

Lecture held by Clare Hemmings, London School of Economics, UK at the international conference ‘Heteronormativity – a Fruitful Concept?’ in Trondheim, June 2nd – 4th, 2005. Please contact author for citations: c.hemmings@lse.ac.uk

Time, Space and Translation - Bisexual Challenges to Western theories of Sexual

Identity

Background to the inquiry

I have been working on bisexuality for 20 years, for masters and PhD thesis and for a book *Bisexual Spaces* published in 2002. I had thought I was ready to relinquish this arena, or at least focus more on feminism – narratives, institutionalisation and translations – but in fact I have been faced with a few interesting problematics that make me curious to ‘return’ to some of the questions a consideration of bisexuality poses. The book itself was highly ‘Western’ insofar as it was US/UK focused, and two contexts have made me want to think this through in different ways: a. a research visit to University of ZwazuluNatal South Africa, where colleagues and students were interested in whether bisexuality might offer a ‘way out’ of problems of translating Western sexual identity categories into a context with a different history of desire and intimacy; b. my location as a lecturer at the Gender Institute, LSE, where the largest masters programme is in Gender, Development and Globalisation (40 + students), and where students need to be very carefully introduced to the value of sexuality in thinking through state and economic formations. Much of the material they encounter positions sexuality as a ‘Western’ problem, a position that reinstates norms of family and invert colonial discourses of ‘decadence’. Studying sexuality is thus theory and politics ‘lite’, neatly fitting with the discursive understanding of (homo)sexuality as ‘Western’, of course (and thus ‘corrupt’ as Narayan and Puri point out in discussing contemporary Indian politics), erasing histories of same-sex desire in global and local contexts. These two contexts come together, as Paul Boyce has pointed out, when the problems of naming in sexual translations result in

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a refusal to think of same-sex relations as sexual at all (Wekker), a curious kind of erasure that leaves heteronormativity intact because unmarked as itself a problem of translation, and the hetero/homo Western dyad intact as that which is translated, despite contests over precisely this for several decades.

So in this paper, I’m interested in particular in thinking through the ways that a focus on bisexuality might be of interest in helping us sort through some of these difficulties – both questions of Western sexual discourse, and questions of sexual translation. As a caveat, and in case this isn’t absolutely clear in what follows, I am absolutely not interested in posing bisexuality as the answer to these problems, but in thinking about what its heuristic value might be both to challenge the homogeneity of what comes to count as ‘Western’, and as a way of exploring vexed questions of translation, particularly in the context of urgent calls for sexual rights as human rights. I want to trace why bisexuality might be useful in thinking about the limits of Western categories, not from an identity perspective, but from its condition of ambivalence. Towards the end of the paper, I want to consider what it might mean to translate failures of identity, rather than achievements, across disciplines and geographies. [In considering the possibilities and limits of transnational approaches to sexual meaning, I offer some preliminary suggestions about what it might mean to be faithful to progressive political framings of gender and sexuality, without reifying marginal identities as problematically ‘authentic’.]

Bisexual Failures

How does bisexuality fail as an identity? And why does this failure matter?

1. Bisexuality has been simultaneously reviled and celebrated within queer discourse as on the one hand that which reinstates homo and hetero as polar opposites (the

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‘bi’ reaffirming that there are indeed two, here coming together), and on the other that which indicates the possibility of ontological sexual meaning not dependent on gender of object choice. Within Western sexual discourse, then, bisexuality is the tie that binds oppositional sexual meaning, and that which seems to undo its logic.

