

Navigating “Normativity”: Kinship and Biphobia in Times of Crisis

“...it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality” – Gayle Rubin, 1984ⁱ

As COVID-19 began to unfold, I found myself confronted with a second predicament: an identity crisis. After nearly a decade of dating queer-identifying people entered a partnership with an ostensibly straight cisgender man. Up to this moment I had thought of myself as loosely affiliated with the label of “bisexual”, but I often used the term “queer” as a way to signal my disinterest in occupying normative space. I also (regrettably) felt that this term distanced myself from my socially disparaged bisexual kin.ⁱⁱ Yet, as a cisgender woman dating a cisgender man, a seemingly “normative” partnership was precisely the location I began to occupy at the beginning of 2020.

The wider context of the pandemic forced a shrinking of worlds and a return to the domestic. Local lockdowns escalated a sense of urgency around clarifying intimate personal networks. As such, the crisis context forced to me confront my internal battle around identity and normativity in a shrunken and hyper-domestic sphere. I wondered, with my so-called “opposite sex” partner staying with me in lockdown, was I suddenly living a heteronormative life? Where does bisexuality fit in to this question of normative sexual formations and partnerships? More generally, I wondered to what extent interpersonal arrangements that provide safety, security and comfort in times of crisis always align with the “normative”.

As Michael Warner suggests, the aim of queer theory is to “...confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet”.ⁱⁱⁱ Here heteronormativity refers to the normative expectations associated with compulsory heterosexuality. Yet the question of whether queer theory ought to always adopt an “anti-normative” position has been much debated in queer theory, given that this has tended to lead to an over-emphasis on certain sexual subjectivities.^{iv} There has been little resolution to this debate, and though “queer” is often deployed to refer to the slippery and indefinable, it is also widely used as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities.^v If, as Warner suggests, we are to see queer in juxtaposition to heteronormativity, what formations are queer “enough” to provide planetary reso/revolution?

Walking down the street with my new partner I felt the weight of this question on my shoulders. I flinched as he kissed me on the cheek at the traffic lights, after years of being afraid to do such things in public thoroughfares for the risk of homophobic abuse that this used to carry. I remembered my new interpersonal position, the privilege of optically aligning with the fabric of “default heteronormativity”. Yet I also felt profoundly distanced from myself, my internal sense of queerness rendered moot.

Though first used to describe trans marginalisation from homosexual communities,^{vi} the meaning of “homonormativity” has shifted. Most famously Lisa Duggan used it to describe a new strand of de-politicised gay and lesbian identity that emerged in the 1990s post-Regan era.^{vii} Duggan described this sensibility as involving “...a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption”.^{viii} Duggan’s concept provides room for examining the political substance of the “queer planet”, rather than simply mapping bodies and practices onto those that appear “normative” versus “non-normative”. Yet more recently homonormativity has become a increasingly used as a reference for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons who appear to mimic anything designated as “normative”.^{ix} Both hetero- and homo- normativity have become simplified shorthand for straight bodies/partnerships and queer bodies/partnerships that align with dominant cultural expectations, particularly regarding domesticity.

These definitional shifts hint at a process whereby the concept of the “personal is political” has moved toward a more neoliberal individualised formation of the “personal as *the* political”.^x Rather than simply accounting for how the sphere of the “personal” (such as the home) is important site for political attention, the individual has become a site of embodying and enacting the political as a mode of resistance. To become heteronormativity’s (or indeed homonormativity’s) “nightmare” then, means successfully embodying queerness on a personal level. As scholars of bisexuality have already identified, achieving an intelligible bisexual subject position is already extremely fraught.^{xi} The bisexual position is thrust into permanent existential crisis in relation to these questions because there is no framework against which to adequately measure oneself against the normative. Bisexuals are often either seen as “not quite straight” yet simultaneously never “queer enough”.

The impossibility of the bisexual position is evident in the framework of *The Queer Nation Manifesto* handed out at the 1990 New York pride parade, now considered a foundational piece of queer philosophy. It states:

Straight people have a privilege that allows them to do whatever they please and f--- without fear...I want there to be a moratorium on straight marriage, on babies, on public displays of affection among the opposite sex and media images that promote heterosexuality.^{xii}

The manifesto echoed through my head as I wondered whether I should post pictures of me and my partner on social media. Would I just be contributing to the “public displays of affection among the opposite sex” that Queer Nation illustrated as the enemy of the queer planet? Would I be undermining the cause?

I felt a deep sense of shame about entering a “straight” partnership. I was confronted by the fact that after *years* of studying and teaching queer theory I could come out the other end of it somehow feeling *worse* about my sexuality than when I began. However, Sally Munt argues that while the denial of shame can have negative impacts as it is redirected toward others, confronting shame can lead to building new social bonds with others who share similar experiences. She suggests, “Shame is creative, and offers potential social transformations”.^{xiii} My first step in confronting my shame was to spend a whole day dedicated to reading the *Journal of Bisexuality* and listening to Taylor Swift albums on repeat. Engaging with work from scholars of bisexuality was my first act of reaching out to bisexual kin. My new intellectual family had long been thinking about the questions I was confronted with, such as the gaps in queer theory that I had been so shocked to suddenly feel the effect of.^{xiv}

