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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO MEDIA, SEX AND SEXUALITY

*Edited by Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood
with Brian McNair*

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-77721-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-16830-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy
by Sunrise Setting Ltd., Brixham, UK

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THE POLITICS OF FLUIDITY

Representing bisexualities in twenty-first-century screen media

Maria San Filippo

Ask audiences today what fictional character they most associate with bisexuality, and along with Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams) of *Chasing Amy* (1997, dir: Kevin Smith) or Catherine Trammell (Sharon Stone) of *Basic Instinct* (1992, dir: Paul Verhoeven), they are likely to say goth-punk hacker Lisbeth Salander – also known as ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’, female lead of Stieg Larsson’s Millennial trilogy (2008) and played by actors Noomi Rapace and Rooney Mara, respectively, in Swedish and US adaptations (2009, dir: Niels Arden Oplev; 2011, dir: David Fincher). In Larsson’s books and their filmed versions, Salander’s bisexuality is a defining character trait, established through her sexual engagements with women and male protagonist Mikael Blomkvist. Following the books’ success and in anticipation of the films’ release, cultural commentators touted Salander’s bisexuality, which hardly deterred the mainstream Euro-American audience that kept Larsson’s books on the best-seller list, made the Swedish-language trilogy a Netflix streaming favourite and turned out at the multiplex for the English-language film’s release.¹

In her visibility and alterity, Salander embodies a significant shift in the representational politics of bisexuality. Unlike most bisexual screen characters, Salander is not confined to art cinema in the way of the characters of *3* (2010, dir: Tom Tykwer) and *Vic + Flow Saw a Bear* (2013, dir: Denis Côté), but nor is she rendered in the hypersexualised, fantasised tones of Hollywood/Indiewood products such as *Basic Instinct* and *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008, dir: Woody Allen). Though performed by conventionally feminine actresses, Salander’s unapologetically queer appearance and behaviour disrupts the history of representing female bisexuality as gender-conforming and desirable for heteromascu-line consumers. Yet the straight male protagonist affirms Salander’s femininity and desirability through a seduction that renders her emotionally fixated on him – conforming to the representational pattern whereby bisexual female characters ultimately fall for men. Moreover, her punked-out self-presentation proves reassuring precisely because she appears safely Other in her exoticism. Yet as a complex character whose bisexuality is but one of her non-conformist traits, Salander humanises non-normative gender and fluid sexuality.

To determine whether Salander and the trilogy overall display a logic of identity and desire that views gender and sexuality expansively rather than restrictively surely requires

looking beyond a character’s appearance or the gender-of-object choice at the narrative’s end. Yet these superficial, displaced and arbitrary ways of determining bisexuality’s presence and politics within representation persist. So does the precept that bisexuality be explicitly named within the text, even as Salander’s legibility as *specifically* bisexual (rather than lesbian, bi-curious or heteroflexible) was widely acknowledged and reproduced within critical and popular discourse despite the B-word’s omission from books and films. But with more characterisations and narrative articulations of desire’s complexity and contingency, the imperative to instrumentalise bisexual representation gives way to an ultimately more liberating recognition of sexual fluidity.

Braving the B-word

Bisexuality as identity formation, representational trope and theoretical concept has re-emerged with renewed force in twenty-first-century cultural discourse. Yet even as we grasp that sexuality is contingent upon emotional and material realities and thus irreducible to binary ways of thinking, as a culture we remain mired in binary trouble – or *compulsory monosexuality*, that is, the positioning of *either* heterosexuality or homosexuality as the two options for a socially recognised sexuality that is perceived as mature and sustainable.² Bisexuality’s cultural and representational ‘(in)visibility’, its simultaneous ubiquity and spectrality, stems from the concurrent fascination and anxiety it provokes. Bisexuality as a concept is produced through this crisis of signification – the contradictions and omissions that binary constructions of gender and sexuality reinforce. Bisexual media studies demonstrates how bisexuality is already present, if obscured – hidden in plain sight – by modes of representation and reading confined within monosexual logic.³ What we can single out as representationally bisexual spaces are those non-binary and/or contingent characterisations, character configurations and narrative articulations that appeal to fluid spectatorial identifications and desires, and thus have the potential to ‘unthink’ monosexuality.

