

# ADJUSTING THE BORDERS: BISEXUAL PASSING AND QUEER THEORY

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*Fluidity is a term sometimes used in reference to bisexual identity, thus positioning sexuality as an adaptive, evolving set of behaviors performed to constitute alternately straightness or queerness. Part of the speciousness of using fluidity to describe bisexuality centers on the implication that heterosexuality and homosexuality occupy opposite ends of a psychological spectrum, leaving bisexuality vaguely straddling poles of identity, without specificity or intent. This article is predominantly concerned with the notion of intentionality in bisexual behavior and whether or not deliberate choices are made to participate in communities that identify as either straight or queer. Rather than framing this investigation in terms of whether or not sexuality itself is a choice, this article compares bisexuals who alternately engage in straight or queer practices in the context of passing, as when a person presents herself as an alternate race. Using personal narratives, theoretical works from Judith Butler, bell hooks and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and drawing on descriptions of racial passing, I am interested in crafting psychological profiles of women who routinely perform their sexualities differently as part of belonging to and identifying with distinct communities of queerness and straightness.*

*Keywords: passing, bisexuality, race, gender studies*

## INTRODUCTION

*Fluidity* is a term sometimes used in reference to bisexual identity, thus imagining sexuality as an adaptive, evolving set of behaviors performed as amorphous alterations of hetero- and homosexuality. These interpretations are at work when bisexuals opt to identify as being gay or straight, moving to firmly claimed poles of sexuality; when the lesbian community scrutinizes dykes who sleep with men; when the allegedly straight proclaim that lone instances of queer behavior fail to constitute comprehensively queer identity; when bisexuality is derided as a scapegoat for promiscuously curious and adventurous women or an easier mantle to assume than “gay” for closeted homosexual men. Part of the speciousness of using *fluidity* to describe bisexuality centers on the implication that heterosexuality and homosexuality occupy opposite ends of a psychological spectrum, leaving bisexuality vaguely straddling poles of identity, without specificity, deliberation or intent. The act of passing, which here means to be able to assume (either actively or passively) membership within multiple communities contradicts figuring of bisexuality as centerless and fluid and underscores theoretical intersections between bodies, sexualities and community. To situate accurately the subjectivity of the sexually marginalized, this article examines queer and feminist theory’s treatment of bisexuality and then introduces firsthand accounts of women who self-identify as bi and who have maneuvered through multiple strata of the sexuality spectrum. These narratives are read through a framework of passing, therein constructing a profile of bisexual women passing as gay and straight. After dealing specifically with bisexuality, passing is complicated and better understood through a comparison with practices of race-based passing, as when a person is able to present herself as more than one distinct race, or when a person can be afforded community recognition as being either White or of color. In comparing narratives describing these two types of social performances, one based on sexuality and the other on race, my intention is to render these rituals more visible and to identify some of their causes and consequences. Thus this article first analyzes gaps in theory and then the kinds of social navigation undertaken by individual subjects that can be refigured by, or in some cases exemplify, those gaps.

To lay bare the dilemma of bisexual passing is to attempt to theorize the realities of bisexual life as a subject position without ostracizing, objectifying or denying subjectivity. Theory that implements lived experiences as integral to hypothetical inquiry always sets up this potential for objectification, in that utilizing behavior as a tool for argumentation should require but does not always include recognition of or attention to subjectivity as a lived reality. Although biographical and autobiographical accounts in many ways anchor this analysis, the intent is not to claim presumptively a definitive, universal exemplification of bisexuality, but to illustrate the diversity of bisexual experience as well as the utter complexity that constitutes bi identity. There are deliberate limitations within the scope of this inquiry on a number of fronts: the discussion of bisexuality does not include accounts of male subjectivity and the biracial divide is limited to the Black–White binary in the United States. Investigation into male bisexuality,

transgendered and transsexual passing, as well as the distinctive particularities of other racial binaries, can be also imagined as potential subjects of similar inquiry.

### ***THEORY'S USE CASES FOR BI BODIES***

Within theoretical discourses, the utility of bisexuality has transitioned in step with hermeneutic shifts in conceptions of sexuality, but these shifts have typically retained a faithful tendency to contemplate bisexuality as a lens through which binary sexuality is understood. One byproduct of this tendentiousness has been the hollowing out of bisexuality as a subject position, where bisexuality is a useful analytical tool rather than a real-world signifier attached to bodily desire. Following Steven Angelides (2001), it seems that “historically, bisexuality represents a blind spot in hegemonic discourses of sexuality” (p. 16). This theoretical discourse is ripe for a consideration of passing, which involves not only a dedicated command of social norms surrounding sexual identities but also the daily, immediate experiences of performing those identities. In this way, bi passing is capable of illustrating performativity of straightness and bi-ness while maintaining the physicality of bisexual desire. The two genres of theory engaged here are feminist theory, particularly French feminist theory of the 1970s, and queer theory, particularly the notion of performativity. The analysis here is a brief, and consequentially incomplete, survey intended to sequester central references to and uses for bisexuality in these schools of thought to examine potential aporias, particularly as concerns the diversity of experiencing desire.

In feminist theory, bisexuality frequently occupies a utopian role of egalitarian desire, for which inequality is negated through the perceived ability to enact male and female desire. In her discussion of Helene Cixous’ and Monique Wittig’s efforts to position writing as an act of feminism, Diane Griffin Chowder (1983) characterized their categorization of “male” and “female” as distinct because of a predominantly biological set of differences, where “liberation from phallogentrism would not negate these differences, but would place them into an equal relationship by reestablishing bisexuality” (p. 137). Bisexuality here constitutes the quotient of a gendered computation in which desires can be multiplied and divided, ultimately resulting in an idealized, unfettered, sexuality of equality. The imperative in this conception of gender difference is one of voice and language, in which “women must mark out a territory within the feminine difference and use it to destroy phallogentric domination language and discourse, in order to establish an equal dialogue in a bisexual culture” (Griffin Crowder, p. 143). Against the discriminatory language of heterosexism, feminist theory posits a set of linguistics that will subvert phallogentric significations resulting in an allegedly bisexual social order.