As synchronicity would have it, the next week I discovered that an Australian and New Zealand bisexual community conference was coming up, the biggest Bi+ event in the globe in 2020.^{xv} Attending the Stand Bi Us conference^{xvi} was lifechanging. Over a week-long (digitally delivered) program I heard from dozens of Bi+ activists on the shared struggle with internalised shame and Bi+ resistance and community building. One of the key events of the program was a variety show hosted on the Friday night. This was the kind of event that would usually be held within a queer club late at night. My partner sat with me in the loungeroom drinking tea while we watched the Bi+ spectacular. I was reminded of the lines from comedian Hannah Gadsby’s show *Nanette* where she reflects on the Sydney Mardi Gras pride parade. She notes:

...the pressure on my people to express our identity and pride through the metaphor of party is very intense. Don’t get me wrong, I love the spectacle, I really do, but I’ve never felt compelled to get amongst it...My favourite sound in the whole world is the sound of a teacup finding its place on a saucer. Oh, it’s very, very difficult to flaunt that lifestyle in a parade.^{xvii}

There was a profound comfort in attending the night from home, not dressed up for the occasion, and not having to perform or signal my queerness in any way. While the closure of queer venues during COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on many within the community,^{xviii} I wonder at how online events have also changed the shape not only of access but also of *who* feels welcome.

Around this time, I wrote a piece for Bi+ Visibility Day,^{xix} held annually on 23rd September. Bisexual scholars and activists have long noted that the “B” in the acronym of LGBTIQ inhabits an in-between and oft maligned space.^{xx} Bi+ Visibility Day is a chance to address the marginalisation of the “B”. This piece, like all writing on sexuality, acted as another moment of attempting to articulate myself, in a lifetime of doing so. People reached out to me with their own stories about bisexuality after the publication: self-articulation is a mode of kinship. You form networks with people who feel the same, who share the same shame struggles, who see their experiences reflected in your story. Through articulation you make space for other people to articulate themselves, too.

In “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin suggests that in times of great crisis and social anxiety, general angst is often transferred onto and intensified at the site of sexuality and questions of sexual morality. She thus contends, “Consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.”^{xxi} Treating sexuality with special respect in this current period might mean rethinking how the domestic has become synonymous with the normative, in a time when so many of us have been thrust into this space. Returning to the personal is political rather than the personal as the political might ease up the pressure on our identities to “do” all of the work, as we continue to articulate ourselves and make new connections.

ⁱ Gayle Rubin (1984). “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”. In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Carole S. Vance (Ed.). Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 267-319, p.267

ⁱⁱ As Michael du Plessis notes, the use of queer can sometimes be “silently subsuming” to “bisexual”. Michael du Plessis (1996). Blatantly Bisexual. In *RePresenting bisexualities: Subjects and cultures of fluid desire*, D. E. Hall & M. Pramaggiore (eds.) New York: New York University Press: 19–54, p.40

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Warner (1991). ‘Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet’. *Social Text*, 29(3-17), p.16

^{iv} See for example Annamarie Jagose (2010). “The Trouble with Antinormativity”. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26(1): 26-47

^v Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan (2020). *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*. London: Red Globe Press

^{vi} Susan Stryker (2008). “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity”. *Radical History Review*, 100: 145-157

^{vii} Lisa Duggan (2002). “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism”. In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, R. Castronovo and D.D. Nelson (Eds.). Durham: Duke University Press, 175-194

^{viii} Duggan (2002), p.179

^{ix} McCann and Monaghan (2020)

^x Hannah McCann (2018). *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism, and the Politics of Presentation*. London and New York: Routledge, p.27

^{xi} For an extensive discussion of how bisexual people are marginalised by the maintenance of the hetero/homo binary from both sides of the dichotomy see Kevin Yoshino (2000). The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure. *Stanford Law Review*, 52(2): 353-461

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- ^{xii} Queer Nation (1990). "The Queer Nation Manifesto". *History is a Weapon*
<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/queernation.html> (accessed 22 October 2020)
- ^{xiii} Sally R. Munt (2019). Gay Shame in a Geopolitical Context. *Cultural Studies*, 33:2: 223-248, p.227
- ^{xiv} See for example: April S. Callis (2009). "Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory". *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9(3-4): 213-233; or Susan Feldman (2009). Reclaiming Sexual Difference: What Queer Theory Can't Tell Us about Sexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9(3-4): 259-278
- ^{xv} As per "Bi Visibility Day" listings <https://bivisibilityday.com/> (accessed 22 October 2020)
- ^{xvi} Stand Bi Us 2020 <https://www.standbius.com/> (accessed 22 October 2020)
- ^{xvii} Hannah Gadsby (2018). "Nanette". Full Transcript available at
<https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2018/07/21/hannah-gadsby-nanette-transcript/> (accessed 22 October 2020)
- ^{xviii} See for example Benjamin Riley (2020). "With queer spaces closed due to Covid, I feel more disconnected than ever from who I am", The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/19/with-queer-spaces-closed-due-to-covid-im-feeling-more-disconnected-than-ever-from-who-i-am-as-a-queer-man> (accessed 22 October 2020)
- ^{xix} [redacted]
- ^{xx} Kimberly Fuller (2020). Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexuality from a Cross-Cultural Perspective. In *Cultural Differences and the Practice of Sexual Medicine, Trends in Andrology and Sexual Medicine*, D. L. Rowland, E. A. Jannini (eds.). Switzerland: Springer: 63-81
- ^{xxi} Rubin (1984), p.267