texts that do try to engage more deeply with this topic from this third side are to be found online: In a blog entry titled "passing and privileges," blogger Sarah of *Bi Furious!* describes her experience of passing as straight and her participation in "straight privilege," and tries to delineate the mechanisms by which it works. In a blog post titled "Bisexuals and straight privilege," blogger Pepper Mint of *freaksexual* attempts to encourage bisexual "accountability" of alleged access to heterosexual privilege.

All of the texts representing this view, however, seem to stem from the same root as the previous argument: that inasmuch as bisexual experience resembles gay and lesbian experience, bisexuals are oppressed; inasmuch as bisexual experience resembles straight experience, bisexuals have access to privilege. You may notice that both sides of this coin reduce bisexuality to either homosexuality (which results in oppression) or heterosexuality (which results in privilege), repeating the familiar notion that no unique bisexual experience, or oppression, exists. Yet another problem here is that most everyone seem to "know" exactly what they are talking about, dismissing the need to elaborate or prove their point before moving on to discuss something else, or to discuss "what we should do next" (whether that is fighting against biphobia, or taking responsibility for our privileges).²³

I'd like to take a different route to understanding power and privilege around bisexuality, not by trying to prove or disprove it, nor by running ahead into the proverbial "next point," but by taking a more

epistemological approach: examining where the idea of bisexual privilege comes from, why and how it emerges, and what could be done with it.

TAPPING INTO PRIVILEGE

As we might recall from chapter 1, Julia Serano says:

For me, the word “reinforcing” is a red flag: Whenever somebody utters it, I stop for a moment to ask myself who is being accused of “reinforcing” and who is not. There is almost always some double standard at work behind the scenes.

In this case, *reinforcing* can be substituted for *privileged*. When Serano talks about *reinforcing*, she is referring to allegations that certain identities “reinforce” heterosexism or the gender binary. Likewise, allegations of *privilege* place the accused groups as reinforcing—and benefiting from—social hierarchies. These allegations—especially within LGBT communities—often coincide with existing hierarchies, but not the way that you’d expect it: The most marginalized groups are usually the ones most likely to face these allegations.

For example, in the American lesbian movement during the 1970s and 1980s, various groups such as butches, femmes, kinksters, sex workers, polyamorous people, transgender women, transgender men, bisexuals, and many more people, were (and in many cases, still are) considered to be beneficiaries of, or contributors to, heterosexual privilege—therefore unfit traitors to be rejected from community spaces.²⁴

In a movement organizing itself around oppression, groups and people perceived as having privilege are also perceived as illegitimate within the movement and often even as a hindrance. In such settings, allegations of privilege, as an idea that carries negative connotations, can often be used as a weapon by the dominant groups against the marginalized ones. This is not to say, of course, that calling people out on their unchecked privileges and oppressive behaviors is always a weapon or should be abandoned as

a method. On the contrary, critically looking into power hierarchies and how they influence our behaviors toward one another is one of the most important tools available for creating revolutionary communities. When the privilege discussed is “real,” or materially detectable, then being aware of and accountable for our privileges is vital for creating change, both for ourselves and for our movements. However, in many other cases, the “privilege” allegations do not check out (materially) and the underlying power structure needs to be reexamined.

One such case is, of course, that of bisexual access to heterosexual privilege. As we’ve seen in chapter 2, bisexuals often find themselves on the bad end within many fields of life and society, in a way that proves allegations of privilege to be misdirected at best and suspicious at worst. If the allegations of privilege made against bisexuals were correct, then we could have reasonably expected to find them reflected in the statistics somewhere between gays/lesbians (lowest) and straights (highest).²⁵ However, looking into the *Bisexual Invisibility* report and other studies, it is clear that this is not the case: Bisexuals are, on average, worse off than both gays and lesbians, and straights.

The trope usually used to justify the “privilege” claim is bisexual *invisibility*: Since being in a different-gender relationship *resembles* heterosexuality, bisexuals have access to heterosexual privilege. Pepper Mint lists three kinds of heterosexual privilege: the privilege of being seen as straight, the privilege of being in a man/woman relationship, and the privilege of knowing oneself to be straight. He then proceeds to claim that bisexuals have access to the first two privileges, since they are sometimes seen as straight, and since they are sometimes in man/woman relationships. I’ll go on to deconstruct that in just a minute.

In her article “How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are,” Lisa Walker criticizes the weight given to visibility in queer and lesbian politics. Walker observes that visibility is often thought about as the end-all of oppression,

presuming that people who are visible as lesbians or queers are more vulnerable to oppression than people who aren't. In addition to this, it is also presumed that visibility is more politically subversive, since visible queerness is supposedly more challenging to the heteronormative mainstream. This view leaves behind those lesbians who are invisible (and in particular, femme lesbians and lesbians of color), who do not receive acknowledgment both in terms of the oppression that they suffer and in terms of their subversion of heteronormativity and contribution to challenging mainstream society. This, in turn, places butch lesbians and white lesbians both as the most oppressed, and the most subversive of lesbian identities, reinforcing masculinist and racist social hierarchies within lesbian communities.

Walker's critique is particularly useful in regard to bisexuals. In many discourses, bisexuality is depicted as *necessarily and always invisible* whereas homosexuality and lesbianism are dubbed as *necessarily and always visible*. Continuing from this axiom, lesbians and gays are normally considered both more oppressed and more subversive than bisexuals, in ways that rely completely on the visible aspects of bisexual identity and experience, treating the part as if it was whole.

To return to Pepper Mint in light of Walker's theory, his reliance on bisexual in/visibility becomes clear: "Being seen as straight" is quite self-evident; however, I would also like to claim that the category of "being in a man/woman relationship" is also visibility-focused. The term implies a "straight" relationship, echoing Blaisingame's "heterosexual-identified bisexuals." Presuming that a "man/woman relationship" receives heterosexual privilege presents it as heterosexual in practice, regardless of the identities of the people inside it, meaning that if it "looks" straight, then it "must" be so. However, a "man/woman relationship" with a bisexual person in it, is not a "straight" relationship—it is a relationship that *visually resembles* heterosexuality, but might, in fact, be far from it.

The term *man/woman relationship* is also cissexist. It seems to be presumed that the writer means any relationship resembling that of a

cisgender man with a cisgender woman. However, many couples exist that may appear to be so but are actually not; namely, relationships with transgender and genderqueer people in them. Pepper Mint also seems to neglect the fact that many genderqueer and nonbinary gender bisexuals will *never actually be* in a man/woman relationship, since they do not identify as men or as women. Even if some of their relationships may visually appear as a "man/woman relationship," they are not in fact so.

Reducing bisexual experience around oppression to the visual aspect only, necessarily means erasing all those other aspects of bisexual oppression that aren't perceived as visible or intuitive. As we've seen in chapter 2, this means most of them. Just to recall: Bisexuals experience oppression through cultural erasure, exploitation, marginalization, verbal, physical, and sexual violence, stereotyping, and internalized biphobia (just to name a few), and in the fields of economics, employment, education, health, mental health, and interpersonal relationships (again, to name a few). Indeed, remembering these multiple faces of monosexism might help us keep in mind that oppression of bisexuals is both widespread and often intangible, and that most of these forms of monosexism work against bisexual people independent of their "visibility" and regardless of their current relationship status. In fact, this reduction to visibility can be thought about as part of the oppression itself, obscuring the effects of monosexism and erasing bisexual experience.