Representations of bisexuality are effaced not only by the mandate to explicitly speak the B-word and by compulsory monosexuality but also by *compulsory monogamy*, the hetero-normative and homonormative inducement to reproduce the privatised, domesticised couple. Maria Pramaggiore underscores the impact of compulsory monogamy on popular representation:

The continued and frankly perplexing inability to see or to speak bisexual in films and television programs that devote themselves to plurality of all kinds seems to me to be the logical outcome of a compulsory cultural regime that understands the couple as the only type of sexual relationship, as the cornerstone that organises society, and perhaps, as the very emblem of personhood.

(2011: 592)

Moreover, bisexuality, unlike heterosexuality and homosexuality, seems to rely on a temporal component for its actualisation; at any given moment a bisexual person or character might appear monosexual depending on his/her present gender-of-object choice, thus contributing to bisexual (in)visibility. To indicate these representational attempts to grapple with the monosexism of our culture’s logic of desire, I turn now to explore bisexuality’s treatment in music video, film and television of the past 15 years, wherein consistently deployed character types and narrative devices reinforce associations of bisexuality with

bohemianism and hedonism, immaturity and experimentation, narcissism and envy, socio-pathology and criminality, infidelity and duplicity, sex addiction and perversion, elitism and white privilege. Yet there are also important new images and voices emerging that challenge this representational history and so demonstrate the capacity of screen bisexualities to reveal ways of seeing past compulsory monosexuality and monogamy.

Commodity bisexuality

While Lisbeth Salander departs from conventional representations of female bisexuality as safely femme – symptomatic of the need to quell anxieties around fluid desire – she remains in her sensationalised iconicity an instrument for commercial profit, or ‘commodity bisexuality’.⁴ A more typically gender-conforming, heteronormative exploitation of female bisexuality-as-marketing strategy appears in the music video (dirs: Kyle Newman and Spencer Susser) for American pop chanteuse Lana Del Rey’s ‘Summertime Sadness’ (2012), a track from her album *Born to Die*. Though the lyrics avoid explicitly mentioning same-sex desire, the video interprets the themes of forbidden love and teenage tragedy as a lesbian romance pairing Del Rey with actress Jaime King. While their suggested Sapphic suffering could reference cases of gay youth suicide around the time, its depiction is hardly politicised outright. Instead, the intention seems to be to add another layer of provocation to Del Rey’s nymphet–siren image, wherein the viewer’s knowledge of Del Rey’s expressions of heterosexual desire elsewhere qualify this as a distinct instance of commodity bisexuality. Both women appear femme, alternately womanly and girlish in their styling first as 1940s femme fatales shooting longing looks across a convertible’s bench seat, then as adolescent friends astride bikes. The doomed adolescent coupling, the titular references to the seasonal and bittersweet and the stylised lapses between light-suffused SoCal romanticism and colour-faded home-movie nostalgia all conjure non-normative desire as tragic and temporary. While response to the video was knowing and often sarcastic, its references to same-sex desire served their function: to associate Del Rey with an enticing whiff of bisexuality, and to attract the interest of queer critics and consumers without alienating her mainstream, heterosexual fan base.⁵ ‘Summertime Sadness’ serves to re-brand Del Rey as sexually fluid, commodifying bisexuality as a means to expand her marketability through representations that are titillating, depoliticised and unthreateningly ephemeral.

Bisexuality as (pathological) mimicry

As in commodity advertising and music videos that exude homoerotic suggestiveness, cinematic bisexuality emerges out of the impulse to connote, yet disguise, same-sex desire behind the smokescreen of one woman’s fantasy identification with another. Just as spectators may experience eroticised identification with characters onscreen, for certain characters the desire *to have* is often conflated with the desire *to be*. This narrative motif often features an adolescent female pair as ‘unnaturally’ close, with one woman obsessively fixated on the other’s persona and lifestyle. In *My Summer of Love* (2004, dir: Pawel Pawlikowski), working-class teen Mona’s (Natalie Press) enthrallment with posh Tamsin (Emily Blunt) is inextricably inspired by class envy and same-sex desire. For all the controversy over its depiction of lesbianism, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013, dir: Abdellatif Kechiche) relies on a similar (con)fusion of sexual identity, fascination and aspiration with the pronounced class difference between Emma (Léa Seydoux) and Adèle (Adèle Exarchopoulos) acting as a structuring silence in their tempestuous relationship and in critical discourse around