Taken literally, this claim seems to ignore blithely the current existence of bisexuality, instead supplanting it with an idealized egalitarianism, a quasi-neo-classical vision in which bisexuality is something like the base state of sexuality. As argued in an interview with Jewish feminist Charlotte Wolff, this line of psychoanalysis posits that “in our gender identity, if we are conscious of what we are, we are all bisexual. But our sexual orientation—if we love men if we are men, and if we love women if we are women—is a thing of our biography” (Steakley & Wolff, 1981, p. 80), thus suggesting that bisexuality is a valid choice for everyone, accessible through the hashing out of an individual’s biography. As a sexual binary is still enforced, however, there is a parallel insistence that the only options are gay or straight love. Rather than minimizing the efforts of feminist theory as fundamentally irrelevant—the efforts of these critiques have unarguably lead to increasingly complicated articulations of genders, bodies, sexualities and marginalization—the effort here has been to present a generalized description of how feminist theory has tended to deploy bisexuality in its discussions. Throughout the annals of feminist theory bisexuality is simultaneously reductive and abstracted, less of a visceral reality than a convenient tool of theoretical utility.

Queer theory employs bisexuality in different but similarly problematic ways. In her work on bisexual theory as distinct from other practices of philosophy of desire, Clare Hemmings (2002) offered an insightful commentary on the analytical flaws evident in the schemas of most queer theorists:

Specific gender performances are enabled by the repudiation of heterosexual or homosexual object choice, and embodied as a loss in a homophobic social order. The fact that a bisexual subject consciously makes both object choices must therefore be ignored or taken to indicate a failed or flawed engendering. (p. 9)

Understanding identity, and consequently performativity, in queer theory is a matter of the viscerally physical and a negotiation of the divide between the internal and external. For Judith Butler (1999), the defining exchange between self and other takes place in terms of the body's borders, such that "the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (p. 170). In her analysis of Butler's conception of bodies and otherness, Hemmings' (2002) critical observation is to identify the limitations of understanding performativity as operating singularly along an orderly pattern of homosexual development, when in fact the progression of sexual identity can be and often is messy, convoluted and confused. Instead, queer theory tends to employ bisexuality as a neutral point of integration between the extremes of homo- and heterosexuality, yet

the bisexual middle ground of contemporary feminist and queer theory is anything but neutral. On the one hand, bisexuality is cast as the pernicious glue maintaining heterosexist, gendered, and sexed complementarity. On the other, within much contemporary bisexual theorizing, that same middle group represents the great bisexual escape from rigid gendered, and sexual oppositions. (pp. 2–3)

Along similar lines, Angelides (2001) wrote that "within the prevailing discourse of sexuality from sexology to gay liberation, bisexuality has functioned as the structural Other to sexual identity itself, that against and through which the identities of hetero- and homosexuality are constituted" (p. 193). The pervasiveness with which the performativity of sexuality in straight and gay communities takes place is not likely to be disputed; indeed analysis of these performances may very well be reaching the saturation point of analytical overdetermination. Yet too often the uses for performativity mirror and reinforce the very binaries queer theory seeks to undermine.

This is not to dismiss theory as solely academic; theoretical argumentation can and does work its way into collective parlance, effecting change, affecting discourse. However, even as academic undertakings may have thrown light on, complicated, deconstructed and recontextualized theoretical nuances of sexuality, scholarship often outstrips any sort of fostered common tolerance and cannot negate the continuance of discrimination. These are not failures of theory, per se, so much as a failure to think of theory as it applies to the diversity of bod(ily) politics. The strength of feminist and queer theory is, in some ways at least, the ability to engage the bodily through theory, to animate and simultaneously analyze the bodies of hitherto marginalized subjects. The task then for bisexual theory has been to configure analyses for the bisexual body, theory that is less likely to deny their ideological predecessors outright than to augment pointedly the need for any set of analytical prerogative of the marginalized to manifest a degree of scalability. Where feminist theory utilizes bisexuality as an automaton for an essentialized, objectified, idealized sexuality and queer theory glosses over bi identity to concentrate on the politicized nodes, touchstones and politics of gay bodies, academics of the bisexual body must navigate theoretical predecessors while incorporating (corporally) the realities of bisexualities. If theory has left philosophical gaps where the subjectivity of bisexuality should be, what are the experiences of bisexual women representing or highlighting these gaps? Because bisexual desire can lead to intimacies demonstrative of gay and straight love, the singular utility of analyzing bisexual passing is the extent to which the performances surrounding the exclusion, inclusion and introspection of these communities make legible processes of gay and straight codification. Bi identity can demonstrate a fluency in (rather than a fluidity between) polarized sexuality identification. This fluency is exemplified in what I have called sexuality-based passing, where bisexuals opt (or feel forced) to alternate between gay, straight and (where available) bisexual communities.

## ***BISEXUAL EXPERIENCES***

In the attempt to provide profiles of sexuality-based passing, a collection of first-person narratives is here gathered from a handful of sources: the following excerpts draw from Loraine Hutchins and Launi Kaahumann (1991), as well as some critical essays on bisexuality that contain biographical and autobiographical narratives. With the increasing visibility and influence of the gay rights movement, issues specific to bisexuality have developed and evolved. The primary sources in this section span several decades and reflect fluctuations in gay and straight approaches to bisexuality. When these narratives are read through a framework of passing, several themes surface to characterize a profile of bisexual experiences as it has taken place over the past several decades. These themes include lacking a sense of defined boundaries in which to belong, dissatisfaction with presumptive (and often offensive) suspicions from gay and straight peers, and recognition of the experience of passing between distinct sexual identities.