A good analogy to this might be transgender people in mixed-gender relationships. For the sake of the argument, let's imagine a trans woman and a trans man in a relationship together. In terms of visibility, their relationship conforms to the two first kinds of heterosexual privilege listed by Pepper Mint: assuming for a moment that they both pass full time, they are likely to be seen as straight; they are also in a man/woman relationship. However, despite the benefits of access to state-sanctioned marriage and other legal benefits, claiming that these people partake in heterosexual privilege would be inaccurate at best and erasing at worst. Transgender people (including those who pass full time

and those in mixed-gender relationships) face a myriad of visible and invisible oppression, including lack of access to medical care and mental health care, unemployment and work discrimination, homelessness and housing discrimination, lack of access to education, police brutality and persecution, physical violence (including several hundred murders per year around the world), sexual violence, harassment, bullying, and many more—all in addition to various effects of internalized transphobia, such as depression, self-harm, and suicide.

Here it might be relevant to remember that transgender people have historically indeed been (and in many cases, still are) accused of pursuing heterosexual privilege, imagined as traitors and closet cases who would rather transition into the “opposite sex” than be out as “gay” or “lesbian.”²⁶ As I hope is obvious to my readers, this view is distorted, being based on the same focus on visibility as the sole indicator of oppression and privilege, just like the allegations of bisexual access to heterosexual privilege. In both these cases, multiple variables of oppression and lived experiences of bisexual and transgender people are erased and denied in light of surface impressions.

These problems demonstrate the limitations of the “heterosexual privilege” discourse in relation to bisexuals and bisexuality. Looking into things from the “privilege” perspective might lend weight to distortion of power relations around bisexuality, and serve as vehicle for monosexist views. Seeing as such, I would like to propose a change in terms around this issue: from privilege into passing. Such a change, I hope, would enrich our understandings of power, hierarchies, and oppression around bisexuality and in bisexual people’s lives, allowing us to view the complexities of this issue, as well as its subversive potential.

PASSING UNTO POWER

Passing usually means being perceived by others as a member of the dominant group. This can be any group at all, though the term most

often refers to three sites: racial, gender, and sexual groups. The term first gained prominence in nineteenth-century United States, as black people used passing as a method for escaping slavery. Gender passing in the past mostly referred to the phenomenon of women passing as men (especially in contexts of war), and today mostly refers to transgender people passing as cisgender. Sexual passing usually refers to queer people passing as straight. In a bisexual context, the term *passing* is more ambiguous and can be used to describe passing as either straight or lesbian and gay. This is because bisexuals are usually a marginalized/non-default group within *any* sexual setting, placing both groups of straights and lesbians and gays as dominant over bisexuals.²⁷

The act of passing can be willing or coercive, by intention or by default. When done willingly, or intentionally, passing is usually done in order to avoid the effects of oppression that come with being part of a marginalized group. Here the original meaning of black people escaping slavery might shed light on other types as well, as any type of passing can be thought of within this framework. People who pass as members of a dominant group are able to achieve access to power and resources that are withheld from them as people of a marginalized group. They are also able to avoid social punishments that they would be subject to by force of belonging to a marginalized group, and thus passing might be thought of as an act of self-protection.

Before I start discussing this in detail, I need to say that although I will be describing bisexual passing in conjunction with other types of passing, it is not my intention to compare between them. Monosexism is not racism, and the oppression of bisexuals pales in comparison with slavery and oppression of black and brown people. Likewise, the oppression of trans and genderqueer people, and of disabled people (also mentioned later on) is very different to that of bis. My intention is not to draw lines of similarity or suggest that these types of oppression are all the same. They are not. Rather, it’s my intention to draw meanings

and shed light on bisexual passing through other histories and types of passing. By doing so I hope to alert my readers both to the histories and meanings of passing in general, and to the meanings that bisexual passing can lend from them. Later on in the book, I will specifically address connections and intersections between bisexuality and transgender, and between bisexuality and racialization.

INTENTIONAL PASSING

As slaves, black people had to suffer a lifetime of hard labor, torture, humiliation, violence, rape, and many other severe forms of oppression at the hands of white people. As escaping slaves, black people were subject to manhunts and persecution, and, if caught, to heavy lashing, beating, starving, and other forms of severe physical punishment, sometimes even leading to their deaths. Those who managed to escape but remained visibly black still had to deal with intense racism, segregation, poverty, hostility, violence (including institutionalized violence such as prisons and criminalization), and total lack of civil rights (much of which persists to this day). Passing as white has thus allowed those who succeeded both to avoid the penalties of being black in Amerikkka and to gain access to such resources as money, food, housing, clothes, medicine, social status, and, generally, perception as an equal human being—resources which were all but withheld from them as blacks (and in many cases, still are).

With this in mind, we might argue that bisexuals face a myriad of social punishments and sanctions while being denied power and resources. Specifically, bisexuals are subject to the many forms of monosexism and biphobia described earlier, and are withheld from positions of power and resources in contexts of work, community, social status, and many more (as specified in chapter 2). Thus by passing, bisexuals might avoid the social sanctions cast upon those known to be bisexual, and be able to access power and resources otherwise denied them.

However, intentionally passing full time also carries a price:

that of perceiving oneself as other than presented externally. In the case of black people passing for white, this often entails erasure of one's personal history and denial of one's family, at enormous personal cost. It also means living in constant fear of discovery: For example, a famous passage in Reba Lee's autobiographical book, *I Passed for White*, describes how she spent all her months of pregnancy worried that her baby would be born with dark skin. When she had a miscarriage, of a baby boy, she realized that she forgot to wonder whether it was a boy or a girl throughout these months. She then reports of being so relieved that the baby was white that she was able to feel no grief about his death. In addition, passing full time for black people means having to listen to white people speak out their racist opinions without being able to call them out on it, for danger of self-exposure. And finally, it means that if one is discovered to be black, one is stripped of all resources, power, and status that one has gained so far, and is again relegated to one's default oppressed status. Thus the whole apparatus of passing is incredibly fragile, as the benefits gained are dependent solely on one's status as a member of the dominant group.

To draw a parallel, for bisexuals, intentionally passing full time (either as straight or as gay or lesbian) often means not only having to hide one's identity, but also one's past (or present) relationships and one's romantic or sexual desires. It means constantly experiencing the fear of discovery, along with the knowledge that one's treatment as an equal will end upon exposure of one's bisexuality, often to be replaced with rejection and isolation. It also means hiding one's opinions and not being able to call out people's biphobic or LGBT-phobic remarks for fear of discovery. And of course, it means that one is only able to maintain their access to certain power and resources (whether in a heterosexual, or lesbian or gay contexts) just as long as one passes as monosexual.