the film. In *Black Swan* (2010, dir: Darren Aronofsky), *Breathe* (2014, dir: Mélanie Laurent) and *Water Lilies* (2007, dir: Céline Sciamma), erotic desire is predicated on competitiveness, social acceptance and envy conflated with awakening bisexual curiosity. Still more exaggerated visual and thematic motifs portraying bisexuality as pathological mimicry reference mother–daughter surrogates, doubling and even split personality. In *Chloe* (2009, dir: Atom Egoyan), *Love Crime* (2010, dir: Alain Corneau) and its English-language remake *Passion* (2012, dir: Brian de Palma), and *Side Effects* (2013, dir: Steven Soderbergh), bisexuality operates as a spoil of wealth and privilege or as a leveraging device for socioeconomic empowerment, constructing a character dyad I name the *rich bitch* and *dependent double* (San Filippo, 2013: 96–114). Such representations rarely affirm their bi-suggestiveness (Olivier Assayas’ 2014 film *Clouds of Sils Maria* is a notable exception), but nonetheless lay bare the unavoidable if underacknowledged relationship between profit, power and pleasure to illustrate how desire and sexuality are predicated as much on circumstances of privilege and need as on the gender-of-object choice.

Bisexuality as erotic perversion

Pathological mimicry and other associations of bisexuality with the perverse stem from psychoanalytic diagnoses of fluid desire, such as gender ‘inversion’, as psychically debilitating. Fittingly, then, bisexuality is conflated with another perversion so deemed for its threat to coupling and procreation – incest – in *The Dreamers* (2003, dir: Bernardo Bertolucci), *Mildred Pierce* (2011, dir: Todd Haynes) and *Savage Grace* (2007, dir: Tom Kalin). Also perceived as an erotic perversion, nymphomania or sex addiction offers a stronger rationale than does incest for associations with bisexuality – orgasms receiving preference over gender-of-object choice – despite its less frequent representation than the family romances referenced above. Consider Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), the titular protagonist of *Nymphomaniac: Vol. I and II* (2014, dir: Lars von Trier), who proclaims her sexual needs in terms uncontained by gender, yet across her admitted hundreds of lovers and four hours of screen time engages only one woman as a sexual partner. Joe’s dynamic with P (Mia Goth) carries *rich bitch/dependent double* associations, as the older Joe stalks P at school and incrementally brings the orphaned, deformed girl into her employ and bed. That this seduction was conceived by Joe’s boss L (Willem Dafoe) suggests that Joe acts in subjugation to a male fantasy of lesbian desire. When Joe’s hope that P would cure her impotence fails to launch, theirs becomes a chaste mother–daughter bond that soon erupts in jealousy and betrayal as P usurps Joe’s authority and seduces the one man to whom Joe feels emotionally tethered. For a film that shows women to be as actively and autonomously desiring as men, it is disappointing that Joe’s same-sex experimentation is so fleeting and underexplored, and in keeping with representational imaginings of bisexuality as straight male-dictated, predatory, competitive and narcissistic.

In *Shame* (2011, dir: Steve McQueen), Michael Fassbender plays sex addict Brandon, whose condition, it is strongly hinted, stems from unresolved incestuous desire for sister Sissy (Carey Mulligan) alongside an abusive experience in foster care – thereby conflating multiple sexual perversions in association with bisexuality. Following a numbing stream of sexual encounters, Brandon, in desperation, descends into an infernal-looking gay hardcore club for a backroom tryst with a male stranger, cuing his and (it is the film’s expectation) our repulsion while offering the glimmering possibility that, having hit bottom, salvation awaits. That explicit representations such as this are configured in such alarmist extremes suggests that male bisexuality provokes deep anxiety even within films

that otherwise offer sympathetic portraits of desiring subjects. However troublingly compulsive these depictions of (bi)sexuality, *Nymphomaniac* and *Shame* engender identification and understanding through their revealing of sexual subjectivity tortured by social dictates.