2. Firstly, bisexuality as androgyny, hermaphroditism and so on, is key for the emergence of Western sexual oppositions as both colonial or racialised, and as gender dimorphic. As Merl Storr points out in her reading of sexology, an understanding of bisexuality as raw materials developing to one or the other (but preferably one), underwrites the colonial understanding of civilization developing out of primitivism. Thus more advanced races are understood as more sexually differentiated, and more primitive races as less, and thus more likely to display deviance (as innocence). Homosexuality is thus partly understood as not being able to tell the difference. As a tie that binds or anticipates gender and desire bisexuality is thus curiously racialised in ways that are mirrored in a contemporary development paradigm that assumes ‘bisexual’ simply defines behaviour, or masculine/feminine paradigms are ‘more authentic’ as descriptors.
3. Secondly, bisexuality as predisposition is essential for maintaining gender as oppositional base to sexual identity, in ways that a consideration of Butler’s ‘Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification’ illustrates. In Butler’s schema, specific gender performances are enabled by the repudiation of heterosexual or homosexual object choice,¹ and embodied as ungrivable loss in a homophobic social order. Butches thus embody the repudiated heterosexual object, heterosexual men the repudiated homosexual object. The latter cannot be made

¹ Butler, “Melancholy Gender/ Refused Identification,” *The Psychic Life of Power* 132-150.

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conscious however, because of a homosexual taboo, and is therefore naturalized.

There are myriad problems with this framework that spring to mind, not least of which that heterosexuals once again emerge ever so fragile because they are unable to mourn the opposites they engender, but here my point is that bisexuality is reframed as predisposition (both gender and desire), its abstraction the condition of Butler's theoretical reworking of sexual repudiation and engendering. Butler has subsequently suggested that she was only describing melancholy rather than optimistic engendering, but this seems rather disingenuous since it correlates so precisely to dominant frameworks, and since the space for the happy bisexual thus opened up again mirrors the racialised fantasy of the polymorphously perverse primitive for whom there is no melancholy adulthood.

Explains some of the roots of thinking about bisexuality as duplicitous, inauthentic, in transition, confused, really x or y, not butch or femme, and so on. Of course bisexual theorists and activists have responded to this by calling for more certain bisexual identity, but this is also fraught with difficulties, both representational (threes), political (separates out bisexual desire from other desires), and theoretical (in what ways does bisexuality as an identity resolve these problems while its role as non-identity is so clearly fundamental to Western sexual discourse, rather than peripheral as many theorists have suggested? Doesn't it simply avoid the question of why it is that contemporary queer theory, even, finds bisexuality troubling? Instead of taking the identity route, I want to make the case that bisexual identity failure is in fact the precondition of the success of Western sexual discourse more generally, and racially coded lesbian/gay or straight identities in particular.

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Sexual Translations

In thinking about how to 'translate' sexual meaning globally, as I began discussing, a consideration of bisexuality is also interesting in related and different ways. As suggested, debates about the limits or necessity of sexual translation from Western to non-Western contexts, particularly vis a vis same-sex desire, frequently re-homogenise what is understood as Western. Fundamentalist orators in South Africa (Stobie), India (Vanita; Puri) are, as one might expect, keen indeed to harness post-colonial discourses of nation to the reinstatement of heteronormative family values. A challenge to this in reproductive or sexual object terms can thus be morally framed not just in terms of deviance, but in terms of national betrayal – the accusation of 'Westernisation' levelled at feminists is interesting in this context, too, because of the concomitant association with lesbianism it thus carries. By sexually marking national and temporally boundaries in this way, the histories of mixing, of global/local knowledges and languages, of colonial and indigenous experiences, that mark global history are strangely wished away. That belongs to them; we are untouched by such plights. In the context of an HIV/AIDS pandemic, this refusal is of course devastating. In a different vein, but often picking up on the importance of developing new languages in the context of STDs, queer development theorists, social scientists and policy workers have been keen to find non-Western languages through which to accurately understand same-sex experience in non-Western frames – with a view to targeting policy resources more effectively (as I return to below).