A classical example of this would be closeted bisexual men married to straight women, one of the LGBT groups most scapegoated for pursuing heterosexual privilege through passing. Passing as straight

enables these men to have access to such resources as marriage, children, family support, employment opportunities and promotion at work, or social status. However, passing also entails constant hiding of one's bisexual identity, lack of support for their bisexuality with no ability to talk about it, and the consequent results of depression, denial, and other forms of external and internalized biphobia described in chapter 2. For those who find their outlet in cruising and casual sex, it also means being at risk of contracting HIV and other STIs through unsafe sex, as well as being less likely to know about the importance of safer sex practices, as this group of men is almost never targeted by information programs and brochures. It also means having to deal with straight people's biphobia and LGBT-phobia without being able to call them out on it for fear of exposure. And, most importantly, it means that if they do decide to come out as bisexual (or if they are discovered to be bi), they are likely to face such punishments as divorce, loss of their relationship, loss of their children, loss of family support (including their family of origin), and a general loss of social status and heterosexually dependent benefits and privileges. Thus, these men's access to "heterosexual privilege" is entirely dependent upon their ability to successfully pass as straight, and stops at the moment when their heterosexuality is "proven otherwise." In addition, whereas many gay men in similar circumstance might expect support from the gay community, this kind of support is often withheld from bisexual men. This means that in order for these men to access gay community resources and support, they would be obliged to pass as gay, with many implications similar to those for passing as straight.

COERCIVE PASSING

Passing isn't only intentional, however, and can also be coercive or done by default. What this means is that, unless (and until) proven otherwise, people of any group are most likely to be assumed as members of the dominant group. In a society which constructs itself around

a single human default standard (male, white, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, middle class, etc.), all others are marked by deviation from this single standard: The dominant identity is obvious and unmarked, while marginalized identities always require assertion. The "deviation" itself is never assumed as the default: Unless visibly and clearly presenting otherwise, one is never automatically presumed to be racialized, queer, trans, disabled, and so on. Even in regard to cis-genders, research shows that it's "easier" for people to identify male than female features, meaning that the default "visible" person in our culture is male "unless proven otherwise." Concurrently, bisexuality as an identity is never presumed since it is always a deviation and never a default (or even an option).

Coercive passing can be thought of as an alternative term to *invisibility*. Whereas *invisibility* suggests that one is simply "unseen" in their marginalized identity, the concept of coercive passing suggests that one isn't simply invisible but actively perceived as something other than they experience themselves to be (as influenced by social construction and power hierarchies). Thus, being "invisible" in fact means being actively, coercively passed off as a member of the default/hegemonic group, entailing erasure as well as more subtle forms of oppression. This is particularly relevant to the concept of *bisexual invisibility*—taken from this perspective, it's easy to understand that bisexuality and bisexual people are not invisible, but are being actively and coercively erased.

In addition to the difficulties experienced by knowing oneself to be other than what you're presenting, people who pass coercively are forced to deal with the effects of erasure. This means that in addition to being exposed to the dominant group's unchecked oppressive behavior and speech, and to knowing that you're only being treated well because (and only as long as) you're presumed to be something you're not, one is also exposed to other people's doubts, disbelief, questioning, or denial of one's marginalized status, and to the need to "prove" oneself as a "true" member of one's "original" group.

For example, in her article "Passing for White, Passing for Black," American light-skinned mixed-race artist Adrian Piper writes:

For most of my life I did not understand that I needed to identify my racial identity publicly and that if I did not, I would be inevitably mistaken for white. I simply didn't think about it. But since I also made no special effort to hide my racial identity, I often experienced the shocked and/or hostile reactions of whites who discovered it after the fact. I always knew when it had happened, even when the person declined to confront me directly: the startled look, the searching stare that would fix itself on my facial features, one by one, looking for the telltale "negroid" feature, the sudden, sometimes permanent withdrawal of good feeling or regular contact—all alerted me to what had transpired. Uh-oh, I would think to myself helplessly, and watch another blossoming friendship wilt.

In another instance, she writes:

I have sometimes met blacks socially who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, require me to prove my blackness by passing the Suffering Test: They recount at length their recent experiences of racism and then wait expectantly, skeptically, for me to match theirs with mine. [...] I would share some equally nightmarish experience along similar lines, and would then have it explained to me why that wasn't really so bad, why it wasn't the same thing at all, or why I was stupid for allowing it to happen to me.

This double-edged effect of passing might shed light on many bisexuals' experience, as we often have to deal with other people's doubts and scrutiny about our lives, our choices, and our identification. To pass

by default means constantly being presumed and treated as something other than what you are, to always be accepted on the premises that you are *not* bisexual. It means fearing the moment of disclosure, and seeing the spark die in another person's eye as the word "bisexual" hits the surface, to always know to expect rejection. It means being scrutinized and asked to "prove" ourselves: Often we are presented with the demand to provide lists of lovers and sexual affairs in order to prove our bisexual status. In lesbian/gay settings, we are constantly asked to prove the oppression that we suffer, presuming that, because they can't see it, then it doesn't exist at all.

In an essay called "A Hard Look at Invisible Disability," Cal Montgomery suggests an alternative way of thinking about invisible disability (the kind of disability which is not visibly detectable, such as some chronic illnesses, visual and auditory disabilities, mental disabilities, etc.). She writes:

In the disability community, we speak as if some kinds of disability were visible, and others weren't. Let me suggest a different approach: Think about the ways different kinds of disability have become more familiar, and more visible, to you as you've gotten to know more disabled people.

Montgomery continues to say that certain visual signals (or "tools") have become synonymous with disability, such as wheelchairs, white canes, hearing aids, etc.

But the tools are only the first step to visibility. The second step is the behavior that is expected, given a particular set of tools. The person who uses a white cane when getting on the bus, but then pulls out a book to read while riding; the person who uses a wheelchair to get into the library stacks but then stands up to reach a book on a high shelf; the person who uses a

picture-board to discuss philosophy; the person who challenges the particular expectations of disability that other people have is suspect. "I can't see what's wrong with him," people say, meaning, "He's not acting the way I think he should." "She's invisibly disabled," they say, meaning, "I can't see what barriers she faces."

Montgomery is here drawing attention to passing by default as informed by social constructions of what it "means" to be disabled. Cultural knowledge on disability that is solely based on visual signs misses out on nonvisible disability by default. This means that disabled and chronically ill people whose disabilities are not visibly detectable are likely to pass as nondisabled by default. In addition to being a criticism of society's focus on visibility (much like Lisa Walker's), Montgomery's text sheds light on the hierarchy of cultural knowledge: It is more difficult for people to understand and detect nonvisible disabilities because they *know* less about it—and the reason why they know less about it is that hegemonic knowledge about disability produces visible disabilities as the only kind of disability that exists. This means that not only is there a hierarchy of visibility at work here, but also a hierarchy of knowledge.

For nonvisibly disabled and chronically ill people, passing by default means constantly having one's disability questioned. It means being told that one doesn't actually have a disability, being presumed able to perform certain tasks and subsequently perceived as fraudulent, lazy, stubborn, or selfish when attempting to assert one's boundaries. It means being less likely to have one's needs accommodated both by other people and by institutions. It also means being harassed by others for accommodations that one has managed to achieve. For example, in her article "My Body, My Closet," Ellen Samuels writes:

Nonvisibly disabled people who use disabled parking permits are routinely challenged and harassed by strangers. Recently,

a sympathetic nondisabled friend of mine told me that a colleague of hers had reported triumphantly her detection of someone using a disabled parking permit illegally. The colleague's conclusion was based on the fact that the woman she saw getting out of the car was young and "well-groomed" and had no sign of a limp. In addition, the colleague continued, she had followed the woman closely as they entered the building and had ascertained that she was breathing "normally" and so could have no respiratory impairments.

