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The Unrepresentable Takes the Stage: Bisexual Legibility and Theatrical Monosexism in Contemporary English-Language Drama

https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2024-2024

Abstract: This article brings contemporary theatre studies into dialogue with the growing range of bisexual scholarship across disciplines. This scholarship argues, among other things, that bisexuality must be understood not as a blend of hetero- and homosexualities, but rather as a unique experience that is subject, at various times, both to homophobia and to another form of discrimination: monosexism. I argue that bisexual erasure, discrimination, and oppression – monosexism – in theatre reinforces and is reinforced by bisexual erasure in the broader culture. Building on the work of Judith Butler, Jill Dolan, Sam See, and others, I suggest that greater awareness of bisexuality in theatre studies might play a part in destigmatizing bisexuality and making offstage bisexual lives more legible and more liveable. The article goes on to analyze representations of bisexuality in three contemporary English-language plays: *Stop Kiss* (2000) by American playwright Diana Son, *Cock* (2009) by British playwright Mike Bartlett, and *Smoke* (2022) by Canadian playwright Elena Belyea.

Keywords: bisexuality, monosexism, Diana Son, *Stop Kiss*, Elena Belyea, *Smoke*, Mike Bartlett, *Cock*

Contemporary theatre scholarship in English has participated in a long and cross-disciplinary legacy of erasing bisexual desire. Theatre – like many other disciplines and institutions – has largely failed to treat bisexuality as its own category of analysis, identity, experience, or ontology distinct from other experiences of queerness, especially gay and lesbian ones. In many ways, this lack of attention is unsurprising. Bisexuality can be perplexing – even to disciplines like queer studies that would seem most likely to engage it. Although bisexual and queer theory share many aims, the former has not generally been understood or welcomed by the latter (Callis). Thus, bisexual desire itself has largely been explained away, ignored, or neglected,

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along with the specifics of the oppression connected to it. Attraction to multiple genders can be understood to queer the queer (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell), subverting binaries between homosexual and heterosexual desire and leaving room for a broad range of human experiences. This particular form of queering has yet to receive significant attention in English-language theatre scholarship. The uniqueness of bisexuality has radical implications for how we understand and represent desire onstage.

This article brings contemporary theatre studies into dialogue with the growing range of bisexual scholarship across disciplines. I begin by highlighting work by scholars such as April S. Callis, Sam See, Sarah K. Whitfield, Kaye McLelland, Maria San Filippo, and others regarding bisexuality generally and bisexuality in older English-language theatre specifically. I go on to analyze representations of bisexuality in three contemporary English-language plays: *Stop Kiss* (2000) by American playwright Diana Son, *Cock* (2009) by British playwright Mike Bartlett, and *Smoke* (2022) by Canadian playwright Elena Belyea. I do so in order to articulate the sometimes subtle ways bisexuality is presented in the theatre as well as highlight the potential to neglect, misread, or explain away bisexuality. When bisexuality is thus erased, a significant strand of queer experience is foreclosed as a possibility within a medium that explores the range of expressions of humanity. My work follows the path laid by McLelland in asserting that

> Specifically bisexual readings are required if bisexuals are not going to continue to be the victims of erasure or elision between the two camps [of heterosexual and homosexual]. This is especially important and especially difficult precisely because bisexuality continues to be seen as less socially acceptable and more perverse or transgressive than homosexuality. (354)

Understanding bisexuality in plays has implications beyond the theatre. As Jill Dolan notes in relation to theatre and performance scholars taking up Judith Butler in their work, "theatre creates what we consider reality by enforcing conventional notions of 'normal'" (15). Theatre has the potential to be a powerful force in countering what San Filippo calls the "un(der)spoken" (4) nature of bisexuality, making visible that which is often erased or, when it is acknowledged, understood as something it is not and then minimized. This un(der)spokenness has consequences. Chaïm la Roi, Ilan H. Meyer, and David M. Frost highlight "greater stigma related to bisexuality, fewer role models, and fewer resources in the LGBT community" (49) as factors contributing to poorer mental health outcomes for bisexuals than other queer and straight populations (see also Feinstein et al.; Chan, Operario, and Mak). This being the case, clearly a new "normal" with better mental health outcomes for bisexuals must be sought. Greater awareness of bisexuality in theatre studies might play a part in destigmatizing bisexuality and offering much needed role models in the form of characters who make bisexual lives more legible. As See argues, bisex-

uality's legibility in the theatre might allow "some queers the opportunity of making sense of themselves with these dramatic representations" (43). Plays can only facilitate this sense-making of the self, however, if they can be understood as bisexual. Yet theatre studies – and even queer theatre studies – often remains stuck in a paradigm which does not allow for bisexuality to be clearly represented. This is a problem since, as Dolan asserts, "Considering sexuality as a component of theatre practice and reception allows critics and artists to analyze how performance refracts desire on both sides of the footlights" (1). Bisexual erasure in theatre thus directly reinforces and is reinforced by bisexual erasure in the broader culture. Because of this, it is important to consider theatrical bisexuality in relation to sociological, psychological, and cultural studies' work on the topics.