Queer postcolonial and anthropological critics too have been concerned to stress cultural specificity in interpreting same-sex sexual behaviour, with a particular emphasis on not presuming sexual identity as knowable in advance. Thus, Sasho Lambevski makes use of queer methodologies to demonstrate the importance of active/passive sexual positioning among men in regulating hierarchical *national differences* over and above sexual

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identities in Macedonia.² And Gloria Wekker's account of Surinamese women's communities suggests that sex between women is a marker, not of lesbian sexuality, but of friendship support in pregnancy.³ I am also very interested in work that foregrounds researcher presumption that empirical sites will mirror their own Western experiences, politics and expectations. Jasbir Puar recounts her interviewees' challenges to her own (she thought) flexible queer framework of analysis in tracing global flows and conflicts of sexual meaning in Trinidad.⁴ And Evelyn Blackwood movingly recounts her desire for her lover to identify herself as lesbian despite the fact that intellectually she knows that this is not a meaningful category for her.⁵ But there are significant limits to this work that need to be addressed. My first concern is that the focus of such work is frequently less on the limits of identity per se, but on the limits of *translatability*, or their lack of accuracy outside the West. Strangely, Western categories of analysis, lesbian or queer, tend to remain unchallenged. The sense from Puar's and Blackwood's work is that queer or lesbian respectively are perfectly accurate descriptors in US or UK contexts, but have limited capacity to explore or explain 'difference' elsewhere. No mis-recognition would occur 'at home' it seems, a strange re-consolidation of sexual identity given the contests over what these terms mean, or who can claim to be their subject.

This curious distance from Western contestation is precisely, I think, what allows related oppositions - masculine/feminine, active/passive - to be instated as if they bore no relation to the identity models being 'left behind', creating confusion (for Lambeviski when they seem intractable). Paul Boyce has done very interesting work on the ways in

² Sasho A. Lambeviski, 'Suck My Nation – Masculinity, Ethnicity and the Politics of (Homo)sex', *Sexualities* 2.4 (1999): 397-419.

³ Gloria Wekker, 'One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup: Afro-Surinamese Women and Critical Agency', In M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (eds), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.330-352.

⁴ Jasbir Kuar Puar, 'Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities in Trinidad', *Signs* 26. 4 (2001): 1039-1066.

⁵ Evelyn Blackwood, 'Falling in Love with An-other Lesbian: Reflections on Identity in Fieldwork', In D. Kulick and M. Wilson (eds), *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork* (New York: Routledge, 1995)

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which these oppositions operate comfortably within an international development/health agenda with respect to HIV/AIDS provision, leaving subjects with little option but to claim their authentic identities in order to access provision, despite the fact that it is in health discourse that they first encounter their authenticating descriptors. Forgetting and so reproducing Western dichotomous framings of sexuality also has implications for researcher/researched relations. There is quite some burden or representation on subjects to articulate themselves, and a certain fetishisation of difference. The danger with Wekker's approach for example, might be the presumption that the truth will be revealed in context and it will of course be radically different, rather than surprisingly similar (something that is irrational as well as unlikely). Not only does this process risk a reauthentication of the non-Western subject in ways that Spivak has warned us of, the very footprints of colonial occupation are thus erased - as if English culture were unfamiliar in India, or Dutch culture in Suriname, as if categories of identity were not very clear indeed.

Bisexual Translations

Where is bisexuality in all of this? In the first place, then, it is often absent from presumed 'Western' contexts that are reified in their rejection, reframed as unproblematically lesbian/gay or queer. But perhaps this isn't so much of a problem given that I am clearly not interested in asserting a bisexual identity as somehow 'forgotten' as I've been discussing. But this isn't the end of the story by any means, because bisexual traces appear and reappear in interesting ways in this site of sexual translation, not just in terms of erasure.

Bisexuality is most visible as *behaviour* in international policy and development work where 'behavioural bisexuality' and men who have sex with men (MSM) are often

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used interchangeably, and importantly, ostensibly as alternatives to the imposition of Western sexual categories. Peter Aggelton and Gill Herdt thus use 'bisexual' as if it were a neutral term, and not one imbued with Western historical meaning (as we have seen). Interestingly, it is this insistence on 'bisexual' as not identity, and curiously as therefore *not Western*, that allows the move into the second most common invocation of bisexual meaning to be released from this association. In addition to MSM or bisexual behaviour, a common way of avoiding sexual imposition is the anthropological cliché of active/passive engendering that again is associated with acts not identities. Not only Lambevski, but a whole range of anthropologists, policy makers and queer theorists describe same-sex behaviour in this gendered way as though this bore no relation to the Western oppositional categories of heterosexual/homosexual. Bisexuality as *Western*, indeed explicitly racialised, androgyny is of course what links active/passive gendering to sexual identity, as suggested in the first part of the paper -- this has to be sidelined in order for the imposed gendered framework to appear not just neutral, but as if it had arisen, somehow spontaneously, from the non-Western context under consideration.