According to Samuels:

Such constant and invasive surveillance of nonvisibly disabled bodies is the result of a convergence of complicated cultural discourses regarding independence, fraud, malingering, and entitlement; the form it takes almost always involves a perceived discontinuity between appearance, behavior, and identity.

Many things here might shed light on the case of bisexuality, especially as far as it concerns "proving" our bisexuality and our oppression. Hegemonic discourse about what it means to be queer (and therefore, oppressed as queer) constructs queerness as a series of visual markers: certain appearances, certain gender performances, certain clothes, and above all, the ubiquitous "walking hand in hand on the street" (or simply being in a same-gender relationship). Bisexual people who, for any reason, do not give out these signs are automatically read as heterosexual by default, because what people "know" about queerness does not include markers of bisexuality.

A significant difference in this matter between bisexuality and non-visible disability is the double-edged effect of bisexual passing: While people with nonvisible disabilities can never seem to automatically pass as disabled, bisexuals do often pass as queer by default—however, the

same social production of “queer” as this series of visual markers necessarily means that bisexuals who do give out these signals will automatically be read as gay or lesbian by default.

In both cases (unless the bi person in question is carrying a huge sign reading I AM BISEXUAL), it becomes impossible to successfully pass as bi or to assert bisexual identity. Thus bisexuals’ visual differences from—or similarities to—homosexuality and lesbianism both hinder “proof” of bisexual identity and of bisexual oppression: Either we pass as heterosexual, and thus are perceived to not be oppressed at all, or we pass as lesbian/gay, and thus are perceived to only be oppressed inasmuch as we resemble them. Since our bisexuality is not “known” to have any visual markers, we are routinely accused of fraudulence, perceived as invisible, and forced to deal with others’ doubts regarding our identities and our oppression.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A BISEXUAL: WHEN BISEXUALS PASS

Despite the above, there still exist several forms of successful passing as bisexual—even without constantly carrying huge BISEXUAL signs. Notably, I can think of two main ways to successfully pass as bisexual: in situations where one is visibly engaged with people of more than one gender, and in situations where bisexual people successfully “recognize” each other.

In her article “What’s in a Name? Why Women Embrace or Resist Bisexual Identity,” Robyn Ochs says:

[B]isexuality only becomes visible as a point of conflict. Bisexuality becomes visible as bisexuality only in the context of complicated, uncomfortable situations: A woman leaves her husband for another woman; a woman leaves a lesbian relationship for a male lover. (Emphasis in original.)

To this we can add situations such as three-way relationships, multiple-partner relationships, cheating on a partner of a certain gender with someone of a different gender, walking in the street with two (or more) partners of different genders, being publicly sexual with partners of more than one gender, participating in group sex with people of more than one gender, and so on.

Before I go on to say what this means in practice, I need to say that I absolutely *love* the conflation of bisexuality with “complicated, uncomfortable situations” in Ochs’s quote. This oscillation of meanings sets bisexuality as a disruption to order, significantly to monosexual and monogamous couplehood order. That bisexuality is only visible as a point of conflict, and discomfort speaks to its character as a social transgression and thereby a tool for change. It makes way for us to imagine bisexuality as a space for difficulty, discomfort, and disruption—not as simple disturbances, problems to be solved, or barriers to overcome, but as sites of complexity whose very virtues are contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities.

To return to Ochs’s quote, this kind of passing means that bisexuals are completely dependent upon their (multiple) partners for successful bisexual passing. This also means that only those bisexuals who have multiple partners or who engage in any of the practices listed above are able to visibly communicate their bisexuality—and even this is only possible at specific times. Most significantly, it means that passing in this way can never be done individually, as it necessitates being seen with other people (as “passing accessories”). In addition, there’s also something to be said about the very particular type of visibility that this way of passing creates for bisexuals and for bisexuality; one that might create the false impression that bisexuality only exists within these particular “disruptions” but not outside of them. And of course, this type of visibility might also constitute coercive passing for people who give out these “bisexual” visual signs but do not identify as bisexual. Such is the case, for example, for lesbians who sleep with men, for straight-identified

MSM (men who have sex with men), for pansexual or queer people, or anyone at all who experiences desire toward people of more than one gender without identifying as bisexual.

That said, this way of passing can also be an empowering way for bisexuals (who can, and who want) to publicly perform their bisexuality, to make themselves visible, and to challenge monosexist and monogamous social norms. This goes in particular to people in multiple-partner relationships or in other polyamorous and nonmonogamous arrangements. By publicly displaying both bisexuality and nonmonogamy, bisexuals (and their partners) might be able to transform or "taint" spaces otherwise presumed monosexual and monogamous. This sort of display can challenge people's ideas about acceptable types of public displays, forms of desire, and kinds of relationships. It might also create a blatant bisexual presence, using an "in-your-face" type of fabulous, outrageous, bisexual spectacle.

The second way in which bisexuals can pass as bisexual happens when bi people recognize each other. In her article "It Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest," Amy Robinson suggests that passing is a kind of a three-way theater performance, wherein the person who's passing is performing a "show" to an audience of the dominant group, while the facilitator of the pass, who enables it and contributes to its success, is an "accomplice" in-group member who recognizes the other person for what they are without betraying them to the dominant group.

Now, whereas Robinson is discussing *intentional* passing, her idea of the pass as a dynamic of recognition might nonetheless be useful for looking into this type of passing. She writes:

A study of passing thus poses the question of identity as a matter of competing discourses of recognition. Not only is the passer's "real" identity a function of the lens through which it is

viewed, but it is the spectator who manufactures the symptoms of a successful pass by engaging in the act of reading that constitutes the performance of the passing subject.

To simplify: This means that identity is "in the eye of the beholder." For us as bisexuals, it means that being able to recognize each other is dependent on our ability to "allow ourselves" to read others. If we use "the lens" through which we can view bisexuals, then bisexuals will start appearing there.

This idea can be simply called a bidar (bi + radar)—the bisexual version of a gaydar. It means that people are able to pick up on the subtle visual or behavioral cues that others give out and that might indicate their (bi)sexuality. As is the case with the gaydar (or transdar), this recognition requires two main components: practice, and the constant, quiet presence of the option. Once one stops presuming that bisexuals are nonexistent, invisible, or undetectable, and starts looking for the subtle signs of bisexuality, those signs will slowly become apparent. The more experience one has in recognizing bisexuals, the more sensitive and skillful one becomes in such identification. Of course, not all bisexuals are recognizable, and many will easily defy the bidar, whereas others will appear to be bisexuals without actually identifying as bi. However, many others can still be identified, and keeping this option in our heads may well help many of us deal with, and counter, the feeling of isolation and lack of community that so many of us experience. Instead of advocating a new bisexual dress code or a standard "bisexual haircut" (as is so often done), we can just start picking up on the signs of bisexuality—they're already there.

So how do you recognize a bisexual? Intuitively, intangibly. A look in their eyes, a vibe they give out. Some people look decidedly bi, whereas others are ambiguous; some people give a "queer" vibe, of liking people of more than one gender but not identifying as bisexual; and some

people give out no vibe at all. One person I once met had the body language of a butch lesbian with the look of a gay man. Others I've met were femme. Still others looked like butch dykes, gay bears, trans boys, and fabulous genderqueers. Not all were recognizable; for some I wouldn't have believed it. For others, I "just knew." With time, I meet and observe more bisexual people and pick up the tools for "knowing" who we are.