### ***Queer Without Community***

When one lacks a coherent space from which to manifest a bisexual community, acts of professing to be attracted to men and women can be emotionally fraught ones. Feelings of alienation can be profound, an assault of emotional homelessness waged on multiple fronts. As social commentator Stephanie Fairynton (2005) suggested, queers identifying as bisexual often

experience disapproval not only from the dominant society but from the gay and lesbian community, as well. Many gay people are reluctant to date someone who's bi because they feel there's an ever-present temptation hovering over every bisexual in a same-sex relationship to "go straight." (p. 33)

When bisexuality is admitted as a valid slot on the envisioned sexuality spectrum, if not dismissed outright, it is accorded only temporary status, a holding pen from which a polarized profile will eventually, satisfactorily emerge, allegedly as soon as the subject returns/relapses/reidentifies as gay or straight. It is the purportedly reassuring promise of eventual reconciliation that indicates the origination of uneasiness for positioning bisexuality as an individual sexual preference. Having battled to carve out a recognizable (if not respectable) place for homosexuality in the social strata, gays and straights are reluctant to undo, undermine or undervalue the truce (however uneasy) of binary sexual identity. Thus bisexuality "erodes the border between homo- and heterosexuality, but it's a boundary that our society is heavily invested in maintaining" (Fairynton, p. 34) precisely because recognition of even binary sexualities marks at least some potential from deviation<sup>1</sup> from monochromatic sexual preferences, which in itself has figured heavily in postmodern and postcolonial discussions on relational binaries. Unable to avoid threatening the status quo that demands divisions of gay/straight as well as male-female and White-of color, bisexuals report a hyperawareness of lacking a state in which their sexual preferences can be practiced.

Marginalized and constantly an object of scrutinizing discrimination, the gay community often seems to lend little credence to the very subgroup that may be undermining gay solidarity. As a result, "bisexual self-identification is not directly related to an external bisexual 'home' in the same way as lesbian and gay self-identification is, or at least can be" (Hemmings, 2002, p. 46). As Fairynton (2005) suggested, these moments of alienation may be most profound when coming out, which is seconded by Sharon Staum (2006) when she wrote that "coming out to others was an intimidating and awkward necessity that carried a backspin of unexpected repercussions. What's more, once out I discovered that entering into a committed relationship entailed some loss of ground" (p. 33), where the "loss of ground" is rooted in a public skepticism of bi-ness each time either a gay or straight committed relationship takes place. The particulars of Staum's "unexpected repercussions" and "loss of ground" are almost certainly variable, but their causes can largely be ascribed to the perceived unattainability of secured, recognized sexuality for those seeking a stable bi identity. Although this may prove particularly isolating as one comes out as bi to a gay or straight community (if there is no bisexual community to be found), the consequential alienation can be perennially present throughout the continuation of a bi trajectory.

Bisexuals are perhaps particularly well-positioned to understand the range of judgments that can potentially be leveled at gay and straight displays of love as described by Lisa Yost (1991):

With my women lovers, I had been called a lezzie and a dyke . . . I had forgotten what looks you get when you walk down the street with a man. I had imagined I might feel safe and accepted. Wrong. I felt measured, as if the women were checking out their interest in the guy I was with and their ability to obtain him. Similarly, the men were gauging their attraction to me and competence to beat my boyfriend in a drag race or some other primitive competition. (p. 75)

On one level, Yost pointed to the ubiquity of eliciting judgmental conjecture; she furthermore underscores the extent to which there is a dependency on constant interpolation of subjects as either gay or straight, where bisexuality is denied entirely as a valid category for displays of love. In terms of passing, she also identifies the ways in which an audience reads a performance (as part of a couple walking down the street) and responds with a categorization of Yost's display. In participating in a "straight" relationship, she is labeled by a binary-minded public as straight.

### *Assumptions, Stereotypes, and Mechanisms of Control*

Given the determination of the hegemonic and marginalized mind-set to recast bisexuals as either gay or straight, an understandable response from the bisexual community might be to reject labels of sexuality all together. And indeed, some bisexuals may prefer maneuvering deliberately between communities of homo- and heterosexuality without a manifest need for specific spaces of bisexuality. Yet just as a space for homosexuality has had to be created and defended, so too have bisexuals objected to attempts to demolish categorized identity. Rather than being positioned as a social hindrance, clearly defined labels for sexual preferences function as social tools; as Carol Queen (1991) described, labels are "useful, like knowing whether a new acquaintance is a Scorpio or Democrat. Further, our sexual orientation serves to affirm us in our sexuality" (p. 19). The temptation apparent in adopting this antipolemic approach is largely centered on the ability to move within established modes of group identity and interaction, where assimilation is presumed to be equitable with acceptance. Acceptance, however, is often hindered by negative stereotypes cast of bisexuality, posed by gay and straight alike, in which bi behavior is seen as licentious, slutty, mercurial and temporary. Referring to Janis Joplin and Bessie Smith, Braziel (2004) asserts that Smith and Joplin "embodied the very stereotypes continually (and negatively) associated with bisexuality promiscuity, fickleness, lack of commitment, unpredictability, and illicit disregard for consistent or constant same-sex and/or different-sex identifications" (p. 6). Braziel's summary of the negative connotations surrounding bisexuality offers a succinct indictment of the difficult position of public performances of bisexuality (whether it is the publicity afforded by a successful music career or the more basic publicity of walking down the street with one's partner) when faced with prejudice, animosity or denial. As outlined in her essay on bisexuality as a challenge to queer politics, Elisabeth Daumer (1992) wrote that part of the consensus shaping public perception of bisexual women is that they,

carry the taint of promiscuity, as if they were floundering, promiscuously and opportunistically, back and forth between people of either gender—exploiting heterosexual privilege on the one hand, while savoring, unrightfully, the honey of lesbian sisterhood on the other. (p.94)

The profiling to which Daumer alluded draws some of its virulence from deeply embedded prejudices about nonstraight culture and values as a threat to heteronormative morals.<sup>2</sup> Even as an increasing number of women have publically embraced their bisexuality, on a personal, private level or on smaller scales of public display, damaging presumptions about bisexuality, as expressed in these narratives, can lead to a reluctance on the behalf of women to claim bisexuality as their own.