There is, in fact, a third, very interesting way in which bisexuality emerges from this literature. It emerges as a series of asides that raise the question of bisexuality, only to insist on its limited value precisely because of its reinstatement of identity boundaries (the tie that binds argument so popular in queer theory). What is odd about this invocation is that it tends to occur in articles that are otherwise content to use lesbian, gay or homosexual as unproblematic descriptors (Dunne; McLelland). I can only understand this as a way of trying to make bisexuality 'carry the can' for Western imposition by marking it as identity. A curious inversion where what is Western about bisexuality is its lack of clear identity status, a lack of clarity that allows these other terms

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to signify most clearly indeed. To make bisexuality culpable as rather than for sexual identity is thus once more to erase bisexuality and hetero/homosexuality as linked.

Conclusions and Warnings

In short, then, and as I hope I have begun to demonstrate here, bisexuality’s position as non/identity is significant both for the maintenance of gendered and racialised norms in discourses of Western sexual identity, and for imagining a break between gendered opposition and identity in transnational contexts. A consideration of bisexual failure is useful insofar as this failure is both the precondition of the success of oppositional Western sexual identity, and of the success of its sidelining in favour of purportedly ‘neutral’ terminology. Real and ethical engagement with questions of sexual translation cannot afford to reinforce the hidden norms of Western sexual discourse.

Dangers:

- This is such a general inquiry that it reinstates a West/rest opposition in its own right – somehow ‘West’ is not populated by diaporic communities and migrants with different sexual framings.
- Bisexuality as ambivalence might be useful to highlight some translation problems, but isn’t there a tension between its use as heuristic and its status as identity?
- If we can’t call particular activities sexual (which is not actually what I’m saying, but I can see how one might infer this), mightn’t there be a problem with the point I raised at the beginning, which is that sexual practices are authenticated in other ways, with a burden of representation on those being studied/engaged with? Mightn’t there be an erasure of sexual meaning in general, which fits with the framing of sexuality as Western?

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As a final set of suggestions for discussion, I would still insist that we need to turn our attention to the ways in which we *go about* finding out about sexuality, rather than deciding what our object of inquiry is in advance, or expecting it spontaneously to reveal itself. Might we develop instead epistemological positions, drawing on the idea of the partial, compromised subject (so loved by Homi Bhabha),⁶ that challenge rather than reenact a colonial desire for the native other? How would we make this consistent, and thus transparent?

Epistemological Assumptions for interdisciplinary, translatable perspectives on sexual meaning might include the following

- a. Assumption that subjects *are* compromised, though perhaps not in entirely predictable ways (moving on from Bhabha). That identity categories are both inaccurate but never fully transcended in the spheres in which their meaning is recognised.
- b. Spatial not narrative - a focus on juxtaposition (Glen Elder on hostels in S. Africa)⁷ It is the juxtapositions between and conflicts among positions in a given space that are need to be considered the most revealing, as well as the changes within and across identities that mark most people’s experiences of daily life.
- c. Seems likely to me that such an approach is resolutely qualitative, small-scale and focused on both patterns and anomaly from the outset. That subjects surely can give accounts, contradictory and so on, that are readable in this sense and not only ever existing in the margins of discourse (moving on from Spivak and Scott)

⁶ Homi Bhabha (1994) Nation and Narration

⁷ **Elder, G.S.** 2003: Hostels, sexuality, and the apartheid legacy: malevolent geographies. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press