Of course, this mechanism of recognition doesn't have to be limited to bisexuals. In-group members don't have to identify in the same way or actually belong to the same identity group. In this way, *in-group* should be taken to mean those "in the know." No one is born with special abilities of identifying bisexuals (or identifying anyone else, for that matter), which means that anyone can learn how to do this. This includes bisexuals as well as monosexuals, asexuals, and any other group of people. The central point is keeping the option of bisexuality in mind, remembering that any person you meet might be bisexual. Once the question "Who is bisexual?" is present in one's mind, the potential of recognition follows. Monosexual and other non-bi people would do well to remember this, as it might help them avoid making presumptions about other people's sexualities.

PASSING IN THEORY (A BI/EPISTEMOLOGY OF PASSING)

Taken as a symbol or a metaphor, passing carries various subversive meanings in and of itself. As Elaine K. Ginsberg explains in her article "The Politics of Passing," passing is a transgression: a crossing of boundaries. The word itself marks movement from one space into another, as in passing through a gate or "passing the line." The line being crossed here is one of social hierarchy, a socially manufactured line separating the privileged and the disprivileged, using categories whose very purpose is hierarchical distribution of power.

For bisexual people, these lines are multiple: the line of

heterosexuality, the line of homosexuality, the line of lesbianism, the line of queerness (even the lines of transgender and genderqueerness). All of these might be presumed, in different places and times, as the core identity categories to which a bisexual person belongs, according to her visual similarities to what people "know" of these categories. Inasmuch as visual interpretation of identities goes, all of these overshadow and are privileged over bisexuality. However, the privilege doesn't start and end with visual recognition: Visual recognition is only a symptom of the deeper lines of privilege in a monosexist system where bisexuality is produced and located as a disprivileged other, in both heterosexual and queer spaces (as described in chapter 2).

The act of passing exposes these lines and reveals these hierarchies by infiltrating the lines of the social group(s) from which one is banned. The necessity to pass in order to access privilege (in the case of intentional passing), or privilege granted on the premises of *not* belonging to a disprivileged group (in the case of coercive passing) serves as an indicator of the unequal power relations between the different groups. For example, Adrian Piper writes:

A benefit and a disadvantage of looking white is that most people treat you as though you were white. And so, because of how you've been treated, you come to expect this sort of treatment, not, perhaps, realizing that you're being treated this way because people think you're white, but falsely supposing, rather, that you're being treated this way because people think you are a valuable person. [...] To those who in fact believe . . . that black people are not entitled to this degree of respect, attention, and liberty, the sight of a black person behaving as though she were can, indeed, look very much like arrogance.

When one stops passing for a member of the dominant group, the privileges that one had enjoyed thus far are revoked. The revoking of the

privileges testifies to the existence of the boundary separating privileged and disprivileged groups, making it visible and detectable.

For example, in many bisexuals' lives, these lines are exposed in the context of dating, where an entire bisexual lore exists on whether, when, and how exactly to come out as bisexual to a potential lover. An all-too-common scenario is one where the bisexual person in question goes on a date with another (monosexual) person. The date goes well and everything seems pleasant until the moment when bisexuality is mentioned. The other person responds with shock, feels deceived, proceeds to question the bisexual person about their commitment level, HIV/STI status, or very capability to be honest. In the worst-case scenario, this is where the date ends; in the lesser-case scenario, the date might slowly draw to an end thereafter. In both cases, both parties know that they will not see each other again. Also in both cases, the bisexual person experiences rejection and disappointment on the basis of his bisexuality, on the premises of having been coercively passed off as monosexual. Of course, similar to Piper's anecdote, this scenario is only one small indication of a far broader system of oppression.

Passing also plays out on hegemonic fears of infiltration and invasion, reflecting dominant groups' fear of not being able to distinguish between "us" and "them"—themselves and "the others." This is a direct threat to the distribution of power and privilege in society, since passing, as an act, makes it impossible to differentiate "worthy" benefactors of privilege from "unworthy" targets of marginalization. It breaks down the distinction between hierarchical groups and threatens the privileged groups with loss of relative power.

For example, in her book *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, Gayle Wald cites a *Saturday Night Live* skit by Eddie Murphy titled "Black Like Me," in which Murphy performs in "white face" (putting on makeup so as to appear white-skinned) and goes out to New York City in order to

"actually experience America as a white man." Murphy, in white face, becomes the beneficiary of white privilege, as he receives various humorous favors from his "fellow white men." The skit ends with Murphy's observation that America still has a long way to go before all people can be "truly free." Murphy, however, then goes on to reveal a row of black people disguising themselves in white face as well. "America may not be a land of equal opportunity," Murphy tells his audience, "[but] I've got a lot of friends, and we've got a lot of makeup." This skit's conclusion obviously plays off on white people's fear of not being able to tell themselves apart from black people, since passing disrupts their ability to distribute racial power and privilege hierarchically.

As it comes to bisexuality, we might recall Kenji Yoshino's observation that bisexuality subverts people's ability to distinguish between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and thus disrupts their ability to privilege some people over others. This works in two directions: the heterosexual hegemony, and the GGGG movement. In heterosexual spheres, the idea of bisexuality, and bisexual passing, makes it impossible to ascertain heterosexual (privileged) identity. Since bisexuals may well "appear" to be straight even as they act and perform their bisexuality, it becomes impossible to withhold visibility-based privilege from them on the basis of not "being" straight. What this means is that heterosexual power, status, and resources are being "shared" with an outsider, breaking the rules of the system and "stealing" those resources from their "rightful owners." In addition, this also acts out on many straight people's anxieties that they themselves might be bisexual or gay—for if there's no way to distinguish between a heterosexual and a bisexual person, then perhaps they themselves might be "unwittingly tainted." Such latent bisexuality might indeed be cause for anxiety, as it usually entails loss of privilege and power. This means that the very existence of bisexuality creates a constant anxiety on part of heterosexuals, of losing their privileged social position.

As far as it goes to the GGGG movement, as a movement generally set on catering only to the needs of white cisgender gay men, the ideas

of bisexuality and bisexual passing make it impossible to privilege only gays when distributing inner-community power and resources. Simply put, the quicksilver character of bisexual passing subverts the GGGG movement's ability to prioritize the needs of only one group over those of others. In this way, bisexuality might subvert rigid identity-based politics, which only reinscribe the original lines and borders of categorization, and therefore of oppression.

On a side note: It's important to remember again that bisexuals' ability to pass does not equal unequivocal access to privilege. Even those bisexuals who do pass are still oppressed on the axis of bisexuality through a variety of invisible yet highly influential types of oppression, such as those alluded to throughout this chapter and elaborated in chapter 2.

Passing also creates a denaturalizing effect in regard to identity, meaning that it shows how identities, which are usually perceived as natural, are in fact socially constructed. Ginsberg writes that

the possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic and even antithetical assumptions about identity, the first of which is that some identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences: presumably one cannot pass for something one is not unless there is some other, prepassing, identity that one is.

The idea of passing as an act of disguise presumes an essence of identity. Without a "true core," a disguise becomes impossible, for the very meaning of disguise comes from the discrepancy between what one "is" and what one is "seen" and "understood" to be. However, instead of being an essentialist notion, passing can subvert these presumptions by showing, in practice, that appearances—including one's very body—are no guarantee for the "truth" of one's identity. From this point of view, passing becomes particularly useful in demonstrating the way in which

all identities and appearances are socially constructed, the way identities are written into our very bodies, and the enormous fragility of these constructs themselves.

