

The B(r)idesmaid:  
Writing Bisexual Representation

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Creative Writing

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Stories are the means by which humans interpret their lives. Our conceptualization of our identities, values, and communities - and our perception of others' identities, values, and communities - all stem from how these things are framed by the stories we consume. And in modern America, these stories, most often, are consumed in the form of movies, television, and theatre. In a time of significant political debates around queer rights, where many Americans are discriminated against due to their 'deviance' from gender and sexuality norms, it is more important than ever to use stories to show the lives of queer people in nuanced ways. To cultivate larger cultural attitudes of acceptance towards a variety of queer identities, it is necessary to encourage the development of thoughtful, empathetic, and diverse queer representation in mainstream media - and this starts by writing those kinds of stories.

I wrote the play, *The B(r)idesmaid*, in an attempt to be such an example, to fill the specific gap in representation of bisexual women that I had noticed in the stories I was consuming. Though overall queer representation has improved over the years, mainstream bisexual representation is still lacking, with bisexuals often lumped in with other queer identities or erased entirely. Bisexuals, however, exist in a strange grey area between our cultural ideas of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and their experiences and their place within the queer community are unique. The play, in short, tells the story of a young woman (Sam) who comes out as bisexual to her mother, who begrudgingly accepts this new information, but who then gives Sam an ultimatum to find a woman to bring as a date to her brother's wedding or be forced go with a man that her mother has picked out. As Sam searches for a date, she grapples with her new bisexual identity, her beliefs around love and marriage, and her need to gain her mother's acceptance. During the process of writing this play, I examined the current research done on the historical methods and effects of writing queer representation by watching two influential

documentaries, *The Celluloid Closet* and *Disclosure*, as well as referencing queer and feminist writers' work on the cultural storytelling used to inform our ideas of gender and sexuality.

Ultimately, I came to understand that the stories we absorb from entertainment have a strong connection to and influence over the cultural stories we live by and perpetuate as a society.

Therefore, we must use an empathetic, intersectional approach to writing queer representation if we ever hope to have mainstream media with truly diverse stories and, by extension, a culture that actively celebrates diversity.

Writing diverse stories serves two important functions: creating connections between seemingly disparate social groups, and reflecting and affirming the identities of a diverse audience. Stories, at their core, help audiences empathize with or see themselves in characters who may have identities they don't usually interact with, which is especially important for exposing people to marginalized communities with little mainstream visibility. In *Disclosure*, a critically acclaimed 2020 documentary on trans representation in film, actress Laverne Cox cites that “[according] to a study from GLAAD, 80 percent of Americans don't actually personally know someone who is transgender. So most of the information that Americans get about who transgender people are, what our lives are and are about, comes from the media” (00:20:56 - 00:21:11). Nick Adams, GLAAD Director of Trans Media & Representation, adds to this point by saying that “[trans] people have also been taught how to think about themselves [through the media],” and “when we're trying to figure out who we are, we look to the media to try to figure it out, because just like the 80 percent of Americans who say they don't know a trans person, that's often true of trans people as well” (*Disclosure* 00:21:13 - 00:21:31). Though Cox and Adams are specifically referring to the issues that the trans community faces, their points could also be extended to apply to the queer community as a whole. Both queer people *and* non-queer people

use the media to form their perceptions of the queer community and what it means to be queer. Taking it a step further, in *The Celluloid Closet*, an Emmy-nominated 1996 documentary on queer representation in film, film historian Richard Dyer explains that “[your] ideas about who you are don’t just come from inside you, they come from the culture. And in this culture they come especially from the movies. So we learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman, what it means to have sexuality” (00:6:21). All people, queer or not, form their sense of gender and sexuality from the stories they absorb.