Within the more mainstream, commercialised culture of hip-hop, sexually curious and libidinous women are presented as exotic and submissive to heteropatriarchal authority. Rap artist Usher's video for his track 'Lil Freak' (2010, dir: Taj Stansberry) features Trinidadian pop star Nicki Minaj as a lascivious club-goer who (the lyrics announce) is 'on duty' to procure a good-looking blonde for a ménage à trois. It remains unclear which of the two women is the designated 'freak', though the video suggests the term could be applied interchangeably. Though known for her outspoken, sexually liberated persona, here Minaj pimps under orders ('You go get some girls and bring them to me', Usher raps) and voices her desire only in subservience to his authority, chatting up the blonde with 'I really like your kitty kat/And if you let me touch her/I know you're not a bluffer/I'll take you to go see Usher'. Where Minaj is relegated to the role of predatory, exoticised woman of colour in servitude to Usher, the blonde becomes the easily seduced prey, whom Usher lauds with lyrics conflating the two women as malleable objects of, and for, straight male desire:

You'll let her put her hands in your pants/Aye girl, I see you like that/You gettin' excited/And you rockin' like a pro wit' it girl/By the way, you got right on it/With the chick you wanted/And now you in the corner kissin' on a girl/I'm bout to have a ménage with these here ladies.

As with Del Rey's 'Summertime Sadness', here too we see evidence of the commercial potency that commodity bisexuality holds within a genre (hip-hop), industry (music) and medium (music videos) even better known for its sensationalist marketing and exploitative structure than is the movie industry.

Bisexuality as (in)convenient truth

Art cinema, more than other cinematic modes, yields bisexual representability on account of its penchant for ambiguity, nuance and sexual frankness. Yet demanding the B-word's explicit articulation in films made outside of Western Europe or North America, in cultures where bisexual formations are relatively nascent or discouraged, threatens to efface what is readably bisexual about, for example, the female intimacies of *Attenberg* (2010, dir: Athina Rachel Tsangari), *Beyond the Hills* (2012, dir: Cristian Mungiu) and *The World* (2003, dir: Jia Zhangke). Representations of fluid desire meeting with cultural resistance may not directly voice bisexuality, but rather evoke it by foregrounding how material circumstances and social dictates, alongside desire, shape sexuality. The married men at the centre of *His Secret Life* (2001, dir: Ferzan Özpetek) and *Undertow* (2010, dir: Javier Fuentes-León) struggle to reconcile their same-sex desire with their culture's stringent expectation of heteromascularity, with the toll of their repressed/closeted desire shown to affect not only bisexual men but their wives and family as well.

Cinematic treatments of real or fictional figures with documented or readably bisexual orientations follow a gendered schema of eroticising female bisexuality and effacing male bisexuality. *Domino* (2005, dir: Tony Scott), *Frida* (2002, dir: Julie Taymor) and *Violette* (2013, dir: Martin Provost) – based on the lives of bounty hunter Domino Harvey, artist Frida Kahlo and writer Violette Leduc, respectively – conflate their subjects' outlaw/bohemian status with

their bisexuality, playing up these twinned elements narratively and visually. The *Carmen*-inspired heroine played by Djeinaba Diop Gai in *Karmen Gei* (2001, dir: Joseph Gai Ramaka) queers the legendary temptress tale by immediately seducing her female prison guard both out of carnal desire and as a means to escape back to her multiple male lovers. Yet where depictions of (real or fictional) erotically adventurous women amplify bisexuality, when it comes to male bisexuality, biographical details and their visualisation are muffled, if not silenced altogether. In Baz Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, the homosexuality that F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel pointedly gestures at in its characterisation of narrator Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire) is reconfigured as bromantic bonding with Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio), and reduced to some intense gazes exchanged between the pair. The Oscar-embraced success of *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013, dir: Jean-Marc Vallée) was unbothered by accounts that Ron Woodruff, on whom the hero-protagonist is based, was openly bisexual in real life, and bore little resemblance to the homophobic womaniser portrayed by Matthew McConaughey. Presumably the rationale dictating these omissions was to retain the (however illusory) public image of a cherished canonical work of American literature, in the case of *Gatsby*, and to shape a risk-averse plea for empathy and advocacy around HIV/AIDS, in the case of *DBC*. For the apprehension lingers that to 'taint' a film with even a whiff of non-heterosexuality would indelibly colour it as being 'a gay film' or 'a bisexual film', no matter the marketing campaign attempts to tout it as 'a universal love story' – just think of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, dir: Ang Lee). Certainly this hesitancy to align films with the so-called gay ghetto disproportionately affects representations of male bisexuality, given our culture's greater comfort with same-sex desire between women; one has only to look at the bromance craze to note how urgent we find the navigation of homoeroticism to be. While the majority of such representations recuperate relations between men as safely platonic, US indies *Chuck & Buck* (2000, dir: Miguel Arteta), *The D Train* (2015, dirs: Andrew Mogel and Jarrad Paul), *Humpday* (2009, dir: Lynn Shelton), *Old Joy* (2006, dir: Kelly Reichert) and *The Overnight* (2015, dir: Patrick Brice) each attempt to varying degrees to articulate and explore that which goes unacknowledged between heterosexually identified men.