In the case of bisexuality, we might look at society's insistent attempts to naturalize both homosexuality and heterosexuality, appealing to bodies, genes, hormones, and brains in order to establish that "this" (the sexuality in question) is inborn, natural, and immutable. Under this logic, one is either "born" gay or "born" straight, and thus any performance of their desires is "true to its nature." Being in a same-gender relationship presumes homosexuality, and being in a different-gender relationship presumes heterosexuality, because one's relationship choices are understood to reflect one's inner essence. Bisexuality—and bisexual passing—short-circuits this circular logic by showing that "acting gay" or "acting straight" does not necessarily equate with "being gay" or "being straight." It allows us to distrust visual presentations and to deconstruct claims of inner essences. In this way, bisexuality may again be one way out of rigid identity constructs, a way of resisting both the lines of separation imposed by them and the hierarchies built upon them.

PASSING/BI

I'd like to suggest that all of these subversive meanings carried by passing are bisexual in character, and that concurrently, bisexuality itself is an act of passing. In thinking how passing can be bisexual, we might recall from chapter 1 the various political meanings of bisexuality and the use of bisexual stereotypes. We might remember that crossing boundaries, exposing hierarchies, invading and tainting social order, and denaturalizing identities are all meanings associated with bisexuality through stereotypes and various discourses.

Such ideas might be found in several bisexual stereotypes. The stereotype of confusion and indecision marks a social anxiety of identity instability, as well as fear of change. This anxiety is reflected by the covert demand put forth in this stereotype, for bisexual people to choose

a “stable” identity. We are given to understand that in order to reassure society, bisexuals need to reaffirm binary social order and take on one of two “opposing” identities: either gay or straight. This “refusal to choose” makes bisexuality particularly shifty in the terms of the dominant system of sex, gender, and sexuality under which minority-world cultures operate, making it a destabilizing force on the entire system. This destabilization echoes the effects of passing, which, as explained above, destabilizes identities by making it impossible to distinguish between members of privileged and disprivileged groups.

The stereotype of bisexuals as carriers/vectors of HIV and other STIs “carries” the image of bisexuals as invaders of heterosexual, as well as of lesbian and gay, spaces. This “fear of invasion” clearly echoes anxieties related to crossing of boundaries and subversion of distinctions. As mentioned above, passing is also perceived as a threat to these things, and is imagined as an act of crossing and transgression of boundaries even by its very name.

The stereotype of bisexuals as treacherous or unfaithful recalls the deception, invasion, and exploitation associated with passing. This stereotype presents bisexuals as people who deceive others into believing that they are something other than they “truly” are (for example, “deceive” their monosexual partners into believing that they are trustworthy). This connotation clearly echoes the idea of passing as an act of deception. (For example, Randall Kennedy defines passing as “a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct”).

The stereotype that bisexuals can choose to be gay or straight stands for a denaturalization of sexual-identity categories by disconnecting between sexual identities and the idea that they are inborn. As explained in chapter 1, this stereotype marks a monosexual anxiety that identities are not naturally determined, thus disrupting the connection between identities and biology. Likewise, as mentioned above, passing denaturalizes identities by showing that despite social expectations to

the contrary, what one’s body looks like (for example, skin tone) cannot testify to any “truth” about one’s identity.

Thus, through the parallel meanings of subversion of boundaries, destabilization of categories, and disruption to order, the idea of passing might be thought about as bisexual in character. However, the parallels between bisexuality and passing do not end here: In addition to the closeness and similarities between passing and bisexuality, I’d also like to suggest that bisexuality is close and similar to passing.

The first level in which bisexuality is similar to passing resides in bisexuals’ general inability to successfully pass as bi. As discussed earlier in this chapter, bi people are constantly being passed off as anything but bisexual, while only few and relatively rare incidents permit successful bisexual passing. In practice, what this means is that *to be bisexual is to pass*, to be perceived as other than what one understands oneself to be, to be taken as a member of the dominant group. The act of passing is inextricably encapsulated within bisexuality and bisexual experience.

In her essay “Lose Your Face,” Mariam Fraser discusses how certain lesbian theorists describe the “bisexual” woman (quotations are in the original) as a trope whose main characteristic is inauthenticity. This inauthenticity, in Fraser’s reading, originates from the “bisexual” woman’s ability to be seen as something that she is not. Her ability to pass as a lesbian (or to be coercively passed off as one) creates a crisis of meaning that challenges the assumption that what one “looks like” reveals the “truth” about her. Fraser writes:

Because the . . . “bisexual” fails to pass, the “misfit”—the discrepancy between acting and being, between what we see and what we know—is revealed. And in this misfit, the “bisexual” woman illustrates that acting and being are not after all the same or “naturally” bound.

This crisis of meaning creates further anxiety for the (imaginary) authentic lesbian in the text as she seeks to validate her own lesbian identity using eyesight and her gaze. While expecting to see her lesbianism reflected back to her from others who “look like” her, she is confounded by the “bisexual” woman, whose identity doesn’t match her appearance. Thus,

by passing through the lesbian community the “bisexual” woman introduces the possibility that that community, and the authenticity of lesbian identities, are not after all “ideal,” that not everyone in the “community” shares the identity and therefore will not necessarily reflect the authentic lesbian back to herself. . .

In the lesbian texts that Fraser writes about, the trope of the “bisexual” is used in order to differentiate “true lesbians” from “bisexual” pretenders, who pass as “true” lesbians, but in fact exploit lesbian women’s conditioning to “service and nurturance.” This differentiation brings to light two points: First, it emphasizes exactly the kind of anxiety described above. Because of the “bisexual” woman’s ability to destabilize lesbian identities (by refusing to reassure their authenticity), the “authentic” lesbian (in this case, the theorist) is required to redraw the lines so as to shut out the bisexual. In other words, the theorist needs to redefine what it means to be a lesbian in order to defend herself from the confusion brought about by bi women. In this way, the entire theoretical argument in these texts rests within the anxieties raised by bisexual women regarding lesbian authenticity.

Second, the word *bisexual* seems to be enough for these theorists in order to convey inauthenticity, meaning that bisexuality “passes” this meaning without the need for an accompanying clarification. We don’t need to be told that bisexuality is inauthentic, because “it just is.” Thus again we can see that to *be* bisexual *is* to pass. The “bisexual” woman who passes through the lesbian community need *do* nothing in particular

in order to pass—and confound—the “authentic” lesbian’s identity—she only needs to be bisexual and to be in a lesbian community. Her presence, as a bisexual woman, is enough to raise anxieties and destabilize identities. In this, we might see yet again that bisexuality and passing are one and the same, encapsulating one another, carrying mutual meanings and creating similar effects.