In writing my play, I kept both goals of queer representation - connection and affirmation - in mind. I recognized that while my target audience would be young queer women and my main goal would be to tell a story that spoke to their experiences, I wanted to craft a story that would still deal with universal themes - navigating the nuances of one’s identity, searching for belonging and fulfillment, struggling to gain a parent’s love - in order to emphasize how queer people deal with the same universal problems as non-queer people. I didn’t want to write a story exclusively about queer issues such as coming out, though those are important as well, but rather a story about navigating the same complicated life problems everyone struggles with. When people both inside and outside of the queer community don’t see the community’s members reflected this way in mainstream media, it skews their perception of the community and contributes to a culture that is less accepting of queer people.

Further contributing to this problem is the common practice of writing queer characters with inaccurate stereotypes and negative storytelling tropes. Unfortunately, queer identities are often marginalized or misrepresented in the stories our culture consumes, and this limited and sometimes harmful representation can lead to significant discord between the queer community and the non-queer members of mainstream American society. Both *The Celluloid Closet* and

*Disclosure* examine the ways in which queer people have historically been written as something to be laughed at or feared, as sexual perverts and deranged killers, which reinforces these ideas in audiences' minds. Too often are queer people written as 'others,' with a stereotypical portrayal of queerness being the only dimension of their characters, their humanity erased in order to leverage their 'deviance' for the sake of plot. Though I wrote my play's characters to have flaws, I wanted to make sure they were still clearly human, worthy of love and respect, just like anyone else - not jokes, not monsters, but humans.

However, even when queer people are positively represented in media, the identities represented are often very limited. Queer media often focuses on white homosexuals (gay men and lesbian women), erasing other identities and emphasizing assimilation into heterosexual culture. *The Celluloid Closet*, for example, talks about a wide range of gender and sexual 'deviance' as portrayed onscreen, but "homosexual" is used as an umbrella term to cover all of this deviance. While this documentary was made in 1996 and thus may not have had the same language as 2020 to describe the various identities within the queer/LGBTQIA+ community, this illustrates how limited the perception of queerness has been throughout history. It contributes to the idea that there is a natural, strict binary of heterosexuals ('normal' people) and homosexuals ('abnormal' people), when in reality, gender and sexuality are extremely nuanced, socially constructed, and not binary at all. Gender and sexuality exist on spectrums, manifesting in different ways across a variety of identities depending on cultural context, and so to lump everyone under one very limited term and give it a strict definition (homosexual: someone who is sexually attracted to a person of the same gender) is to erase the nuances of their identities and experiences. On this spectrum between heterosexuality and homosexuality is where bisexuality exists - not as a middle point, half one and half the other, but its own identity.

Due to our limited cultural beliefs around what sexuality can look like, bisexuality has often been misportrayed, often due to being written by non-bisexual writers. Even other queer writers do not necessarily write bisexual representation in an accurate manner, due to their own biases. For context, women's and gender studies professors Susan M. Shaw and Janet Lee write about the stigmas that bisexuals face inside and outside of the queer community in their book, *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*. They describe how "[bisexuality] implies a sexual identification with both women and men. There are derogatory social connotations of bisexuality as hypersexualized that not only do these people have sex all the time, but they are doing it with both women and with men, simultaneously. Of course, to be bisexual does not imply this at all; it just means the choice of lover can be either a woman or a man. Nonetheless, these connotations reflect the fact that there are many stigmas associated with bisexuality from both the straight and the lesbian and gay communities" (Shaw 315). Bisexuals, then, deal with the same overall issues of discrimination as the queer community, but also their own specific issues. Onscreen, bisexuals - if mentioned at all - are often written as being more promiscuous than lesbians and gay men and are often shown to be unfaithful to their partners. In a CBS News article on bisexual representation in the media, writer Zoe Christen Jones points out the prevalence of "tropes that [characterize] bisexual people as flighty, unwilling to choose, in a phase, or worse, killed for the plot of the straight protagonist." Though Jones points out that some positive representations of bisexuality exist, particularly on television as compared to major studio films, these instances are not frequent and still a kind of anomaly. The evidence of this erasure is supported with hard numbers in the *GLAAD 2020 Studio Responsibility Index*, which "maps the quantity, quality and diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) characters in films released by eight major motion picture studios during the 2019 calendar year" and "[serves] as a road map