Understanding Bisexuality

Bisexual is a reclaimed word (Eisner 18–19). It originated in late nineteenth-century discourse to describe those who would now be called intsersex individuals, gradually evolving its meaning to refer to those not solely attracted to one sex or gender (Holthaus 23). Since the last few decades of the twentieth century, bisexual communities and scholars have variously defined bisexuality as an attraction to genders like and unlike one's own (Eisner 25), attraction not limited to one sex or gender (Serano 83), and/or attraction to more than one or multiple genders (Holthaus 23), the latter of which is arguably the most commonly used definition (Shaw 15). Importantly, bisexual scholars and organizations rarely define bisexuality in relation to a gender binary of man and woman or male and female, despite a widespread belief that bisexuality somehow reifies a gender binary in a way that other sexualities and gender identities do not.[1] The "bi" prefix has often been understood in bisexual communities to refer to attraction to genders both *like* and *unlike* one's own, much as the "homo" in homosexual refers to attraction to sexes *like* one's own. Many other terms such as *pansexual* and *omnisexual* have also been developed to address nuances of personal experience and the umbrella term *queer* is also frequently used as an identity that might encompass bisexual desire (*Bisexual Invisibility* iii).

It is important to respect individuals' personal choice of identity labels as each carries nuances and sociocultural histories; it is likewise important to understand the oppression each of these identities mutually experience. As bisexual identifying trans activist Julia Serano notes, each of these identities "face[s] societal monosex-

1 For a detailed exploration of this phenomenon and a refutation of bisexuality as "supporting the binary" or reinforcing transphobia, see Serano (81) and Eisner (49–58).

ism – i.e., the assumption that being exclusively attracted to members of a single sex or gender is somehow more natural, real, or legitimate than being attracted to members of more than one sex or gender" (81). Following Serano, I prefer the term *monosexism* to *biphobia*, although both terms are employed in the scholarship, and *biphobia* is perhaps more common in everyday parlance. In this article, I use bisexuality as Shiri Eisner proposes: as "an umbrella term for multiple bi-spectrum identities, those that involve attraction to people of more than one sex and/or gender. This works similarly to the word *transgender* [now usually *trans*], which is not only a name for a specific identity, but also a general term encompassing many identities that deviate from cisgender norms" (28). For the purposes of this article, I am less focussed on bisexuality *as an identity*, however, but rather on the lived realities and representational challenges presented by bisexual *desire and experience*. Bi Academic Intervention describes this as exploring "bisexuality without necessarily writing an (imaginary) bisexual into the picture" (9). My focus is not, therefore, on identity politics per se but instead on making legible a particular form of queer experience within contemporary drama in English.

As a non-monosexual (or plurisexual) identity, bisexuality is subject to what Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell describe as a "politics of delegitimization [whereby] [t]he desires and the existence of bisexuals are erased from view and subsequently reconfigured to fit within our comfortable – and comfortably narrow – homo-heterosexual binary, even by others within the queer community" (298). In her monumental study of bisexuality, Marjorie Garber tells the story of a gay theorist and friend who worried that "a fully theorized bisexuality [. . .] would repolarize hetero- and homosexuality, placing itself conjecturally between them, and usurp the place of radical critique" (27–28). Bisexual scholars like San Filippo embrace this usurpation, arguing that "it is now overwhelmingly the *bisexual* rather than the homosexual impulse that threatens heteronormativity's armature – and that of *homonormativity*" (12). Building upon Lisa Duggan's articulation of homonormativity, combining it with a reference to Adrienne Rich's much-cited articulation of "compulsory heterosexuality" (632), San Filippo has explored the ways homonormativity colludes with heteronormativity and monosexism to create "compulsory monosexuality – the ideological and institutionalized privileging of *either* heterosexuality *or* homosexuality as the two options for mature sexuality that are socially recognized and perceived as personally sustainable" (12). The cultural demand that bisexuals "pick a side" or that bisexuals are always "sleeping with the enemy" arises from this compulsory monosexuality.

