

The Challenges of Bisexual Representation (working project title)
Keyword: Desire (draft)

Desire is an integral component of sexuality: desire, whether romantic, erotic, or something else entirely, influences our actions and drives our relationships. Dictionaries define desire as “a longing or craving, as for something that brings satisfaction or enjoyment,” or “physical or sensual appetite; lust”. Yet these definitions leave much to be *desired*, for they do not fully express the intense affective reactions in the body or mind in a moment of desire, or the confusion that can accompany unorthodox desires. The imprecision of this definition is reflected in “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” in which Kenji Yoshino observes that “desire” is a floating signifier, or an abstract word that has no clear meaning (10).

Despite the ambiguity of this word, sexual orientation and sexuality are often understood as based on desire. According to Yoshino, one definition of bisexuality is “the ability to feel more than incidental sexual desire for both sexes” (3). The desire-based definition is the preferred definition in sociological studies because it yields a greater population of viable bisexuals than a conduct-based definition of bisexuality (i.e., a definition that relies on an individual’s sexual experiences with both sexes) or a self-identification-based definition of bisexuality (i.e., a definition that only applies to individuals who claim the bisexual label, as not all individuals who express dual desire consider themselves to be bisexual). The qualifier in this desire-based definition, “more than incidental,” requires a bisexual to experience more than just a singular incident of desiring both sexes (though not usually simultaneously). This phrase also suggests that there may be confounding variables—like the gender presentation of the object of desire, or an environment which produces arousal and erotic sensations regardless of the sex/gender of a sexual partner—in an incidental desire which would prevent a conclusion of bisexuality. Furthermore, such a distinction between incidental and recurrent desire of both sexes serves to refute the tiresome claim that “Everyone is bisexual.”

Yet, desire’s ambiguous nature even complicates this broad and cautious definition of bisexuality and representations of bisexuality. What does a manifestation of desire, especially (bi)sexual desire, look like? Consider the following hypothetical cases:

- **The stirring in a prepubescent child’s heart when he hugs his best friends, a boy and a girl.** Although this child may not recognize it as such, the emotion that he experiences could be desire. After all, a child may be aware of their attraction to certain sexes/genders long before they are aware of or understand sex and sexuality.
- **A woman’s desire to be the person she admires.** While this desire may be rooted in appreciation or envy, it has potential to be a sexual desire to *have* that person. “Girl crushes,” masquerading as innocent admiration among friends and peers, sometimes reveal themselves to be subconscious (sexual) desires and may be indicators of homosexuality or bisexuality in women. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick introduces the concepts of the homosocial continuum and the homosocial triangle which also represent a form of such subconscious desire in males.
- **Fantasies of romantic or sexual relationships between two (unlikely) characters in the minds of fans.** Pairing fantasies, while different from the previous cases in that the fantasizer is not involved in the fantasy, fit within the general definition of desire (“noun 3”). There are many examples of one true

pairings (OTPs) in fictional entertainment, especially in film and television: Kirk/Spock (*Star Trek*), Sherlock Holmes/John Watson or Sherlock Holmes/Irene Adler (Arthur Conan Doyle's canon of Sherlock Holmes stories, Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, BBC's *Sherlock*), Rebecca Bunch/Valencia (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*). Fans of same-sex pairings may be perceiving potential/viable bisexuality in the characters; in many instances, bisexuality is a prerequisite for such relationships to be possible. Just as real, living people may act on their desires, fans may realize their fantasies through fan fiction, if not in the original production.

Assuming these cases represent examples of desire, there is still a challenge in demonstrating that these are examples of *bisexual* desire. In each of these cases, it is difficult to determine whether the potential desire is "more than incidental," or at the level of significance that can constitute identity. Conceptions of bisexuality frequently rely on the aspect of [TEMPORALITY](#); that is to say, bisexuality is perceived diachronically in a person through a history of desires, relationships, and sexual experiences with multiple sexes or genders. Thus, without the context of a person's romantic/sexual narrative, one cannot definitively say that any of the above cases are more than "incidents" of desire for any sex or gender.

Desire can further complicate representations of bisexuality. This entry has focused so far on a desire-based definition of bisexuality, but the conduct-based and self-identification-based definitions of bisexuality also deal with desire. While what Yoshino calls "true bisexuality," which follows the desire-based definition, is the most commonly represented form of bisexuality, there are other bisexualities that do not require the presence of desire: defense bisexuality, Latin bisexuality, ritual bisexuality, married bisexuality, secondary homosexuality, experimental bisexuality, and technical bisexuality (Yoshino 8). As these forms of bisexualities suggest, bisexuals may be sexually active with both sexes, separately or simultaneously, but they do not necessarily have bisexual orientations or attractions.

Through desire and fantasy, individuals may recognize in themselves or others the presence of bisexuality. While bisexual desire may be fleeting or ignored, it is just as valid as bisexual experience or bisexual identification. Unfortunately, certain stigmas against bisexuality compel some people to quell the bisexual desire they experience and to pursue only heterosexual or homosexual desires instead.