toward increasing fair, accurate and inclusive LGBTQ representation in film.” The Index notes that in 2019, “[for] the second year in a row, only three major studio releases counted in GLAAD’s report included bisexual+ characters despite bi+ people making up the majority of the community” (*GLAAD* 14). With queer audiences struggling to find any kind of positive queer representation in mainstream media, there seems to be little room to demand the portrayal of a whole host of nuanced queer identities. This is part of why bisexual representation has so often been lacking; in a heteronormative world that assumes heterosexuality is the default, writers can write a single homosexual character and have it be accepted as an adequate amount of queer representation.

As a bisexual woman, I wrote *The B(r)idesmaid* to provide several examples of positive bisexual representation through its characters, hoping to contribute to the visibility of this marginalized identity. I wrote three bisexual characters: Sam, the protagonist; Alex, Sam’s friend and mentor; and Mark, Sam’s potential suitor who becomes a good friend. When writing the play, I actively tried to avoid the negative stereotypes and tropes of previous representations, and I also made each character an integral part of the story. The characters are more than just their sexuality - though their sexuality does play a significant role in the story. As described, bisexuals frequently experience the erasure of their identities in heterosexual and queer spaces, and I wanted to take the time to specifically explore how a newly-out bisexual might navigate their place between those spaces and try to find a community where they feel accepted.

The work I did with this play was primarily about examining the “sexual scripts” that women are taught about love, relationships, and marriage from a young age, and how those scripts might be flipped, reinterpreted, or completely rejected by queer women. For context, Shaw and Lee define sexual scripts as “frameworks and guidelines for sexual feelings and

behaviors in particular communities at a particular time,” which are founded in “the oppositional binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality” (Shaw 314). In terms of storytelling, Shaw and Lee connect the idea of these sexual scripts and social expectations to the genre of romantic comedies, describing how “the best genre of film in which to observe gender is the romantic comedy or romantic drama. Romantic comedies have become the de facto film produced for female audiences that shape notions of multifaceted femininities. Their heteronormative formula reinforces myths about romantic love and marriage as the most important keys to women’s happiness” (Shaw 262). To examine the sexual scripts taught to women, particularly in regards to love and marriage, it only seemed appropriate to write my story as a literal script, specifically a romantic dramedy, and use the tropes of the genre as a frame in which to explore a queer woman’s relationship with love and sexuality.

My initial goal with this play was to explore how bisexuals are still heavily affected by heteronormative sexual scripts, often forced to over-identify with their relationship status and the gender of their partner in order to feel valid in their sexual identity. Mainstream America’s sexual scripts prioritize heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family, and many queer people still absorb the foundational concepts of these scripts and simply flip the gender, resulting in a similar preoccupation with finding a partner and achieving the goal of marriage, as the main character of my play experiences. But the very nature of queer relationships should challenge these scripts around marriage and family and sexuality, and encourage breaking free of them in favor of new paths. In her talk, “What young women believe about their own sexual pleasure,” Peggy Orenstein describes how, in her research on women’s sexuality and sexual experiences, “[lesbian] and bisexual girls would tell [her] that they felt liberated to get off the script, free to create an encounter that worked for them” (00:11:21 - 00:11:31). By subverting the most obvious



gender expectations regarding relationships and sexuality in heteronormative sexual scripts, queer people have a chance to be free and explore other models of relationships, love, and family. By the end of my play, my protagonist reaches this point, flipping the female sexual script with her choice to take her romantic life at her own pace and not be defined by her relationship status.