Another level in which bisexuality encapsulates passing is in what Clare Hemmings terms *bisexual partiality* in her article “A Feminist Methodology of the Personal: Bisexual Experience and Feminist Post-structuralist Epistemology.” What this term refers to is a state in which bisexuals’ identities and experiences are always formed and articulated in relation to “communities that do not recognize bisexuality as discrete (or viable), and filtered through competing discourses of identity.” Since in most locations in the world, no (explicitly) bisexual community exists—and even if it does, it does not connect with a broader bisexual culture—bisexuals find themselves coming to terms with our identities in, and through, communities where we are strangers. As suggested above, these communities almost always presume that their membership is homogeneous, presuming bisexual identities and bisexual people out of (imagined) existence. Simply put, in most communities, bisexuals are never thought of, acknowledged, or accepted as bisexuals, but always as something else. For example, in L, G, and T communities, bisexuals are accepted only inasmuch as we “are” (or are perceived to be) lesbian, gay, or transgender (respectively). In other communities, the parameters of acceptance might be any descriptive factor of the community (for example, being a feminist, a geek, an anarchist, vegan, etc.); however, in none of these spaces are we accepted on the basis of being *bisexual*.

This constant presumption that we are other than we understand ourselves to be makes our bisexual identities particularly contested, making us always partial to our environments, no matter what spaces we inhabit. Hemmings writes:

Precisely because of bisexuality's production as "inauthentic," and the lack of separate bisexual spaces, passing as lesbian, gay, or straight (whether intentionally or not) is inevitably a formative part of what it means to become bisexual.

To return to the meanings of passing—this bisexual experience of partiality echoes experiences of passing in which the passer is alienated both from their current communities and their communities of origin, never fully part of anything, but fluent in all dialects. Here again we may see that it's impossible to be bisexual without having the experience of passing.

In another essay called "Resituating the Bisexual Body: From Identity to Difference," Hemmings envisions the bisexual body as a "double agent," moving between and against multiple spaces, but never being a part of them. Here bisexual passing might be thought of not only as an act of *passing for* (or being *passed off as*) but also as *passing between*. This passing between might echo the experience of people who, following the process of passing, continue to move between different identities and spaces linked to their current and past lives (for example, white and black). Bisexuality in particular seems very flexible in this regard, as it often represents not a linear journey with a beginning and an end (as passing narratives are often imagined to be), but a complex formation of movements in multiple, often contradicting, dimensions. In this way, as Hemmings claims, bisexual partiality becomes "a sign of [bisexuality's] transitivity and [its continual] reformation."

Another aspect of *passing between* is the elusiveness of bisexuality as an identity "core," even as one is enacting their bisexuality honestly and straightforwardly. In her article "Invisible Sissy: The Politics of Masculinity in African American Bisexual Narrative," Traci Carroll writes:

An identity that defines itself not as subject position but as a movement between positions suggests that what one appears to be is always a sincere expression of one's sexual identity; there is

no true, essential, or repressed identity to be exposed or contradicted.

Not only does this type of coercive passing imply that appearances can be deceiving (subverting people's presumptions about the relationship between appearance and identity), but it also means that since many bisexuals' behavior and performance are indeed sincere, there is no "secret identity" to expose, even when people presume that there is.

Here it's also worth mentioning that in minority-world societies, secrets are often perceived to hold an essential truth about oneself. In her blog post "10 Things We Didn't Know About Yossef/a Mekyton," Israeli blogger Yosef/a Mekyton writes:

In our psychologistic society, the things that are most hidden are considered most real. If someone is hiding some secret, that secret is considered more real than what is openly known about them. Thus the gay and lesbian coming-out model, for example, presumes that the most real identity is the closeted one, the one which was secret.

The act of *passing between* eliminates the "secret," along with the perceived "gap" between appearance and identity, and thus has the potential to subvert the notion of a "true" identity.

You might have noticed that all of these meanings of bisexual passing come together to create a very particular vision of bisexuality: one associated with inauthenticity, partiality, illusion/illusiveness, hybridity, and danger. While perhaps unpalatable at first sight, these meanings can serve as one wonderful basis for bisexual politics.

* * *

TOWARD A BI POLITICS OF INAUTHENTICITY

As we've seen, bisexual passing might cause all sorts of anxieties regarding the stability and naturalness of monosexual identities. It might denaturalize monosexual identities, since appearing monosexual is no guarantee for monosexual identity; it might disrupt the presumed uniformity of communities and monosexual spaces, and thus also trigger anxieties of deception and treason "from within"; according to Hemmings, the bisexual person's partiality and her cultural production as inauthentic are the very things that enable her to move through and between various spaces and to be "fluent" in different subcultures; according to Carroll, one effect of this fluidity is subversion of presumed "natural truths" about identity.

It is impossible to be bisexual without also passing. This is because, as bisexuals, we are constantly being coercively passed off as monosexual, or pushed into stealth modes about our bisexual identities as a means of gaining safety from monosexism and biphobia. Passing is also an inseparable part of bisexuality because very few distinct and named bisexual spaces exist, and therefore as bisexuals, we find ourselves articulating our identities always in relation to subcultures that do not recognize bisexuality as an identity or us as bi people.

All put together, we might be able to say that to be bisexual is not only to pass, but also to be *inauthentic*. It is to be partial, to be hybrid, to be the metaphorical axis of deceptiveness, treason, and danger. As I hope I've shown so far, these things are inseparable parts of bisexual experience and of bisexual existence.

But why is this a good thing? Because all of these qualities are signs of subversive power.

In his essay "Activating Bisexual Theory," U.K. researcher Jo Eadie proposes the ideas of pollution and hybridity as bases for bisexual politics. Eadie invokes American anthropologist Mary Douglas's theory about

purity and danger, in which she explores the idea of pollution and dirt in the context of society and social norms. According to Douglas, dirt is "matter out of place"—something that is not where it's supposed to be. Food on your plate, for example, is fine, but if it falls onto the kitchen floor, it immediately turns into dirt and requires cleaning; a hair on your head is a part of your body, but if it should fall it would end up in the trash.

Douglas uses the concept of "dirt" in order to question the way that certain groups in society are considered a "dangerous pollution" to an otherwise "pure" state. To take a common example, in minority-world countries, asylum seekers are people in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and often with the wrong skin color, who are therefore perceived to be infiltrating and polluting the purity of the white race and the nation to which they migrated.²⁸

With regards to bisexuality, we can very easily find this idea reflected in many of the aspects related to passing, and in particular within the stereotype of bisexuals as transmitters of HIV into heterosexual and lesbian populations. According to Douglas's analysis, one might say that bisexuals represent dirt and pollution since they are *always* out of place. The fact that the overwhelming majority of cultural spaces are defined as either straight or gay means that bisexuals will always dirty the purity of this presumed monosexuality.

Douglas concludes that "dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification" and argues that the will to eliminate dirt represents a social attempt to control and organize the environment. This means that the cultural concept of dirt and pollution has very little to do with "real" (life-threatening) danger, and much more to do with social categorization and order. This is why Douglas supports the idea of pollution as conducive to social change, writing that "purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise." According to her (and as Eadie puts it), the best way of dealing with such dirty "category violations" is to "find some way of acknowledging them, in order to disrupt existing limited patterns." "Pursuing this last option,"

he continues, "requires models of a non-devouring relationship to difference, which operate by miscegenation and hybridity, in celebration of boundaries transgressed and never simply unified."

One of these models suggested by Eadie is that of the cyborg—a political manifesto put together by American feminist theorist Donna Haraway. In her article "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century," Haraway presents a political mythology of cyborgs as a metaphor for the transgression of binaries. The cyborg—cybernetic organism—is a patchwork of identities, combining multiple components into a single body. A hybrid combination of organism and machine, the cyborg represents a whole made out of parts, and stands for "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities." Echoing Douglas, Haraway writes, "cyborg politics also insist on noise and advocate *pollution*, rejoicing in . . . illegitimate fusions" (emphasis mine); echoing Hemmings, the cyborg represents "*partiality*, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (emphasis mine).