## ***PASSING AS AGENCY, PASSING FOR APPROVAL***

The ramifications of being denied a public sphere in which to practice a sexual identity that isn't labeled licentious or opportunistic leads some women to resort to manufacturing profiles of gayness or straightness to pledge membership within a community. These acts of passing share causal endemicity and can take place with varying degrees of acknowledgment. The process of public performances can become less rather than more comfortable overtime; Sharon Staum (2006) wrote that

with each passing year in this [straight] relationship, I seemed to be losing a bit more of my public bisexual identity . . . the change was a not-so-subtle political message that you're no longer "one of us," a banishment of sorts. I played along in public, but internally I was more bi than ever. (p. 33)

The divide between public and private sublimation of desire, where desire should not be taken so much in the Freudian sense of an Oedipal object choice or substitution but as a more general signifier of the aesthetics surrounding attraction and impulses, thus drives a burgeoning need to constantly reassert one's sexual preference. Queen's (1991) narrative manifests an understandable frustration stemming from the impossible predicament of passing when she wrote: "I hate hearing 'You just can't make up your mind.' I make a decision each time I have sex" (p. 20). Decision making and deliberation are critical to Queen's conception of her sexual identity and in turn provide important insight into a generalized construction of sexualities, in particular the ways in which passing underscores the necessary deliberations (as opposed to the stereotypical allusions to either innate heterosexuality or overly dramatic homosexuality) inherent in embodying desire. Rather than manifesting sexuality as part of a nonexistent, much-maligned bisexual cause, women may instead opt for predefined, if unfulfilling, subjectivities as gay or straight. Desire becomes political when the behaviors associated with it come to signify collusion with, resistance to or belonging within group identity. Ellen Terris (1991) was starkly upfront in the portrayal of her sexuality as manufactured when she says "so I turned dyke and rode with the Amazons for a while" (p. 57), where the temporal implications of "turned dyke" and "for a while" indicate a blunt recognition of needing to play up deliberate lesbian caricatures. Similarly, Queen described her performances as a lesbian when she recounts: "I had a fetching crew cut, wore jeans and tank tops, and didn't shave; I was passing, but my secret escapades would get me in . . . trouble in my lesbian world" (p. 19). Queen characterizes a public facade involving the adoption of particular dress and comportment, and in addition acknowledges a contrasting sphere in which she conducts her "secret escapades." Queen thus identifies the bisexual predicament as one that demands performances of multiple sexualities while maintaining careful boundaries between public and private realities. The apostate lure of relinquishing bisexuality in favor of identifying as gay or straight is succinctly delineated when Braziel (2004) wrote that "Joplin, it seems, shared her sexual exploits selectively straight with those who were straight (or worse, homophobic) and queer with those who were queer, or at least not averse" (p. 12). The unavoidability of evoking negative public reactions irrespective of the adopted label decries the perilous tasks of navigating public expectations for convincing performativity.

Even in one's own sphere of friends, family, coworkers and surrounding strangers, navigating others' expectations often feels public. If Carol Queen (1991) made the decision to support (or star in) porn where actors don established symbols of gay erotics (leather attire, perhaps), her actions may resonate on a stage different than Terris's (1991) (still hypothetical) decision to incorporate chaps and spurs into play with her lover. Nevertheless, both actions begin with a personal decision that has ramifications on the individual level, a common denominator of personal sexual agendas notwithstanding any public opprobrium or approbation. Although the extent to which moving through the world as noticeably marginalized varies with geography, profession, religion, social standing and individual psychology, it still has consequences that take place on a person-by-person, performance-by-performance level. These performances constitute a personal decision or set of decisions that are then subject to public judgment;

although the extent to which one lives one's life in public varies, as does the tolerance or intolerance of one's community, interplay between self and other (where again other can signify gays, straights or bisexuals) is (eventually) unavoidable.

### ***RACED PASSING: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES***

If bisexual experience can be read through a framework of passing, just what does that framework entail? Definitions for and analyzations of passing have originated in legal, critical and historical texts, creating a larger social narrative in which passing encompasses cross-dressing, class-jumping and age-faking, and myriad other combinations of adopting or abdicating characteristics of religion, culture, age, class and ethnicity. In the introduction to her collection of passing narratives (which includes accounts of passing inside and outside of white, black, Latino, straight and Jewish communities), Brooke Kroeger (2003) defined *passing* as taking place “when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be . . . Passing means that other people actually see or experience the identity that the passer is projecting, whether the passer is telegraphing that identity by intention or chance” (pp. 7–8). Anna Camaiti Hostert (2007) argued that passing signifies a “site of constant transition . . . a desire to withhold information, reminiscent of a poker game, when a player passes his/her hand without stating his/her position and the next move is left to other players” (p. 79). Randall Kennedy's (2001) offered a definition of *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 [sic]” (p. 1). Discussing Hilary Swank's performance in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, Monique Rooney (2001) wrote that “passing narratives anatomize the body and become hyper-aware of its constitutive parts. They *draw attention* to the fractured and disempowered but fetishised role of the marginalized subject” (p. 6). Within this assemblage of possibilities for an interpretation of passing, race-based passing marks a particularly profound point of focus, in large part because as a social act it has been specifically (and punitively) legislated. The accounts of race-based passing presented here describe women passing in the United States during 1940s and 1950s, when geographic mobility offered the possibility not only of a new city, but (for those with skin coloring that allowed it) a new racial identity. Clarence Major's (2002) *Come by Here* is an effort to write his mother's biography; after a failed marriage to an abusive husband in Atlanta, Georgia, Major leaves for Chicago where she passes for White. Reba Lee's (1955) *I Passed for White* (later made into a motion picture) similarly describes moving to a new city (from Chicago to New York) and passing as white.<sup>3</sup> At age 17 Lee leaves Chicago and, without giving notice to her family, flies to New York, where she finds work and eventually, a husband. After the country's industrialization by before its civil rights movement, the United States in the 1950s was a social space offering some kinds of mobility (geographic, in some cases increased opportunities of employment) while denying others (retaining strict binaries of race, sexuality and gender). Confronted with harsh restrictions for and discriminations against the Black community, light-skinned biracial individuals were presented with the question (alternatively configured as an opportunity and a burden) of passing as White. Themes from these narratives include introspective questioning of skin color as a social indicator with such significant social consequences and feeling a sense of alienation from those in one's own community who cannot or will not pass.