Though I am still proud of this play, I do not pretend to be the first person to write about bisexuality, nor do I claim my representation to be the best. *The B(r)idesmaid* is not a perfect play; the representation presented is still influenced by my own experiences as a person with the privileges of being white-passing, middle-class, educated, American, able-bodied, young, and cisgender. These privileges are important for me to acknowledge as a writer, so that I can accept that while I may try to write universal stories about a specific identity (particularly bisexuality), I may not be as inclusive in my storytelling as I intend. Through the process of writing this play and learning more about gender and sexuality, I realized that despite being out as bisexual for several years, I am much like the protagonist in that I am still very naive and inexperienced when it comes to engaging with the queer community. My portrayal of other queer people is based on my very limited knowledge of other genders and sexualities, and therefore is at least somewhat affected by stereotypes and implicit biases. For example, the play does not address that gender can exist beyond the binary, instead exclusively referencing men and women. It also includes somewhat stereotypical portrayals of an artistic, jaded lesbian and a feminine, flamboyant bisexual man. While I tried to portray these characters in nuanced ways, I can't deny that some stereotypes about queer identities are present and unaddressed. The main character, Sam, also doesn't address the ignorance that she undoubtedly has about different queer people's

experiences, which is the primary reason her first date with a woman ends in an awkward confrontation regarding internalized shame and family trauma.

These problems with the play, understood only after I had finished the piece and had taken time away and returned with a more critical eye, showed me how important it is for writers to actively approach their work with an intersectional lens. Originally “coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw,” intersectionality is a term used “to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap” to create specific experiences of oppression and privilege (Coaston). While intersectionality extends far beyond something as small as media representation, the framework can still be useful when approaching writing. Though I may be a bisexual, my experience of life and bisexuality may be very different than a person with a different race, class, gender, ability, or age than me, and this will greatly affect how relevant my writings about bisexuality will be to people with those different identities. As a writer, it is my responsibility to recognize where my privileges are, where I make mistakes, and where I have room to grow and learn about others’ experiences. The acknowledgement of these privileges does not mean that I should try to write the literal details of my stories to be completely universal or try to represent every identity, because that is impossible; rather, it emphasizes that one queer writer cannot speak for all queer people's experiences, and that we must seek out and support all manner of diverse voices and uplift the stories of people other than ourselves.

There are many changes I would like to make to this play in the future - such as including an expanded discussion of gender, possibly making Alex nonbinary instead of a woman, giving Ruby a more nuanced characterization and using their date to illustrate where Sam has room to grow in her knowledge of the queer community, having Mark directly question social

expectations around masculinity - and so much more. I know that I cannot represent the entirety of the vast LGBTQIA+ community in a single play with only five characters, but I want to improve the representation that is there and further add to the discourse around queer issues. For now, however, I am content to know that even if this play is not perfect, the process of writing it was very informative and valuable to me, and I encourage other writers to go through a similar process. In writing this play, I exposed my own biases and discovered areas where I - and hopefully the play's audience - can continue to learn and grow.

Even within specific identity labels, such as “bisexual,” we need diverse writers and diverse stories across a variety of intersections, because we cannot reduce people to a single label. Writers must simultaneously make a conscious effort to write nuanced representation, while also accepting that they're not necessarily going to get it right every time, and that's ok. In *Disclosure*, actress and writer Jen Richards describes this situation, stating how “[there] is a one-word solution to almost all the problems in trans media: we just need *more*, and that way, the occasional clumsy representation wouldn't matter as much because it wouldn't be all that there is” (00:24:14 - 00:24:26). This can apply to all queer representation. We can't be satisfied with crumbs, because those few crumbs will only offer a limited perspective; we must demand more representation, in both the characters and creators of our culture's stories.

And yet, even as mainstream media starts to include more nuanced, diverse representation of queer people in its stories, there is still work to be done. At the end of *Disclosure*, Laverne Cox gives a beautiful conclusion to the documentary: “I wonder if people who watch and love these shows, I wonder if they will reach out to trans people in need and work to defeat policies that scapegoat us, policies that discriminate against us, policies that dehumanize us. Because until that happens, all that energy from the silver screen won't be

enough to better the lives of trans people off the screen” (1:42:32 - 1:43:02). Again, Cox’s point can be extended to all queer people. Positive, nuanced representation in popular stories alone is not enough to change the social conditions for a group as vast and varied as the queer community - but it’s a start.

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