In order for compulsory monosexuality to be undone, bisexuality must become culturally legible. Butler explains that "a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so [too] a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option" (*Undoing Gender* 8). Bisexuality is fre-

quently framed as a mix of heterosexuality and homosexuality; in this framing, bisexuality is queer only insofar as it resembles homosexuality, and bisexuals are oppressed only insofar as they are mistaken for homosexuals and thus subject to homophobia. Eisner reminds us, however, that "The notion that bisexuals are only oppressed as a result of homophobia and lesbophobia erases the need for a unique bisexual liberation struggle and places bisexuals as 'halfway' add-ons to the gay and lesbian movement" (60). Indeed, understanding bisexual experience as a halfway fluctuation between homosexuality and heterosexuality as opposed to a unique experience in and of itself renders monosexism, the specific oppression experienced by bisexuals, invisible. While bisexuals can and do in many situations suffer from homophobia and have long been involved in struggles against it, bisexuals *also* suffer from monosexism, an oppression which is not reducible to homophobia. Thus, bisexuality itself must be named and analyzed in order to make monosexism visible. Although not discussing bisexuality, Butler's reasoning may prove useful in articulating the significance of this phenomenon:

> To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor. (30)

A specifically bisexual critique is necessary if bisexuals are to create a robust language for their unique experiences of humanity, an experience which is so often dismissed or made unintelligible within a monosexist binary. As Butler poignantly points out: "a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity" (31). It is for this reason that I bring bisexuality on both sides of Dolan's footlights into dialogue.

Bisexuality in (Queer) Theory and Theatre

Theatre studies is only beginning to engage with bisexuality. Since bisexuality is often assumed to be legible only in terms of the degree to which it resembles homosexuality and heterosexuality, theatre studies has encountered the challenges of "reading" bisexuality. Writing about film, San Filippo suggests that "bisexuality, unlike heterosexuality and homosexuality, seems to rely on a temporal component for its (practical or conceptual) actualization [. . .] appear[ing] heterosexual or homosexual depending on [. . .] present object choice, a situation that significantly con-

tributes to bisexual (in)visibility in society" (30). Michael Amherst attributes this (in) visibility to the presumption that bisexuals "have reconciled to whichever gender they are in a relationship with now" (13). San Filippo suggests that the relative "dearth – and death – of confirmable bisexual characters has to do both with compulsory monosexuality and with the correlated issue of bisexual *representability*" (19). Bisexuality seems impossible to represent in the present as it becomes subsumed by a reading that allows only hetero- or homosexual desires, ignoring both past experience and potential future desires of those who do not fit within a dichotomous arrangement of sexuality. The same is true of theatrical representations.

Even when bisexual desire is present onstage, it remains difficult to see. A man who kisses another man is presumed to be gay, even if he has previously kissed women. Steven Angelides refers to this as bisexuality being "erased in the present tense" (17). In response to such readings, Callis asks "If there are no bisexual acts, but rather, only heterosexual and homosexual ones, then how can bisexuality ever be performed" (228)? Callis expands this reasoning, arguing that "in a society based on (serial) monogamy, bisexuality cannot be performed, and thus cannot be validated" (229). In a similar vein, Julie E. Hartman contends that in the popular imagination "one cannot 'do' bisexuality because sexuality is conceptualized in dichotomous terms, at least in most Western societies" (42), and bisexuality exists somewhere between these dichotomous poles of present-tense hetero- or homosexuality. The seeming impossibility of bisexuality is sometimes referred to as bisexuality being rendered invisible. Eisner insists, however, that *invisibilit*y must be understood as *coercive passing* because "*invisibility* suggests that one is simply 'unseen' in their marginalized identity, [but] the concept of coercive passing suggests that one isn't simply invisible but actively perceived as something other than they experience themselves to be [. . .]. [. . .] bisexuality and bisexual people are not invisible, but are being actively and coercively erased" (107). Forced to coercively pass as heterosexual or homosexual, the very possibility of a uniquely bisexual experience – and, by extension, onstage representation – is thus foreclosed.

In an article on the *HowlRound* theatre commons, Emily White identifies a lack of bisexual representation in mainstream theatre, a lack of representation which, I argue, is mirrored in theatre scholarship. The theatre scholarship which has engaged with bisexuality has generally focussed on plays written before the 1980s. Garber's work includes discussions of Tennessee Williams, Joe Orton, John van Druten, and William Shakespeare. In a similar vein, McLelland takes up the bisexual queering of Shakespeare, while Jordan Schildcrout explores bisexuality in the thriller genre and Ira Levin's *Deathtrap* (1978) in particular. In "A Space Has Been Made," Whitfield explores more recent theatrical work, but limits the exploration to musicals.