In both texts, there are moments of meditation on the fact that something with such deeply embedded social, political and legal significance should be as variable (and arbitrarily assigned) as skin color. Lee (1955) wrote that one of her first perceptions of being Black centered on the impression that “being colored meant being any sort of shade from black to brown to cream” (p. 1). Similarly, Major's (2002) narrative reports that she “came to understand there were white people, then there was everybody else . . . it seemed to [her] that negroes could be any color from stark white with blue eyes to jet black with a blue cast” (p. xi). That blackness has been mutable over time and across geographic borders is indicated by the process of determining racial heritage as per state legal codes.<sup>4</sup> The extent to which an individual could experience the fluctuating perceptions of color is elucidated in Major's narration of an episode in which she is granted White privileges as a passenger on a train, leading her to reflect that

whiteness—or blackness, for that matter—is as thin as a ripple on the water . . . What is this thing called whiteness? It certainly couldn't have much to do with the way a person looked, or with skin color, or with one's ancestors. It had to be mainly about the community a person was born into and what that person was brought up believing. (p. 123)

Passing is here positioned as a conduit through which abstractions of race become possible and philosophical. Both women describe a heightened awareness of the subjective nature of assigning privileges based on something as uncontrollably random as skin color, which in itself would seem to undermine the strictness with which a racial binary is upheld.

Even before passing itself is undertaken, the awareness of being able to pass creates a sense of opportunity, and simultaneously, stigma. Because the ability to pass is so arbitrary, it can lead to an uneasy sense of separation even from one's closest relations. Lee (1955) remarked on her sense of removal from her siblings, for whom passing is effectively impossible: "It wasn't my fault, I told myself, that I felt the way I did . . . I hadn't asked to look the way I did. [My brothers] had no problem because they *couldn't* change. I was different" (p. 85). Major (2002) used similar terms to describe receiving attention from her relatives because of her light skin: "she'd make a fuss over me and my light skin and by straight hair since I was a baby . . . Although later I felt ashamed of this sort of false satisfaction, I could never entirely ignore the fact that I looked different . . . I wanted to blend in and to be accepted despite my color, not because of it" (p. 21). This valuation of skin coloring takes place very early in a person's life and is repeated continuously. bell hooks (2003) described the critical moment at which potentially the first moment of determining the possibility of passing in fact supplanting a concern of gender, immediately after a baby is delivered: "in black American life when a newborn is emerging from the body what is first noticed is skin color . . . black parents know skin color will, to a grave extent, overdetermine some aspects of their child's destiny as much as gender" (pp. 41–42). This sense of focusing so intently on a newborn's skin color is starkly portrayed in Lee's account of her pregnancy, during which the anxiety over her baby's skin color as a potential exposure of her biracial heritage to her White husband is so heightened that when the baby boy arrives stillborn her reaction is one of assuagement: "I hadn't wondered before whether it was a boy or a girl . . . I was so full of relief, of blessed, exquisite relief, that I could feel nothing else, not even grief" (p. 230). Not only is interest in the baby's sex superseded by the question of its coloring, the fact of its death is overshadowed by solace in its whiteness, which highlights the emotional strain that can be embedded in passing and the extent to which skin color, in terms of race-based passing, is at once a continuously prolonged moment of objectification, a mechanism of gaining entry, potential evidence of treason and an undercutting of oversimplified racial divides. As a decision, or rather, set of decisions, race-based passing is a solitary endeavor that not only requires immersion in an adopted community, but also abandonment (at least temporarily) of one's native community. As a little girl, Major (2002) is struck by being told, "when you grow up, you go up north where you can be white. You don't have to stay here and be colored all your life" (pp. 4–5). Passing thus requires rejection of one community even as it permits entry into another. In describing her recognition of the ability to pass as the conclusion that "when [she] was taken to be white [she] was white. When [she] was seen as black, [she] was black" (Major, p.2), Major underscored the extent to which passing requires a performance and a willing audience, who confirms the successful migration to a new identity by way of racial and cultural assumptions. Major's supposition holds that race is community defined, which has important consequences as a tool for and audience of passing. According to hooks (2003), this kind of self-segregation, whether it requires passing as White or, inversely, deliberately excluding Whites from the Black community,

can create a more comfortable social setting, [but] it does not heal ruptured self-esteem . . . Sadly, in way too many cases it is a reflection of the longing to be away from the anxiety that is often present in a context with unenlightened whites, the fear of racial tension arising, the fear that one's fragile self-esteem may shatter. (p. 165)

hooks' reference to fragility can be extrapolated onto passing subjects, where the potential intake of negative self-valuation occurs with each act of passing. Even as it is taking place successfully, passing has the potential to pit one community against another; during a dinner party with her husband's family, Lee (1955) found herself engaged in a conversation rife with prejudiced, racist remarks against Blacks, resulting in a tumultuous inner monologue: "I'd get used to it, I told myself. I'd have to get used to it. It shouldn't be any worse than for my white blood to hear talk against the whites. But it was worse. I had been brought up colored" (p. 180). Lee describes herself as simultaneously Black and White, and thus reasonably able to navigate both communities. This navigation threatens to break down, however, when the extent to which Lee felt most removed from her family identity and values is forced by a confrontation with blatant racism that seeks to include her even as it (unknowingly) targets her. As much as the idea of her biracial heritage implying an even split of blackness and whiteness might seem to offer an attractive coping mechanism, Lee returns to the role of community in her self-determination of identity, her ability to side completely with one community when it is so openly attacking another.

Although theoretically this movement is flexibly two-directional, that contact with one's own race can threaten exposure of passing marks a harsh sacrifice, one perverse effect of which is the possibility of developing fear of and alienation from one's native race. As Lee's (1955) successful passing takes her through the upper-class world of east coast privilege, she wrote that "safe as [she] felt [herself] among whites, [she] did not feel wholly safe with colored people" (p. 167). Momentary gains of belonging in privileged collectives may not mitigate the exhaustion resulting from fear of being outed, an exhaustion that is most likely directly proportional to the ramifications of exposure. When Lee's initial attempt to pass for White at high school fails, it is followed by a storm of derision and isolation from her peers: "I felt like Judas. Then again I felt as if it were I who had been betrayed" (Lee, p. 46). With a biracial heritage that defies but cannot undo a strict Black-White binary, Lee's sense of betrayal as a result of rejection from one community while not having access to any sort of recognized biracial community mirrors the frustration of bisexuals who feel excluded from gay and straight communities and may not have a secure bisexual home. By definition, passing does not posit a new community or idea of community but instead seeks to reemphasize through performance the utility, pervasiveness or benefits made possible through the racial and racist status quo. This act of taking advantage of stereotyped behavior is a delicate one; valued components of racial identity are being performed and at the same time challenged. In this way Rooney (2001) wrote that "passing illustrates the irreducible part the (socially and historically specific) body plays in cultural discourse" (p. 6), which is to say that critical texts on racial experience can never be wholly divested from the bodies in and on whom these assumptions, stereotypes, discriminations and performances take place. Thus Lee and Major are bodily exemplifications of boundaries surrounding race. Terms and metaphors of racial divides and binaries are not figurative in these narratives, but actively literal.