Bisexuality as (not) just a phase

In the steady spate of lesbian romantic comedies released globally in the twenty-first century, a much-employed narrative formula ranging from *Butterfly* (2004, dir: Yan Yan Mak) and *Spider Lilies* (2006, dir: Zero Chou), to *I Can't Think Straight* (2008, dir: Shamim Sarif) and *The World Unseen* (2007, dir: Shamim Sarif), to *Blue Is the Warmest Color* and *Imagine Me & You* (2005, dir: Ol Parker) has an initially heterosexual-identified woman fall for a self-assured lesbian and lay claim to lesbian identity herself. I remain sceptical about this formula's challenge to compulsory monosexuality, for often the narrative engineers movement to an ostensibly fixed sexuality that also embraces monogamy as both the default and the ideal. *Puccini for Beginners* (2006, dir: Maria Maggenti) offers a refreshing twist on romcom's monosexism even if it strays only slightly from formula – protagonist Allegra (Elizabeth Reaser) still reunites with her temporarily estranged love Samantha (Julianne Nicholson) in what promises to be a monogamous coupling, even if Allegra's earlier diatribe against the myth of soulmates and monogamy's oppressiveness still echoes. *Puccini* departs from the monosexist script by allowing Allegra a sexually and emotionally fulfilling affair with a straight man, Philip (Justin Kirk) – a rebound-turned-juggling act given that Allegra two-times Philip with his ex-girlfriend Grace (Gretchen Mol), whose relationship with

Allegra is her first with a woman. What reads as most perceptive about *Puccini's* representation of desire is its irreducibility to gender-of-object choice: Allegra's chemistry with Philip is shown to be as potent as that which she shares with women, and their relationship has everyday potential that shakes but does not crumble her sense of herself as lesbian.

A similar, if more controversial, negotiation of bisexuality as behaviour versus identity is taken up by *The Kids Are All Right* (2010, dir: Lisa Cholodenko), after long-partnered mother Jules (Julianne Moore) is caught having a steamy affair with sperm donor Paul (Mark Ruffalo). When wife Nic (Annette Bening) asks, 'Are you straight now?', Jules responds with a defiant 'No! That has nothing to do with it', and later refuses Paul's plea to continue their relationship by telling him insistently, 'I'm gay!' While bisexuality goes unspoken, Jules' affirmation of her lesbian identity seems less an endorsement of monosexuality than a reclaiming of her uninterrupted impulse, and right, to so identify despite having enjoyed sex with a man. Paradoxically, Jules' unwavering lesbian self-identification testifies to the film's affirmation of sexual fluidity, wherein personal/political identity does not preclude erotic/emotional desire – valuably revealing how desire is often steered by circumstance and emotional need ('to be appreciated', as Jules tearfully tells Nic). Just as bisexual-oriented characters might be read in terms of lesbian or heterosexual representation, *Puccini* and *Kids* are valuable instances of bisexual representation even if the characters ultimately reaffirm their lesbian identity.