Possibly the most thorough theatre-specific reading of bisexuality is found in See's 2004 article "Other Kitchen Sinks, Other Drawing Rooms." In this work, See cri-

tiques a homo-/hetero binary that has dominated much drama scholarship, neglecting many queer readings in the process. He argues that scholars have often dismissed important queer representations as inauthentic and insufficient in a search for "the homosexual where the bisexual or ambiguously queer is always already present" (45). Focussing on plays by Noël Coward, Shelagh Delaney, and Orton, See discusses the ways in which these playwrights represent queer experiences in pre-1968 Britain despite the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain. Highly critical of the simplistic notion that "queer is queer because of the sex (never mind desire for, never mind affection toward) one has with another person" (32), he argues that queerness in dramatic writing is more than homosexual relationships and/or depictions of gay and lesbian sex. Instead, queer works "cleave, fracture, and remold conventional identity models; they resist monolithic conceptions of both hetero- and homosexualities. To suggest otherwise [. . .] is to misunderstand and to do violence to what it means to be queer in this decade and the decade in which these plays were written" (33). See contends that "ambiguously 'queer' rather than exclusively 'homosexual' characters" (33) have been devalued by critics who dismiss them as poor representations of queer (understood to be synonymous with homosexual) life. However, just because "they are not 'homosexual' plays does not mean that they are not queer, and to suggest otherwise marginalizes queer representations in an act of what may be called homosexism" (34). In the same way "heterosexism marginalizes homosexuality in its normalization of heterosexuality, so too does homosexism marginalize queerness in the effort to defend homosexuality from heterosexism. Such potentially well-intentioned goals run the risk of negating queer liberationist strategies" (51). The article concludes with the important assertion that "*people are indeed different from each other*: by denying or ignoring the reality of these plays' queer community representations, as queer scholars we risk *un*exposing, *re*centering, and *re*ifying that oppressive sexual system, an effort that poses deleterious consequences for sexual liberation politics and queer literature alike" (50). In light of See's radical queer critique, I now turn my attention to several recent dramatic texts which offer opportunities to eschew a homosexist reading in favor of a bisexual one.

Contemporary Bisexual Plays

Very little has been written about bisexuality in plays of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially outside the traditions of musical theatre. Contemporary understandings of bisexuality have only come into the consciousness of mainstream society in the last few decades of the twentieth century and are still working to find their place in academic and popular queer discourses. Thus, this period is crucial in bringing theatre studies into dialogue with bisexuality.

Despite the relative newness and as yet un(der)spoken nature of bisexual theorizing, many plays of the last few decades offer unique possibilities for representing and staging bisexual desire. There is a small but growing canon of published plays that overtly depict bisexual characters and their experiences. Plays like *The B Is for Bullshit* (2021) by John Mabey and *Sap* (2022) by Rafaella Marcus, for example, depict many of the common experiences identified in bisexual literature. These pieces deserve detailed readings of their own, but I wish to focus instead on plays in which bisexuality is less overt but nonetheless present. I do this in order to highlight the (in)visibility of bisexuality which might be understood to be hiding in plain sight. In this sense, I am reading plays in light of San Filippo's astute observation that "limit[ing] the [analytical] focus to characters who proclaim their own bisexuality would overlook the ambiguous and liminal spaces that alternatives to monosexuality actually inhabit" (18). The following sections are not intended as comprehensive analyses of each play. Rather, they are meant as a contribution towards White's call for the development of a bisexual canon and a starting place for understanding how extant scholarship on bisexuality can be applied in relation to contemporary English-language plays and how, in turn, these plays might help us understand bisexuality and its representability. It is my belief that the plays being discussed can meaningfully contribute to understandings of bisexuality, particularly how it can be represented in performance.

Stop Kiss

The word *bisexual* is not spoken in Son's *Stop Kiss*. Nonetheless, in drawing attention to a lack of mainstream bisexual plays, White suggests that *Stop Kiss* is a relatively well-known play which might make bisexuality visible if properly understood. *Stop Kiss* is an interrupted love story that does not allow its central characters to resolve the identity struggles brought about by their desire for one another. Sara has left her hometown (and her long-term boyfriend) to move to New York where she meets Callie, a woman with whom she develops a fast friendship. This friendship seems about to develop into romance when tragedy strikes, leaving the romantic and sexual possibilities of the relationship mostly unexplored. The two main characters are undoubtedly the victims of homophobic violence. They share a public kiss and are attacked by a man who calls them "Pussy-eating dykes" (28). I argue, however, that in addition to the homophobia endured by the characters, it is important to consider monosexism. As I argue above, neither is reducible to the other.

Stop Kiss is a play in which the central characters can be understood to be bisexual, despite neither character claiming any specific sexual identity. Despite the

