



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 30 | Spring 2020

Title	Resisting Monosexism: Representations of Bisexuality in Literature
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	30
Issue Date	Spring 2020
Publication Date	22/07/2020
Editor	Mara Curechian

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Resisting Monosexism: Representations of Bisexuality in Literature

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In a New York Times review of James Baldwin's 1968 novel Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Mario Puzo writes that "A propaganda novel may be socially valuable... but it is not art." Puzo's claim is a function of what creative writing pedagogy scholar Janelle Adsit calls "the particular privilege that comes with a denial of marginalization." Assumptions of rigid binaries that categorise people as either hetero- or homosexual, a phenomenon that scholar Kenji Yoshino calls "the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure," create and reinforce harmful ideas about bisexuality. Bisexual representation in literature can operate as a creative resistance to the status quo, undermining the alleged necessity for a rigid binary system of sexuality. From James Baldwin's 1968 Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone to Jen Wilde's 2017 Queens of Geek, this article traces representations of bisexuality in literature, with special attention to the ways in which bisexuality is demonstrated, described, and labelled in literature. However, while acknowledging the problematic representations of bisexuality in older fiction, such as Radclyffe Hall's 1928 The Well of Loneliness, this paper resists a narrative of pure progress of bisexual representation, examining both problematic and nuanced representations in contemporary literature.

In a 1968 *New York Times* review of James Baldwin's novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Mario Puzo writes that "A propaganda novel may be socially valuable... but it is not art" (par. 2). Puzo's claim, however, is a function "of the particular privilege that comes with a denial of marginalization" (Adsit 52). Baldwin's protagonist is Leo Proudhammer. Leo is Black, queer¹, and bisexual. This character is aware of how the world treats people of his identities, and he directly challenges such treatment. In "What Does Pride Mean Now?" Carmen Maria Machado writes that "queerness does not protect you – not from domestic violence, not from racism or sexism or transphobia" (par. 20). Is there any way that a novel surrounding a character as perceptive and intersectionally marginalised as Leo is going to be anything other than a form of creative resistance to the status quo? The nuanced representation afforded to a character of such othered identities is a challenge to society itself.

Analysing representations of bisexuality within literature highlights the ways in which bisexuality is culturally legitimised or delegitimised, which exposes the implied sexual binaries of hetero- and homosexuality as being socially constructed and implemented. Bisexuality undermines and threatens the

¹ In this article, "queer" is used as an inclusive umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people to indicate a spectrum of sexualities and genders outside of heteronormative expectations, cisnormative expectations, and similarly normalised identities. "Bisexuality" is used to specifically refer to attraction to two or more genders, and is included within the umbrella term "queer" while focusing on a more specific marginalised identity.

sexual social structure and so its representation is both political and essential. While contemporary literature offers texts that nuance sexuality and bisexuality, it would do a disservice to portray representation of bisexuality as a linear evolution of pure progress. As Machado writes, “history is not simply made up of moments of triumph strung together like pearls. I didn’t know that large changes were made up of many small ones, and of moments of suffering and backsliding and incremental, selective progress; unnecessary sacrifices and the opportunistic, privileged and lucky walking forward over the vulnerable and the dead” (par. 19). In this article, bisexual representation will first be analysed in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, which offers not only representation but also conversations in-text concerning issues of sexuality and bisexuality. Following from this, Chinelo Okparanta’s novel *Under the Udala Trees*, a novel written in the context of the 2014 Nigerian criminalisation of same-sex relationships, will be discussed as a contemporary example of a text that engages with and legitimises conversations about exploring bisexuality beyond monosexual binaries, which allows for an openness to bisexuality even if the characters themselves are not ultimately bisexual. *Under the Udala Trees* will then be compared with texts which do not leave room for such nuance with characters who are potentially bisexual, beginning with Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (abbreviated here as *Well*), a seminal queer text written in England while the criminalisation of homosexual acts between men² was still in place. The argument proceeds to more contemporary bisexual erasure in American literature, as demonstrated by Rainbow Rowell’s *Carry On*, as well as in American popular culture, as demonstrated by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, in the interest of furthering the conversation not only about a lack of representation but also about the presence of representation, three contemporary American texts that were published after the legalisation of same-sex marriage in America will be analysed; *Labyrinth Lost* by Zoraida Córdova and *Jane, Unlimited* by Kristin Cashore showcase bisexual attraction in the protagonists even when labels are not explicitly claimed, and Jen Wilde’s *Queens of Geek* follows in the footsteps of *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* by having explicit conversations in the text that challenge hetero- and homonormativity and legitimise bisexuality.