Bi every week

Serial television offers a promising site for bisexual representation because seriality permits bisexuality to emerge over time, which is necessary for the accumulation of experiences that renders bisexuality not conceptually *viable* – for any individual is potentially bisexual, no matter his or her behaviours to date – but rather representationally *legible*. Characters as diverse – though nearly all female – as Brittany (Heather Morris) on *Glee* (2009–15), Dr Eleanor O'Hara (Eve Best) on *Nurse Jackie* (2009–15) and Cosima (Tatiana Maslany) on *Orphan Black* (2013–) have established a televisual template for being 'bi every week', to paraphrase what Anna McCarthy terms 'everyday queerness', embedding queer characters and non-interruptive storylines within the textual fabric but without necessarily applying identity labels or normalising queerness into apolitical non-specificity (2001: 593–620). Setting a series within an historical (and mythical) era ostensibly more accommodating of fluid sexual behaviour permits the particularly elusive male bisexual such as Oberyn Martell (Pedro Pascal) in *Game of Thrones* (2011–) to indulge his expansive sexual appetites to an orgiastic degree, while a supernatural premise accommodates fluid sexual subjectivities such as that of succubus Bo (Anna Silk) on *Lost Girl* (2010–). While these fantasy-based texts offer a liberating space for desires and identities beyond monosexuality, such spaces skew utopian and sensationalist in their sexual imaginings.

Having formerly confined its bisexual representations to 'very special' episodic treatment (read: necessarily fleeting, thus exceptions *sans* narrative repercussion), US network television has caught on to something pointed out by a recent *Slate* piece titled 'Why Bisexual Women are TV's Hot New Thing': 'a bisexual character does seem to double a show's chances of building a fan base' (Thomas, 2012). The sexually ambiguous woman constitutes a renewed form of 'having it both ways', as a recurring character whose sexuality remains perennially unresolved while providing exotic titillation in every episode. Investigator Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) on *The Good Wife* (2009–16) is bisexually behaving, if not identifying; while her single status paradoxically allows for bisexual explicitness in

giving her multiple opportunities for both male and female sexual partners, her professional motivations frame her every erotic encounter as a transactional exchange for information – making Kalinda another bisexual mercenary, for whom power and pleasure are conflated. Vying with Kalinda for the role of US network television's landmark recurring bisexual female to date is Dr Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez) on *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–), whose sporadic trysts with her male colleague/friend-with-benefits Dr Mark Sloan (Eric Dane) span several seasons *and* relationships (on both their parts) with women. The series avoids polarising Callie's drives along the conventional binary that aligns women's erotic desire with heterosexuality and emotional desire with lesbianism, even if Callie's eventual partnering with female paediatrician Dr Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw) works to contain Callie's legibility, if not her legitimacy, as bisexual.

Having shrewdly branded itself as sexually progressive, the emergent realm of original television content distributed online has already produced two notable treatments of bisexual representation. When Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling), the incarcerated protagonist of women's prison drama *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–), clarifies in the pilot that she was a lesbian 'at the time' of her drug-related crime, it is the first of many references within the series to the temporal and otherwise contingent specificity determining any utterance of identity. Despite Piper's resistance to naming herself bisexual (or ascribing to herself any sexual identity in the present tense), *OITNB* effectively names her and 'gay for the stay' co-inmate Lorna (Yael Stone) as such in characterising them with associations made between bisexuality and same-sex environment, criminality, infidelity and white privilege. But while *Orange Is the New Black* reappropriates the women's-prison trope of mercenary bisexuals, it more predominantly emphasises how all-female environments construct a 'safe space' for exploring how logics of sexual desire might be reconceived along a more fluid range.

Though hailed for its landmark transgender representation of transitioning septuagenarian Maura (Jeffrey Tambor), Amazon Originals series *Transparent* (2014–) is moreover exceptional in presenting its other ensemble leads, Maura's three children, as correspondingly queer – each in their highly individual, not easily categorisable way. Complex histories and repressed family secrets inform these characters' libidinal logic, signalling the contingency of sexuality alongside its insuppressibility. With daughters Sarah (Amy Landecker) and Ali (Gaby Hoffmann) grappling with their respective sexual and gender fluidity, queerness becomes the show's norm, while straightness is defamiliarised and heteromascularity problematised through the (self-)destructive machismo and transphobia exhibited by the cis male leads, Maura's son Josh (Jay Duplass) and Sarah's husband Len (Rob Huebel). Just as *Transparent's* nuanced individuation of Maura redefines trans-ness in terms of uniqueness rather than imitation, so is sexuality articulated as infinitely varied and only socially shackled to gender.