absence of self-identification, *Stop Kiss* is often read as a lesbian story. Jiang Mengmeng, for example, describes the characters' journey as one from "heterosexuals to ambiguous lesbians" (38). Mengmeng downplays the need for labels while at the same time offering three possibilities for Callie and Sara's relationship: "heterosexual, homosexual or only sisterhood" (37). While sisterhood seems to miss the mark, Callie and Sara's relationship can, I argue, legitimately (and perhaps bisexually) be read as both lesbian and bisexual, rather than one or the other. In this sense, I am building upon Bi Academic Intervention's assertion that a "bisexual imaginary is both iconic (setting up an image) and ironic (destabilizing that image), without having to choose between the two" (11). Not having to choose between two seemingly opposite possibilities might be a fundamental contribution of bisexuality, very much in keeping with other pursuits of queer theory. Referencing Rich's expansive definition of lesbian experience, Eisner argues that "bisexuality can also be seen as an expanse of forms of 'primary intensity' with people of more than one gender" (24). This open-ended definition squares with Butler's articulation of identities as signs which are a "political necessity" ("Imitation" 311) that can nonetheless be used only as a "strategic provisionality [. . .] [whereby] identity can become a site of contest and revision [. . .] preserving the signifier as a site of rearticulation" (312). Bisexuality is not a monolithic experience unchanging over time. Nonetheless, claiming and understanding characters as bisexual is politically important in making legible experiences that fall under the umbrella of the term.

Throughout the play, it is implied that Sara has come to New York in order to come out – or at least to live more authentically or openly. This coming out is not done overtly, however, and it is thus unclear how exactly she would come out or what label she might choose for herself in living openly. Coming out and moving to the big city fit nicely within traditional gay and lesbian narratives, which makes Sara easy to read as a lesbian moving to the big city to explore her sexuality. Callie, however, already lives in New York and maintains a complicated but deep relationship with a man, George, throughout the play. When Callie describes that relationship, she does so, haltingly, as follows:

> George and I . . . are friends. Who sleep together. But date other people. Sometimes for long periods of time. We've been doing this since we were . . . 20. Although he *never* likes anyone I'm dating, he's unabashedly – and I admit I can get jealous when he's – but at least I try to hide it, I'm pretty good at it too. It's only *after* they've broken up that I – Anyway, we'll probably get married. (17)

Callie's ongoing desire for George and her jealousy of his other partners could be read as insincere or as a way to hide her homosexual (and not bisexual) desires. This would risk, however, falling into the trap articulated by many scholars whereby one act (in this case, desiring Sara) is enough to confirm homosexuality but, para-

doxically, not bisexuality. Amherst suggests that many people "dismiss sexual behaviour, sexual attraction, sexual identity, all for the sake of the increasingly shaky categorisation of gay and straight" (45–46). Dismissing sexual behaviour for this reason is certainly possible when reading *Stop Kiss* and could be, in See's words, a homosexist reading.

Importantly, each character's experience of queer desire need not be interpreted in the same way. Sara may never have felt desire for her ex-boyfriend Peter, dating him only as a way to survive the homophobia of the 1990s American Midwest. Such a reading would make Sara legible as a lesbian who has left a sham relationship. An equally plausible understanding based on what is said – and the great deal that is left unsaid – in the text is that Sara is a bisexual and has, indeed, experienced sexual and/or romantic attraction to her male partner, but nonetheless feels stifled by the relationship – including, perhaps, by homophobia *and* monosexism. The text does not give us enough information to know Sara's experience or self-identification definitively and thus it is left up to the interpretation of the reader, production, and audience member. Indeed, ambiguity about identification and what can be shared at certain stages of a relationship are key themes of the play.

We know that Sara is leaving an unsatisfactory relationship; the question remains, however, whether Callie's experience is the same as Sara's. It is unclear if Callie can be read as being on a journey out of a disingenuous heterosexual relationship and towards a more authentic homosexual one. It is equally possible and perhaps more fitting with the textual evidence to instead read Callie as bisexual. This would not require her relationship with George to be understood as somehow insincere, even if it is a flawed one. Indeed, Calie can be understood as bisexual even if Sara is read as a lesbian; this would make their relationship one that bridges differences of sexual and/or identitarian experience. It is entirely possible that the characters have similarities (mutual desire) that unite them but do not collapse their experiences one into the other.

To be attracted to someone of the same sex does not foreclose attraction to different sexes and – despite the prejudices which continue to exist in queer and heterosexual communities – homosexuals and bisexuals (or, indeed, bisexuals and heterosexuals – bisexuals and any people of any sexuality) can be romantically involved in what are known as "mixed-orientation relationships" (Shaw 70; see Vencill and Wiljamaa). Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell suggest that these mixed-orientation romantic possibilities ensure that "the figure of the bisexual is a threat to the existing infrastructure of sexuality that bases itself entirely upon a dominant heterosexual population and an oppositional homosexual one" (302). Since neither character claims an identity for herself, a definite understanding of their sexual identities is impossible. However, Callie's desire for Sara – even though it is framed as the narratively satisfying end of the drama – should not necessarily be read as

erasing or invalidating previous experiences of desire. Likewise, Callie does not need to be read as choosing between hetero- and homosexuality just because she is choosing between differently gendered romantic interests. Moreover, reading Sara's sexuality in one way does not necessitate reading Callie's sexuality in the same way. Such a reading risks embracing the monosexist erasure to which bisexual desire is often subjected.