Bisexual existence is political; or, more accurately, bisexual existence is politicised. Puzo writes about *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, a novel with Leo Proudhammer at the helm, as though such a novel could be anything but politicised³. This novel is political because Baldwin crafted it that way, certainly, but preconceived notions about what characters should default to – white, straight, etc. – mean that readers who are familiar with such cultural ideas will bring political assumptions to the text when the character does not default to such identities. Characters who exist outside of the normative default are politicised by virtue of their identities – people of colour, queer people, etc. Such representation is a political act and, when depicting bisexuality, this representation resists not only a heteronormative status quo, but also a homonormative status quo. In *The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure*, Kenji Yoshino writes

² While women were not directly subjected to Section 61 of the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861 or Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, this does speak to a legally codified queerphobic ethos, as made only more apparent by the novel’s obscenity trial and subsequent destruction in the United Kingdom.

³ To illustrate how America treated queer identity at this time, the American Psychiatric Association pathologized homosexuality in DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (of Mental Disorders)). In DSM-I (1952), “Homosexuality is listed as a sociopathic personality disturbance” (Cabaj), and this continued in DSM-II (1968).

that “even when the heterosexual presumption that all individuals are straight is suspended, it is replaced by the monosexual presumption that all individuals are straight or gay” (369). Further, Yoshino writes that

There are at least three⁴ different explanations for why bisexuals are being erased in popular culture... This political explanation posits that bisexuals are being erased because the two most powerful sexual orientation constituencies – self-identified straights and self-identified gays – have mutual investments in the erasure of bisexuals. I call this the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure. (388)

Such an epistemic contract simplifies a clear-cut delineation between two distinct binary options. The legitimisation of bisexuality (and, indeed, of any non-monosexual identity) would complicate the distinct compartmentalization of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Thirty-two years before Yoshino writes about this epistemic contract, Baldwin was working in opposition to it. In “Troubling the Canon,” Mark A. Gammon and Kirsten L. Isgro write that “queer theory and its politics seek to disrupt normative conceptions of identity as is typically practiced in both heterosexual and homosexual arrangements, to resist ‘regimes of the normal’ (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi)” (173). Yoshino argues that these “normative conceptions” have persisted for so long because of the “mutual investments” (388) that monosexuals have in such clearly delineated and separated sexual orientation identities. Baldwin is writing a character not only to “resist the ‘regimes of the normal’” (Gammon and Isgro 173) of heteronormative identity, but also to “resist the ‘regimes of the normal’” of homonormative identity. Leo’s position as an outsider in relation to multiple forms of normativity is an inherent part of his character as someone who transgresses society’s insistence on neat compartmentalization of identity. Such a character allows Baldwin the opportunity to more universally question, challenge, and critique all systems and societal structures.

In his review, Puzo calls Baldwin’s *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* “a novel of social protest”⁵ (par. 3), which, though used disparagingly in context, is not a false claim. Baldwin depicts two meaningful romantic relationships in Leo Proudhammer’s life: Barbara and Christopher. Leo’s lack of shame toward his bisexuality is, on its own, a form of social protest, a rejection of heteronormative and monosexist dictates from society. Further, this approach rejects tragedy and shame as inevitabilities of queer narratives. All of these factors, on their own, would offer a progressive novel with positive queer representation. Baldwin pushes the queer narrative further, having Leo explicitly come out to friend and fellow actor Barbara when they are young. The use of labels and the handling of this scene make obvious Baldwin’s rejection of bisexual erasure as well as the novel’s potency as a work of political art. In the course of this coming-out scene, Leo tries to convince Barbara that starting a relationship with him is ill-advised. Leo asks her, “Do you know I’m bisexual?” (274). This may seem a simple, straightforward moment, but in the very diction he employs, Baldwin acknowledges the validity of the label “bisexual,” and further legitimises this label through its use. This is not something that changes over the course of the novel, and it is not something that Leo himself second-guesses. Leo’s words are an assured declaration. This sort of representation is a political act in fiction, an act of creative resistance – it is a move toward challenging the

⁴ Yoshino divides these explanations into the ontic, cognitive, and political (389).