Queer bisexualities

Iranian-American Desiree Akhavan's debut feature *Appropriate Behavior* (2014) adds a much-needed voice from a bisexually identified woman of colour to the conversation on bisexual representation. Performing as alter ego Shirin, a Brooklynite not out to her conservative parents and recently jilted by her girlfriend, Akhavan speaks volumes about the distinctive (though not essential or universal) experience of bisexual alterity. That its *Annie Hall*-like non-linear narrative compulsively lapses into flashbacks showing the heartbroken Shirin's memories subsumes us within her subjectivity, offering insight into and empathy

for the ways bisexuality contends with straight *and* gay phobias. That Shirin is forced to straddle a cultural divide between queerer-than-thou Brooklyn hipsters and the equally arbitrary norms of her family's Persian community, where women openly dance together but lesbianism is verboten, provides an intersectionalist sense of bisexuality's uniquely adaptive yet, as a result, maligned, invisible status.

Akhavan's specifically and explicitly bisexual voice is equally, though paradoxically, as valuable as that of other auteurs who eschew identity markers but have created bodies of work wherein sexual fluidity is representationally pervasive. While most contemporary auteurs still display compulsory monosexuality's pull in conceiving characters and narratives within a binary logic of desire, the *oeuvres* to date of Cholodenko, Québec's Xavier Dolan, France's François Ozon and Taiwan's Tsai Ming-liang conjure worlds and construct characters that resist sexual categorisation, and thus richly probe the fluidity of desire and complexities of identity.

What I hope to have demonstrated through my analyses is that bisexuality's disambiguation, or its explicit articulation, matters less than its enunciation through representations of desire that go beyond compulsory monosexuality and monogamy. One may leave the B-word silent without silencing bisexuality or condemning it as marginalised Other. Its non-utterance functions to cast sexuality as continually in flux, and its characters as no less irreducible to fixed subjectivities than real people. Responding to ongoing hand-wringing both in queer studies and popular discourse over the B-word, David Halperin offers the following:

Another solution, or nonsolution, would be to treat the perpetual crisis of bisexual definition as a useful one for dramatizing the larger crisis in contemporary sexual definition, to see it as witness to a world in which we cannot make our sexual concepts do all the descriptive and analytic work we need them to do.

(2009: 454)

As Halperin cannily observes, it is precisely bisexuality's ontological, epistemological and representational polysemy that generates its subversive potential to lay bare the mutability, contingency and inherent transgressiveness of desire. The complex, queer understanding of bisexuality which I use to analyse its representations construes the B-word as a pluralistic construct rather than as a totalising essence, but one which nonetheless possesses a historical lineage and idiomatic specificity that emphasises the importance of emotional and material determinants (as much if not more than gender-of-object choice) informing sexual desire, behaviour and identity. In this conceptualisation, the B-word re-emerges as a deft device with which to explore and question the contours of desire, and to map intersections among bisexuality and other sexuality and gender alternatives.

Notes

- 1 David Fincher's 2011 English-language remake of Larsson's initial volume ultimately proved disappointing at the box office, and follow-up films *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* remain unproduced.
- 2 I am recalibrating Adrienne Rich's view of 'compulsory heterosexuality' as the ideological, institutionalised suppression of lesbianism (1993: 227–54).
- 3 Foundational works on bisexual representation include Doty (2000: 131–54) and Hall and Pramaggiore (1996), to which my book *The B Word* (2013) is indebted.

- 4 I am adapting 'commodity lesbianism', Danae Clark's term for the strategic use of lesbian suggestibility within mainstream advertising images; such a 'dual market approach', she argues, 'allows a space for lesbian identification, but must necessarily deny the representation of lesbian identity politics' (1993: 195).
- 5 As 'Kate', a reviewer for queer women's website *Autostraddle*, asked: 'I guess we are supposed to infer that smoke machines + gazing at each other and crying = lesbianism?'

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