Cock

Bartlett's *Cock* also dramatizes many of the societal complications that attend bisexual desire and impede bisexual self-identification. When John (a man) sleeps with W (a woman) after ending a long-term relationship with M (a man), John ends up in an identity crisis. The reduction of these lovers to letters, corresponding to binary genders, highlights the ways in which sexuality is normatively understood to be defined by one's sexual and romantic partners. John's crisis is internal and personal, but also – and perhaps more importantly – one of external legibility and coherence to those around him. After sleeping with W, M derogatorily describes John as "a different person" (14) who is "a collection of things that don't amount / [. . .] a sprawl / A mob. / [That] don't add up" (23). These are all accusations frequently leveled at bisexuals because they destabilize the seeming binaries of gender and sexual attraction. M insists that John must "make a decision" (24) between M and W and, it is implied, between being gay and being straight. This is a vivid dramatization of the type of monosexism that attends bisexual desire. In response to John's new gendered attraction, M puns that John does not need but has already done "some straightening out" (13). This line implies that bisexuality is somehow "straighter" than homosexuality, a diluted version of a "pure" queerness, understood as synonymous with homosexuality.

Cock highlights the imperfection of identity labels and the potential fluidity of desire. Even John identifies himself by saying "I'm gay" (39) despite having loved the sex he has had with W. He rejects the label bisexual because "there's never been any other women [I've desired]" (74). This rejection may also be read as internalized homosexism, a need to defend a pure notion of homosexuality. John seems to imply that one could only be bisexual if one was repeatedly attracted to people of different genders, and that one attraction, no matter how powerful and significant, is not enough to change one's identity. John's desire, however, which at least in one instance encompasses multiple genders, might be understood as bisexual, even if his identity is not. Much as Eisner argues for bisexuality including a variety of forms of primary intensity, Serano explains that one can be "experientially bisexual" (83) regardless of label. My earlier distinction between identity categories and experien-

ces of desire is important in this case; whether or not John calls himself bisexual is not the point, since John is a character and not a real person whose choice of identity label must be therefore respected.

Enric Monforte takes John's refusal of bisexuality one step further by insisting that "*the play* also makes clear that his [John's] is not a case of bisexuality, since W is the only woman he has ever felt attracted towards" (164; emphasis added). John may not identify as bisexual, true, but to say this removes *the play* from being understood as a representation of bisexual experience goes a step further and risks reifying the notion that bisexuality itself can be understood as a ratio of so-called homosexual and heterosexual attraction. This understanding of bisexuality-as-ratio brings up an impossible and monosexist question: how much of any type of the two "legitimate" types of desire makes one a "legitimate" bisexual? Fifty/Fifty? At least twenty-five per cent of one? By understanding bisexuality not as a blend of these two binarized types of attraction but rather as its own form of experience, one can circumvent questions of ratios and legitimacy entirely and open up new fields of possibility which expand and respect instead of foreclose or police potential desire. Monforte argues that through "questioning of strict definitions of sexual identity and of binary categories, *Cock* opens up a breathing space for dissidence – interestingly this time focused on a *heterosexual relation*" (165; emphasis added). The first part of this argument is certainly true. However, rather than understanding the play as a confrontation between a homosexual and a heterosexual experience – even if that is how the characters might read it –, the play can be understood to present a deeply bisexual experience, including the cultural illegibility which can attend it. In the play, John himself suggests a similar interpretation: "maybe it's not a switch, one way or the other, maybe it's more like a stew, complicated, things bubbling up" (86). The play's challenge to binary categories can be usefully understood as focussing on a bisexual relation or bisexual experience, even if no self-identified bisexuals are involved. Bisexual experience must be critically and expansively understood on its own terms, ones which may be legible in very different ways than those of monosexualities – and, importantly, which do not rely on monosexualities as referents.

The play vividly dramatizes many of the social stigmas and barriers imposed by compulsory monosexuality that could prevent a person whose desires and/or experiences could be described as bisexual from identifying this way. Because of this, it is unsurprising that the character would not self-identify as bisexual. Nonetheless, reading the play through a bisexual lens is deeply useful. Such an analysis is largely lacking in critical discussions of theatre. That John's experience of bisexual attraction makes him illegible to both himself and others, pushes him away from those he loves, and makes his life less *liveable*, in the Butlerian sense of the word, is a dramatization of the power of monosexism regardless of identity label. These experiences

demand what Erikson-Schroth and Mitchell call "a reconfiguration of the ways in which we define our desired-object choice, diffusing outward from a monosexual paradigm into significantly more open-ended categories" (313) which would allow space for bisexual – indeed, all non-monosexual – experience to become possible.

