

## The Challenges of Bisexual Representation

Keyword: Fence

The fence is both an expression and an image which is familiar to many bisexuals. Since the concept of bisexuality was established in popular discourse in the mid-twentieth century, monosexuals have used words like “fence-sitting” and “fence-sitter” to characterize bisexuals as people who cannot choose between heterosexual and homosexual lifestyles. These expressions contain negative connotations of the indecisiveness, greed, and unfaithfulness, or inability to be faithful to a partner, of which monosexuals often accuse bisexuals. However, bisexual authors and activists now embrace the “fence,” ridding it of its pejorative sense and attributing positive figural language to the word.

In her introduction to *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, Maria Pramaggiore proposes new “Epistemologies of the Fence.” The virtues of the fence, Pramaggiore argues, is that it allows things to pass through it while still maintaining a border through two spaces. A bisexual, sitting atop this “fence,” can still observe and partake in the romantic and sexual interactions of *both* heterosexual *and* homosexual spaces while belonging to its own bisexual space on the fence (see [BOTH/AND](#)). In *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*, Clare Hemmings further considers Pramaggiore’s “fence” as a bisexual version of the homosexual “closet” metaphor. The imagery of the “fence” in lieu of Eve Sedgwick’s binary “closet” more accurately represents the viewpoint of a bisexual subjectivity: while homosexuals must resist the pressure of heterosexism that comes from the heterosexual space, bisexuals must resist the pressure of monosexism of both heterosexual and homosexual spaces.

Already “fence” is lexically rich, but bisexual authors find even more room to play with the word. In “BI-introduction I: Epistemologies of the Fence,” Pramaggiore also discusses “fence” as the verb which means to spar, dodge, and parry. Using this alternative part of speech, the bisexual “fence” becomes combative:

“If monosexual models of hetero- and homosexuality can be conceived of as our sparring partners, then bisexualities are also unreliable third parties, refusing the agreed-upon rules of engagement and questioning the dualistic sport itself. Our theoretical points of contact and conflict, though often set up as oppositional terms, often shift to become points of mutuality” (Pramaggiore 4).

In their essay “From Performativity to Interpretation: Toward a Social Semiotic Account of Bisexuality,” Ki Namaste draws on the expression “fence-sitting” to refer to a transdisciplinary approach of examining “the connections between representation, discourse, and society” (Namaste 71). Namaste describes the fence as having the unique vantage point of pluralism, in which an individual can draw knowledge from many fields and perspectives, in the same way that bisexuals have knowledge of multiple gender attractions. Not only does Namaste indicate another positive association of “fence-sitting” in response to its typically negative meaning, but they also demonstrate the possibility of reading and thinking “bisexually,” or reading outside of the traditional binaries.