According to Haraway's parable, the cyborg takes pleasure "in the confusion of boundaries" and "responsibility in their construction." It is not a creature of unity and wholeness—the cyborg "would not recognize the Garden of Eden." Instead, the cyborg is about resistance, about "otherness, difference, and specificity," a "many-headed monster" who is not afraid of "partial identities and contradictory standpoints."

Why the cyborg might be considered bisexual may very well be obvious by now, as it shares so many of the same qualities we've seen attached to bisexuality. Like the cyborg, bisexuality is made up of multiple, sometimes contradicting components. Bisexuality is a patchwork identity, always partial in the sense that we articulate our identities based on the leftovers that we scavenge from other spaces, communities, and identities. Confusion, infiltration, and pollution of boundaries is one more quality associated with bisexuality that is shared with the cyborg.

For Haraway, the cyborg is a way of approaching politics without

trying to unify various standpoints, a way of recognizing multiplicity and difference within any group and society as a whole. It's also about learning to identify and resist dominant power structures. While the cyborg might often be an "illegitimate offspring" of these very structures, it does not follow in their footsteps, and instead uses its mixed heritage to "seize the tools" of power and to "subvert command and control." According to Haraway, "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms" constructed around us by society. "It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories." She concludes: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess."

Another model that I'd like to suggest is that of the *mestiza*, the mixed-race Chicana. Articulated by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, the *mestiza* is a hybrid identity made up of multiple races, locations, and cultures, containing contradictions and complexities within a single whole.

The *mestiza* might perhaps be best introduced through this (rather bisexual) quote by Anzaldúa from her essay "La Prieta":

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. . . You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and -legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web. Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

The *mestiza* might be thought of in conjunction with Haraway's cyborg. Like the cyborg, she lives between and on the borders of Western binary constructions. A "hybrid," "mutable," "malleable species with a

rich gene pool," the mestiza "is a product of crossbreeding" who speaks "half and half" and both straddles and transcends such dualities as subject/object, white/of color, male/female, and straight/gay. Her ambiguity and plurality mean that "she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries," a quality with which she copes by "developing a tolerance for contradictions" as well as for ambiguities. Anzaldúa writes:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race; my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.

Similar to the mestiza, bisexuality is a hybrid identity, mutable and malleable in that it's often given to change. Bisexuality is made up of the cultural bits and pieces that we, bisexuals, scavenged, and our fluency in multiple subcultures could certainly be seen as speaking "half and half." Like the mestiza, bisexuals are homeless; our communities have cast us out, yet all communities are ours because every person is our sibling or potential lover. Out of our homelessness, we might create another culture, new stories, and new questions.

The mestiza stands in contrast to racial purity and to essential/inner core identities. Her ambiguity and complexity mean, in Douglas's

language, that the mestiza is a form of social pollution, a way of challenging social categories and subverting social order. The mestiza might offer us a way of both transgressing and transcending boundaries, creating, in Haraway's words, a "'bastard' race of the new world." Thus the mestiza marks yet another way of using such qualities as partiality, hybridity, pollution, and danger in order to affect social change.

What all of this means for bisexual politics is that we should double-check our positions. As we've seen in the discussion about stereotypes in chapter 1, when encountering biphobia, bisexual activists usually respond by insisting that bisexuality is *very* authentic, *very* stable, and *very* coherent. Viewed through Douglas's theory, these notions may very well seem like an attempt to reassure hegemonic order and to "clean bisexuality up" from the dirt and pollution that it represents. But instead of stressing what Douglas and Anzaldúa might call the "purity," and what Haraway might call "organic wholeness," of bisexuality, we should try utilizing the force that bisexuality holds as an impure, inauthentic, and hybrid identity.

What I mean is that we work *through* pollution, *through* invasion, and *through* danger to social order, that we fuck things up and then build anew. This means giving up on the notion that we need to redeem bisexuality by being "better than good" or "purer than pure," and taking up the subversive options held in a bisexuality that is disturbing, inconsistent, incoherent, contradictory, and multiple. Instead of trying to prove ourselves as worthy of mainstream recognition, a radical bisexual politics would adopt the idea of bisexual inauthenticity and use it as a tool for breaking down the rules of identity politics and sexual categorization. Instead of trying to unify differences, we need to celebrate them. What we need is to take up pollution and hybridity as metaphors through which to disrupt hegemonic order and create social change.

At this point, it needs to be stressed that in this I do not mean unification of sexual and social categories, as is sometimes attempted in

certain bi discourses. Claiming that “everyone is bisexual really,” that “we are all simply queer,” or that “we’re all just people” erases differences. Rather than celebrating difference, this creates, as in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, “one category to rule them all.” Instead of subverting social categorization, we end up preserving it.

I’m stressing this not only as a way of avoiding one certain hole that bisexuals seem very good at digging ourselves into, but also because I need to be accountable to my sources. In the cyborg manifesto, Donna Haraway writes that the cyborg “has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis,” or “other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.” Haraway connects bisexuality with exactly this kind of unifying or utopian discourse that stands in contrast to cyborg, mestiza, and pollution metaphors. She makes this connection because at the time of her writing, bisexuality was indeed propagated in academic writing as a sort of “origin and utopian promised land” (as described by Michael Du Plessis in his essay “Blatantly Bisexual; or: Unthinking Queer Theory”). We still need to be wary of falling into those patterns, as the notion of bisexual utopianism still carries much currency in popular views on bisexuality.

In addition, neither does all this mean giving up on bisexual identity, as so many people would have us do (especially upon hearing such arguments as the ones above). The power of bisexuality as a hybrid identity can only work if bisexuality as a word is maintained, since it is this identity, in particular, that provides us with this particular option in this particular way. Disseminating bisexuality, then, would be counterproductive to the political pursuits I describe above, since my intention is for them to be specifically *bisexual*.

What I mean, however, is for bisexual politics to stop working through methods of assimilationism and normativity and to start working through methods of danger and deconstruction. It means refusing the social appeal for bisexuality as a reassuring and docile identity,

and beginning to utilize the discomfiting, dangerous aspects of it. It means shifting our points of view in questions of normativity, acceptability, or palatability, starting to question the power hierarchies underlining these stances and to oppose them. It means refusing to reassure hegemonic order that we are not a threat to it, and instead reclaiming these threatening powers for ourselves and using them to overthrow social order.

To conclude, the ideas of privilege and passing attach to bisexuality various meanings that represent social anxiety of the breaking of order. The fact that bisexuals are always presumed to be other than we are creates a threat to the homogeneity and purity of monosexist society. Bisexual passing also exposes the often-invisible structure of monosexism, since by crossing the monosexist line, we show that it exists. Our passing also threatens people’s own “pure” identities, because despite the fact that we may look or act like them, we are not in fact like them. This means that we represent their anxiety of being “polluted,”—that is, that they are like us.

These meanings all place bisexuality at the unique vantage point of an identity that is always partial, always impure, always inauthentic and hybrid. Using these meanings as methods of disruption and subversion of social order might enable bisexual politics to step outside of the system and to work toward radical social change, and subversion of binaries and hierarchies, building and destroying new categories and creating a complex, multiple, radical world.