Smoke

In *Smoke*, Belyea presents a novel strategy for staging bisexuality. The play has two characters: Aiden, a cisgendered woman, and Jordan, who can be played by an actor who is read as either a cisgendered man or woman.[2] Jordan is Aiden's ex, who has come to respond to allegations Aiden has made about actions taken during their relationship. The script of *Smoke* is explicitly crafted so that the role of Jordan can be played as a cisgender man or a cisgender woman on alternating nights. Every staging to date has done so ("*Smoke*"). In the text, certain lines change slightly depending on the gender of the speaker in that particular performance, but the arc of the play remains the same. In their playwright's notes, Belyea, a self-identified "queer, pansexual, non-binary, femme/woman" (199), explains that their intention was to "write it so that Aiden and Jordan's relationship has queer undertones, no matter what the casting, inviting space for the possibility that Aiden and/or Jordan might be bi or pansexual in both iterations" (199). In this way, Belyea has taken the novel approach of writing pan-/bi-sexuality *between* performances of the play instead of (or perhaps in addition to) within the narrative itself. As one review of the play noted, "even if you only see it once, you can't help but speculate about how your experience would be different if Jordan were a different gender. The internal dialogue happens simply by virtue of suggesting the device" (Montgomery).

A production in which the gender of one actor changes night-to-night raises questions about how romantic attraction to that character can be understood within the play. This strategy challenges the (in)visibility of bisexuality and the ubiquitousness of monosexism since Aiden cannot as easily or conclusively be read as a lesbian when Jordan is played as a woman and as heterosexual when the character is played as a man. The play has only two characters, and thus, although their relationship has ended two years before the play begins, their relationship is the central one through which we understand the characters. While we learn that Jordan has gotten engaged to Harriet, a person Jordan refers to using she/her pronouns, Aiden

2 The playwright notes that "the script could function with Aiden and/or Jordan as trans, non-binary, and/or otherwise gender non-conforming. However, this current draft does not account for the further complexity this would add to their conversation. If this is something you and your theatre company are interested in investigating, please reach out" (208).

has had no other romantic interests since. Thus, we can only know Aiden's romantic/sexual desires via one person: a person whose gender is different from performance to performance. Importantly, although we know Jordan to have been romantically involved with two people who use she/her pronouns, this cannot necessarily be understood to represent the entirety of Jordan's romantic or sexual history, nor to foreclose possible futures. We can only speculate on Jordan's sexuality via such inductive reasoning. This uncertainty evokes the aforementioned issues of both serial monogamy (Callis) and present object choice (San Filippo) when reading bisexuality. Monogamy does not erase bisexuality; similarly, the gender of the actor playing the character on any given night does not necessarily imply a limit to the desires of the character, even if other desires are not explicitly shown. This is a challenge to presumptions of orientation based on current object choice.

It is the dominant focus on *current* object choice that must be examined. Amherst highlights a monosexist presumption that "the sex of an individual's current partner can tell us anything [or everything] about their past or future partners" (27). *Smoke* encourages us to read Aiden's sexuality in a more nuanced way than simply in light of the gender of Jordan on any particular night. San Filippo explains that "bisexuality, unlike heterosexuality and homosexuality, seems to rely on a temporal component for its (practical or conceptual) actualization" (30), noting that, except in cases of polyamory, showing "'proof' of bisexuality depends on behaviors that a character is hard-pressed to demonstrate [when] [. . .] not just running time but narrative circumstances can foreclose the development of a character's bisexual potential" (34). In *Cock*, the differing sexes of John's two current lovers is the source of much strife. In *Smoke*, the tension is not intra- but extra-narrative, which allows the play to avoid a key bisexual trope identified by San Filippo:

> triangles are time-saving structures that overcome the problem of temporality by allowing for a character's simultaneous exploration of same-sex and opposite-sex[3] desire. But because such narratives are often structured around the question of a bisexual character's "true" (read: monosexual) identity, the triangle tends to turn on stereotypical notions of bisexuality as indecisiveness, as wanting to have it all, and as a phase to be outgrown. Since not only compulsory monosexuality but compulsory monogamy as well are enforced as cultural norms, the narrative resolution of the triangular structure almost always involves a questioning (or questionable) character's ultimate self-discovery as *either* heterosexual *or* homosexual, a revelation reinforced by the notion of a fated "one true love." (37)

3 This choice of words implies a gender binary which does not exist. Although bisexual scholarship, like all representations of culture, uses imperfect and misleading language at times, much attention has been paid in the body of work to critiquing such binary thinking around sex and gender. It is also worth noting that San Filippo critiques binary thinking throughout this work.

Returning to an earlier example, *Cock* does not present a rosy or optimistic "one true love" ending. The play does, however, end in a decision which seems to foreclose bisexual possibility in favour of a culturally legible monosexual identity. Conversely, the extra-narrative approach to bisexuality taken by Belyea allows for the bisexual potential of the characters to be read without it having to dominate the plot of the play.

