

It Ain't No Lie, Baby Bi Bi Bi: The Challenges of Bisexual Representation

Keyword: Puns

Bisexual literature contains a plethora of puns. Many of these puns simply play with the prefix “bi,” which is often used as an abbreviation of “bisexual” to suggest the preposition “by”: for example, *Bi Any Other Name* (ed. Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu), *Getting Bi* (ed. Robyn Ochs), *BI Women* (pub. Boston Bisexual Women’s Network), and *Bi the Way* (dir. Josephine Decker and Brittany Blockman). Other puns are subtler: the newsletter *Bi Monthly* (pub. San Francisco Bisexual Center) suggests “bisexual monthly” and the expression of frequency “bi-monthly,” while *RePresenting Bisexualities* (ed. Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore) suggests reading “RePresenting” as both the act of representation and as the act of presenting again.

Although bisexual writers often do not remark on presence of meanings of their puns—likely out of respect for the reader’s intelligence and awareness of such simple wordplay—the pun has a significant relationship to bisexuality and bisexual writing.¹ As the above titles suggest, the pun can produce a witty expression of the challenges associated with naming, becoming, or writing as bisexual. Yet the pun is also an example of the way in which bisexual writers constantly play with language to prove its fluidity in relation to conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality. In fact, the pun may be considered a verbal manifestation of the bisexual philosophy of [BOTH/AND](#).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a pun is

the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words. (“pun, n.1”)

Like the pun, bisexuals seem to contain several different associations—or directions of desire—at the same moment in time. Monosexuals struggle on a cognitive level to visualize a person who is capable of attraction to both the same sex and to other sexes synchronically rather than diachronically (see [TEMPORALITY](#)). More often, monosexuals misidentify bisexuals according to their sexual or romantic history and rationalize bisexual behavior as “experimental” or “closeted” homosexuality. By contrast, readers and listeners who are alert to a pun do not struggle to visualize the plural words or meanings suggested by the pun synchronically. The pun, therefore, can be appropriated as a helpful metaphor for bisexuality which emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multiple attractions suggested by bisexual behavior.

While the simultaneity of associations of the pun is useful for understanding the expressions of bisexuality, the pun may also hinder bisexual politics. As the *OED* states, the purpose of the pun is “to produce a humorous effect” (“pun, n.1”). This humorous effect may provide comic relief to an otherwise serious conversation about the difficulties of being bisexual in a monosexual society and perhaps elicit a knowing chuckle from bisexual readers and listeners. Yet it is crucial to also consider the potential negative effects of punning on bisexuality: does the pun’s humorous effect diminish the importance of sexual politics, or contribute (indirectly) to the minimization of bisexuality? Bisexual writers attentive to the

¹Actually, in his essay “Blatantly Bisexual; or, Unthinking Queer Theory,” Michael du Plessis connects the puns in bisexual literature to the rhetorical device of paronomasia; by translating its variant “paronomasia,” to “para-naming,” du Plessis argues for the prevalence of “naming alongside, through, and by means of all kinds of other names to make our multiple proper identities stick” in bisexual politics (Du Plessis 39).

inimical perceptions of bisexuals may avoid this dangerous pitfall, but it is worth considering nevertheless.