One paradox of raced performance is the insistence that a subject recognize her own racial disadvantage while reinforcing her desire to enact whiteness. hooks' focus (2003) is the crisis of self-worth among Black folk, where the economy of self-valuation is determined through constantly aggregated importations of judgment rather than personal sublimations of ethics. hooks further explains why, surrounded by White supremacist ideology "the relationship between white and black friends becomes one where subordination to whiteness is expressed by this covert demand that the black person must not only assume a secondary posture in the friendship but serve the needs of the white person" (p. 171). In large part, the emotive consequences are so extensive because the reach of interpolation is so far-reaching, if not inescapable, and although this placement can be manipulated, rejected, embraced or played with as individuals develop a sense of their own personal desires and aspirations and as they move in and out of different social and cultural spheres, this does not negate the fact that the very first acknowledgements of identity are for minorities enmeshed in a valuation of race.

The temptation in considering the subversive possibilities of passing for either biracial or bisexual women is to imagine an empowering display of liberation from the confines of binary power structures. In her analysis of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, in which race-based passing figures heavily, Catherine Rottenberg (2003) wrote that although such consequences may not be the individual's intent, "passing interrogates

and problematizes the ontology of identity categories and their construction” (p. 435). This conception of passing as freedom via deliberate self-displacement fits with Camaiti Hostert’s (2007) description of *passing* as “a metaphor for identity formation, as well as a metaphor of transgression—for the practice of violating boundaries that masquerade as absolute and universal when they are, in fact, contingent, historical and local” (p. 15). The sense of liberation to which Camaiti Hostert referred is echoed in Lee’s (1955) repeated equation of whiteness and freedom. In questioning her own motives for passing, Lee explains, “all [she] knew was this passionate determination to be accepted as white, to go about freely” (p. 111). Later, when contemplating a return to her family and Chicago, she reflects that her passing has always been the result of its derivation as wanting “to be [herself] . . . the self that [she] had always wanted to be. Free and white” (p. 265). Although Lee made repeated reference to freedom, she also supplied motivations for passing that are couched in very concrete terms. Lee’s explanations for passing made no allusions to dismantling racial hierarchies, but rather a less idealistic interest in obtaining higher-paying work, being taken out on better dates and, essentially, having more fun (p. 85). As specific aims driving Lee’s passing, these motivations are in keeping with Kroeger’s (2003) statement that “passing involves erasing details or certain aspects of a given life in order to move past perceived, suspected or actual barriers to achieve desired ends” (p. 8). Although passing elucidates ideology surrounding race relations and racial performativity, it is also inextricably tied to the physicality of the body that is actually moving through and being subjected to racial interpretation, a moment with motivations that need not be expressly aware of or motivated by an idealistic desire to confront or dismantle racial barriers.

Just as bisexuals have acknowledged the utility of sexuality categorization and the stubborn implacability of the gay–straight divide, the community of biracial people who pass may in fact agree in kind to the usefulness of the White–Black binary as a condition that enables passing, and thus certain social or economic benefits. Because these structures are so ingrained and because taking advantage of them can offer such concrete advantages, the reproduction of these stereotypes (through passing and to pass) may in the abstract present a challenge to social hierarchies, but in the literal sense also reinforces them. Major (2002) and Lee’s (1955) narratives describe a period of time separated by legal, political and social changes and perceptions surrounding passing that have shifted as the legal, political and cultural parameters surrounding marginalized communities have changed. In thinking about the historical context surrounding racebased passing over a period of time, James O’Toole’s (2002) text on the Healy family, comprising individuals who collectively and individually passed as White throughout the late 1800s, offers a recontextualization of early-20th-century passing in contemporary race relations:

Their choice of whiteness over blackness seems, at some deep emotional level, wrong. Passing remains for us both a controversial word and suspect idea, though for different reasons than in their day. Then, it implied deception, mocking society’s rules by concealing one’s allegedly “true” nature. Today it suggests a lack of pride, a willingness to feel shame about oneself when no shame is warranted. (p. 227)

O’Toole’s (2003) reference to lack of pride may dovetail in certain ways with hooks’ repeated queries into the fractured self-esteem of Black folks. It also provides a useful encouragement to consider what kinds of subjectivity are today faced with limitations and discrimination that might encourage parallel movements of bodies between communities. As homosexuality has alternately been figured as a disease and a revolution, a family and a damnation, there are points of comparison between bisexual women at times opting for hegemonic inclusion and at times identifying as marginalized, and biracial women who are able to pass as alternately White and Black. These comparisons have their deepest parallels when restricted to particular moments of history or social movements that isolate characterizations of marginalized communities.

Although narratives of sexuality-based passing can be placed in a larger context of passing and specifically be compared to biracial subjects passing as White and Black, there are stated differences between the two. Although sexuality-based passing is ostensibly an option open to any bisexual (or indeed, anyone, although the likelihood of successfully passing as gay or straight is reduced for those who have not seriously contemplated the performances required for entrance into these communities, as is

almost necessarily required for bisexuals) the ability to pass as White or Black is not a choice, even as the decision to pass is deliberate. Additionally, when hooks, Lee and Major describe the evaluation of a newborn's skin color, although there may be equivalent interest at birth in a baby's sexuality, there is no parallel, concrete signifier in which to locate this interest. The moment of coming out as gay or bi can be thought of as a kind of reframing, authenticating or negation of kinds of passing that have been taking place with varying degrees of awareness and intention on behalf of a gay or bi subject. Rather than attempting to construct a taxonomy of marginalized subjectivity, the comparisons between different kinds of passing provides a bodily, visceral, literal representation of performativity, racial binaries and community-defined standards of acceptance, tolerance and discrimination.