Although bisexuality is largely figured outside of narrative time in *Smoke*, the play's approach to time can elucidate bisexual representability. Thea Fitz-James understands *Smoke* to take place in "queer time" (195), referencing E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen who assert that "queer transmission and the archeology of the self hinge on the complex interweaving of past alliances and how they haunt present circumstances [. . .] [thus challenging] a presumptively linear model of temporality" (16). Fitz-James highlights that, in queer time, the future can also affect the present; in *Smoke*, "poems read in the future complicate things to come, in real time" (196). Although the poems do not change the events of the play in a supernatural or science-fictionesque way, they do influence the reader/audience member's perception of events. In a similar way, the temporal "potential fluidity of bisexuality" (Amherst 15), where both past and potential future desires shape a nuanced understanding of sexuality, might queer our understanding of desire in a society that behaves as if "sexuality is always a static, unchanging brute fact" (Amherst 14). Fitz-James argues that "queer time can fracture form as well as content" (195) and suggests that "By escaping the reductive linear logic (and time) of smoke equals fire, *Smoke* invites different possibilities between Aiden and Jordan" (197). Representations of bisexuality can perhaps best be read in this queered, non-linear time. To understand bisexuality, one must consider the past, present, and future in a non-linear, non-deterministic way. By removing the centrality of the present and the "social and political imperatives for queer people to talk about themselves in a manner that is expedient" (Amherst 42–43), bisexuality becomes far more possible, liveable, and representable – perhaps even expected. To use Amherst's words: "It is not about everyone being secretly bisexual, but allowing sufficient freedom that anyone might be" (47).

Smoke is not "about" bisexuality per se, but rather sexual assault, healing, and the nuances of gender, race, and class within relationships. The play might, nonetheless, offer a novel way to *present* bisexuality theatrically, a new way to *represent* the seemingly unrepresentable, and a useful challenge to how we read sexuality onstage. *Smoke* suggests that the representational possibilities of bisexuality are different from those we are used to employing for monosexual orientations. This is possible by looking beyond the limits of Angelides's "present tense" (17). Bisexual representation, perhaps, benefits from a less temporally or even textually-limited reading in order to become legible. That is to say, it must be freed from the mono-

sexist focus on the present. Moreover, the play's major themes (gender, race, class, and how they intersect with sexual violence) are explored with a unique richness due to this bisexual staging strategy. Dramaturge Jenna Rodgers advises audiences to "witness [the play] twice. Clock how you feel. Think about what we've been taught about gender. About race. About sex. About sexual violence. Clock how you feel again" (193). Rodgers suggests that this reexamination might motivate real-world action in support of "queer survivors of sexual assault" (193), another example of how a representation staged in a theatre might have meaningful impact outside of it.

Concluding and Reading Theatrical Bisexuality into the Future

Theatre can be a space to explore the representational possibilities of bisexuality and to craft narratives that oppose monosexist oppression. By highlighting "unrepresentable" bisexual desire in contemporary plays, theatre scholars have the opportunity to oppose the coercive passing to which bisexuality is so frequently subjected. Self-identified bisexuals experience material struggles which arise in part from what they share with their queer peers generally and in part from the monosexist oppression which they share only with their plurisexual peers. This monosexism contributes to the foreclosure of the possibility of bisexual desire and the liveability of bisexual lives, leading to a homosexist subsumption into a hetero-/homosexual binary.

This article is not intended as the final word on bisexuality and theatre. It is my hope that theatre studies scholars and theatre-makers will continue to take bisexuality ever more seriously as an identity, experience of desire, lens of analysis, and ontology. Further research is required on, for example, how theatre studies might engage the ways in which race and bisexuality intersect (Collins; Eisner 260–286; Shaw 85–86, 105–106), different Indigenous epistemologies of Turtle Island engage with what I here call bisexuality (Robinson; Shaw 85–86), and how bisexuality is conceived and expressed across cultures, ethnicities, and geographies other than North America and Britain (Chan, Operario, and Mak). Moreover, contemporary plays that depict explicitly bisexual characters and their experiences as well as plays and performance forms that further expand the (post)dramatic possibilities of representing bisexual desire both warrant further scholarly attention. Evolving understandings of queerness will continue to bring new dimensions to this field of study.

Bisexuality is an identity, but it is also an experience of desire which has implications beyond the claiming of a word to describe oneself. Monosexist denial of bisexuality cuts off an aspect of human life, a possibility of human desire, from the realm of the liveable. Bisexuality and its precarity as a liveable life are still largely misunderstood even within queer thinking, and thus theatre studies has an opportunity to show leadership and allyship in support of bisexual liberation and opposition to monosexist oppression. It is my hope that considerations of bisexuality might begin to more fully permeate theatre seasons, classroom discussions, reviews, articles, and syllabi. I imagine this as one contribution towards countering monosexism, to use Dolan's phrase, on this side of the footlights.

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