### ***LIMITATIONS OF PASSING***

As an invocation of the benefits and consequences surrounding situations of performing marginalized identity, passing offers a starkly distinct utility for individuals versus the ideology surrounding the subjectivity of individuals. Concerning the latter it is worth noting that the predicaments of alienation, objectification and performativity are not limited to hegemonically marginalized positions of disadvantage. Thus performances of normativity as a matter of social acceptance are not restricted to the marginalized; just as there are expectations of public displays of blackness and homosexuality, so are there requirements of hegemonic subject categories. Interpolation takes places across the entirety of social spheres; as hooks (2003) further explained, within White patriarchy,

one of the most perverse ironies . . . is the way in which white colonizers created skin-color castes that were kept in place by white folks who, within their group, valued fair skin over darker complexions, straight hair over curly, and yet who adamantly disavowed any knowledge of white supremacist thinking when it came to aesthetics. (p. 42)

In some ways this is a testament to the inescapability of mindlessly, constantly reproducing hegemonic power structures, not only in dynamics between the powerful and the powerless but among the powerful and among the powerless. In fact, as hooks (2002) wrote, one overall impact of postmodernism is that "many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance" (p. 420). This loss can be positioned as a destabilizing detachment from a sense of what is collective and as such has alternately encouraging and discouraging implications for marginalized subcultures distinct in subjectivity but sharing a subject position.

Discouragingly, this formulation of entrapment takes place through the internalization of hegemonic power structures, the reinscription and reproduction of patriarchal control mechanisms. However, hooks (2002) further commented on these shared sensibilities by pointing out how they "cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., . . . [and] could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition" (p. 420). Possibilities for protest will almost undoubtedly center on formulations of community, which can be characterized as a social backdrop against which performances are vetted and as an amalgamation of codes and rituals that in sum qualify a label of identity. Because communities have traditionally offered a source of protected protest, any suggestion to reorient their confines should be met with guarded suspicion. Daumer (1992) suggested that rather than arguing for a dismantling of the confines that constitute community, communities can choose to "respond affirmatively to differences within" and that this choice "is enhanced not necessarily through a call for more inclusivity but rather through a rethinking of the ways in which a community defines itself" (p. 103). This is not an argument for a massive conglomeration of the marginalized to unity solely through opposition to empowered paradigms at the expense of sacrificing individuality, which may offer an immediate appeal in the struggle to counter oppressive dominance but would threaten to reduce the vibrancy of subcultures through conflation.

Beyond the differences in subjective constitution, offenses against subcultures vary to the extent that coalition, derived only from suppositions of empathized discriminations, would be impractical, if not impossible. Instead of encouraging such coalitions, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) wrote of differences within subjugated subcultures,

it was not that all oppressions are congruent, but that they are differently structured and so much intersect in complex embodiments that was the first great heuristic breakthrough of socialist-feminist thought and of the thought of women of color. This realization has as its corollary that the comparison of different axes of oppression is a crucial task, not for any purpose of ranking oppressions, but to the contrary because each oppression is likely to be in a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization. (p. 33)

Although entire subcultures may be marginalized as groups, acts of victimization are still registered individually. The whole of hegemonic oppression may be greater than the sum of its person-by-person, trauma-by-trauma parts, but pain is still exacted on individual bodies. Passing here is a personal approach to maneuvering through oppositional culture and represents an individual method of navigating a systemic refusal to recognize or respect marginalized subjectivity. Theoretically, passing illuminates the performances required for successful identifications as members belonging to groups as labeled gay and straight, Black and White, serving as a powerful documentation of authority structures, binary politics and hegemonic binaries. Although these performances may sustain theoretical discourse, they leave quite a lot to be desired in terms of an individual sense of self. In thinking about this predicament and possible mechanisms for subverting its causes or healing its ruptures, there remains the redemptive possibility of reformulating individual interactions within a collective.

### ***Bypassing Binaries, Rethinking Queerness***

Keeping in mind Daumer's (1992) prescriptive distinction between calling for increased inclusivity and calling for a reevaluation of how communities define themselves, in terms of how bisexuals might locate a source of collective empowerment while retaining individuality, it is worth returning to the definition of queer. David Halperin (1995) worked through a definition of what it means to be queer by writing that "queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or stable reality" and that as a designation, queer "does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinant object; it acquires its meaning from oppositional relation to the norm" (p. 62).

It is by identifying oneself as that which contrasts with what is presumed to be widely and unquestioningly acceptable that one can claim queerness. In his discussion of the different uses of *queer* as a word, Angelides (2001) explained that "queer is invoked as a rhetorical term, an explicit revalorization of that which has been hitherto denigrated, medicalized, marginalized and pathologized by Western regimes of sexuality" (p. 164). In this sense, it is a grammatical, semiotic reclamation of an object, even a touchstone, of prejudice. *Queer* is "by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" and because of this "there is nothing in particular to which queer necessarily refers" (Halperin, p. 62). Thus queer ceases to be a label of an individual or group of individuals and comes instead to be a label for behavior. In this sense, *queer* "demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices," (Halperin, p. 62). There is a risk, of course, in irresolutely diluting the term's potential for definitive, empowering content by loosening the confines of queer's meaning. Even as the confines of its definition can be stretched, there is still a need to retain its origins in otherness. If bisexuality were to be read as queer, and if the queer community were to recognize its process of self-definition as a condition of relational rejection of straight practices, bisexuality could become queer in precisely the same way that a straight couple engaging in bondage and discipline (BDSM) activities is queer. The reliance on dual

conceptions of subjecthood, however reluctant, can be countered by turning to the frequently ignored diversity of the politics, ethics and customs surrounding desire. Human experience is itself so complicated as to expose the flagrant misrepresentations of steady deference to binaries. Cultural critic Claude Summers (1993) commented on such dual, binarized conceptions, suggesting that despite the perennial obstinacy to

think in terms of a dichotomy between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and between the homosexual and the heterosexual, with vague compartments for bisexuality and bisexuals, such a conception is a historically contingent cultural construct, more revealing of sexual ideology than of actual erotic practices. Even within the parameters of our own relentlessly binarizing society, the range of human sexual response is considerably less restricted than these artificial classifications suggest. (p. 149)

It may seem that enveloping bisexuality within queerness posits a loss of descriptive subjectivity, where *queerness* as a single term may seem an overly reductive signifier for illustrating the diversity (and possible perversity) of sexual behavior. But assuming that binaries are unlikely to undergo permanent dismantling, the better option may be to reorient categories of the marginalized to accommodate multiple expressions of queerness, including bisexuality. A number of subcultures have formed or attempted to form tenuous connections with homosexual identification, including the fetish community, transvestites, transsexuals and transgendered, and their efforts toward recognition have not always been met with either interest or acceptance. It is impossible to say, however, how these rights of redefinition and acknowledgement will continue to be regulated, and perhaps if this acknowledgement is seen as a diversifying model of enrichment rather than an alarming intrusion or encroachment, bisexuals, pro domes and trannies alike can begin to feel at home claiming grounded spaces of queerness as their own.

For the biracial subject, reevaluating community seems perhaps a direr proposal. Rearticulating blackness to ignore censure of color is a daunting task, partially for the aforementioned tendency to evaluate color from the moment of birth. Cultural, ethnic and religious identifications require preservation in conceptions of race, making it difficult to redefine adequately or accurately a category as politically charged as Black. This does not reduce the need for communities based on race to address questions of the political interworkings dictating their relations to hegemonic authority or each other. When Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) suggested that the realization of corollaries between oppressive infractions is a “crucial task,” she pointed to the way in which bodies themselves can catalog inflictions of disparagement, discrimination and attempts to control. If race-based passing constitutes a recognition of the absurdity of White supremacist ideology, perhaps increasingly shared points of contact between different racial minorities across other categories of religion, ethnicity, geography and class can open up additional fissures in hegemonic authority, exposing moments of vulnerability, protest and change. Camaiti Hostert (2007) argued that passing offers a freedom from identifiers that limit, ensnare and entrap within social boundaries and wrote that “passing is neither what one does when one performs nor what one is as a subject, but a way of representing and experiencing the fluidity of interpersonal and psycho-political dynamics” (p. 130). Yet the narratives in this article have demonstrated the extent to which performativity is utilized as a tool of survival, self-expression and celebration, where fluidity fails to encompass the deliberation, intention and thoughtfulness that can be required for inclusion in a community. Belonging to multiple communities is not a matter of shifting seamlessly from one group to another, shedding allegiances and identifiers along the way, but the careful application of learned rituals of acceptance and belonging, an accumulation of familiarity with rules surrounding entrance to and tolerance within group identities. And perhaps it is in a reevaluation rather than a rejection of these signifiers of social labeling that there is the most hope for empowerment. If passing highlights the fallibility and the implacability of raced performativity and racial bias, it also demonstrates the potential utility of these labels as catalysts of social, cultural thoughtfulness.

## CONCLUSION

This article argued for several evaluations and redefinitions of various tropes within queer and feminist theory, particularly as pertains to conceptions of bisexuality, queerness and community. The characterizations at work in defining bisexuals as amorously fluid or passing as distinctively useful may open up spaces of subversion in discourses of theory and group ethics, but they also have potentially devastating consequences for the individuals physically, viscerally performing those characterizations. The aim of this inquiry has been to explore a series of paradoxical (and in some cases objectifyingly damaging) paradigms surrounding bisexuality. Homosexual and heterosexual peers have derided bisexuality as an invalid sexual preference when in fact their own group identities have been assumed and performed (thereby pointing to the manufactured customs those preferences require) by the very bodies they seek to deny. Although feminist and queer theory have appropriated bisexuality as an illustrative, epistemological tool, they have frequently failed to recognize the subjectivity and psychological complexity of bisexual bodies, even as their explicit aim was often to demonstrate the validity of the marginalized. The same hopefulness that posits an examined redefinition of queerness and community dictates an optimism for the possibility of empowering, subversive reform in the discursive play between subjects and community, the marginalized and the authoritarian.

## NOTES

1. It has convincingly been argued in Derridean, Saidean and Deleuzian texts that relational dependency between opposing sides of a binary structure are in fact codefinitive to the extent that binary identities can be collapsed into each other. If two seemingly opposed groups are defined through each not being the other, there exists a uniting dependency between them such that the nullification of one would lead to the de(con)struction of the other.
2. That this conflict between gay and straight values is still very much active was clearly demonstrated in the discourses surrounding Proposition 8 in California in November of 2008.
3. Both texts utilize a kind of frame narrative that creates a textual distance belied by the first-person narrative voice used throughout. This distance is less transparent in Lee's (1955) text, in which the reader is only informed that *I Passed for White* is a true story as told to Mary Hastings Bradley. In the introduction to *Come by Here*, Clarence Major (2002) explained his reasons for employing a first-person voice throughout, which includes wanting to foster a personal sense of intimacy with his mother and as a move justified by the extensive series of interviews he conducted with her.
4. The legal text *White by Law* provides a state by state summation of legislative color coding in effect until the Civil Rights Act: "Alabama and Arkansas defined anyone with one drop of 'Negro' blood as Black; Florida had a one-eighth rule; Georgia referred to 'ascertainable' non-White blood; Indiana used a one-eighth rule; Kentucky relied on a combination of any 'appreciable admixture' of Black ancestry and a one-sixteenth rule; Louisiana did not statutorily define Blackness but did adopt its Supreme Court 'an appreciable mixture of negro blood' standard; Maryland used a 'person of negro descent to the third generation' test; Mississippi combined an 'appreciable amount of Negro blood' and a one-eighth rule; Missouri used a one-eighth test, as did Nebraska, North Carolina and North Dakota; Oklahoma referred to 'all persons of African descent,' adding that the 'term "white race" shall include all other persons'; Oregon promulgated a one-fourth rule; South Carolina had a one-eighth standard; Tennessee defined Blacks in terms of 'mulattoes, mestizos, and their descendants, having any blood of the African in their veins'; Texas used an 'all persons of mixed blood descended from negro ancestry' standard; Utah referred to mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons; and Virginia defined Blacks as those in whom there was 'ascertainable any Negro blood' with not more than one-sixteenth Native American ancestry" (Lopez, 2006, p. 83).

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Note:

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