⁵ Baldwin’s essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” engages with the problematic aspects of “a novel of social protest” as tied to Black American identity.

status quo that would have bisexuality delegitimised because of the epistemic contract (in Yoshino's phraseology) that makes monosexuality easier to accept, even as homophobia continues to be an issue. Barbara's reaction also demonstrates an acknowledgement of bisexuality as a legitimate label, responding, "Yes. At least I supposed it... It just seemed logical to me... Normal" (274), further saying "I'm *glad* you know you're bisexual. Many men don't" (275). Not only does Barbara express nonchalant acceptance of who Leo is and what he defines as his sexuality; she also acknowledges that heteronormativity (and, potentially, homonormativity) cause bisexual men to repress their sexuality, and, in her dialogue, she is able to articulate one form of bisexual erasure that Leo has escaped.

In his review, however, Puzo takes issue with Barbara and her confession of love to Leo after his heart attack, which takes place many years after their conversation about Leo's bisexuality. Puzo writes that "Barbara gives this speech [declaring her love for Leo] at the age of 39; she is rich, she is famous, she has been presented as a reasonably intelligent woman. She has known Leo for 20 years. And yet we are asked to believe that the only man in the whole world she can love forever is a Negro homosexual actor" (par. 11). Puzo's review, overall, has a disparaging tone, about this novel but also about Baldwin's fiction in general. However, Puzo does something here that is very specific and, while he is not discussing the coming-out scene, Puzo's word choice harkens back to it. Note that Puzo refers to Leo, while discussing Barbara's love for him dismissively, as "a Negro homosexual actor" while, in paragraph eight of his review, Puzo clearly states that "by this time Leo is bisexual." There are multiple layers to this kind of 'slip-up' that labels Leo as homosexual. The tone here suggests that Puzo is incredulous that a rich, famous, "reasonably intelligent" woman (and here, this should be read as *white* woman, "white as snow," Puzo writes only three sentences earlier) can love a man like Leo – "a Negro homosexual actor." This is meant to paint Leo as unworthy of such attention. And what does Puzo do in the course of arguing that Leo is such an unworthy person who can be "the only man in the whole world she can love forever"? He describes Leo with the two factors that make such love lack verisimilitude in his eyes – he is Black and he is queer. And, on a subtler level, he is erasing Leo's bisexuality that Baldwin so deliberately puts on the page. This makes it seem like Leo, as an alleged homosexual, can never return the love or attraction to Barbara, but it also works to undermine any nuance that the character might have, as a means to further Puzo's argument that Baldwin's characters are "flat as cardboard" (par. 11). Puzo even goes so far as to say that "Baldwin glorifies a sexual Uncle Tom" by having Barbara love Leo.

Puzo makes these kinds of arguments in order to dismiss *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* as "a propaganda novel" (par. 2). He is using identity factors to deride Baldwin's characters while insisting that Baldwin's use of identity in the text makes it "a propaganda novel." Puzo concludes his review by writing,

It is possible that Baldwin believes this is not tactically the time for art, that polemical fiction can help the Negro cause more, that art is too strong, too gamy a dish for a prophet to offer now. And so he gives us propagandistic fiction, a readable book with a positive social value. If this is what he wants, he has been successful. But perhaps it is now time for Baldwin to forget the black revolution and start worrying about himself as an artist, who is the ultimate revolutionary. (par. 13)

Not only does Puzo dismiss the novel's artistic value because of its political content; he actively only engages with the aspect of race in this conclusion and altogether refuses to acknowledge the aspect of sexuality⁶, even as he has made such acknowledgments elsewhere. Baldwin, however, argues in "The Creative Process" that the very function of art is to engage with society:

I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own. For the truth, in spite of appearances and all our hopes, is that everything is always changing and the measure of our maturity as nations and as men is how well prepared we are to meet these changes, and further, to use them for our health. (670)

Gammon and Isgro's argument about "disrupt[ing] normative conceptions of identity" and "resist[ing] 'regimes of the normal'" (173) is ever-relevant. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin resists "regimes of the normal" against heterosexuality and homosexuality (and white supremacy). This "warring" is necessary to fulfil "the artist's responsibility to his society" (Baldwin 670). In this framing of art, Puzo's assessment that politics in novels only provide social value and not artistic value completely misunderstands the concept of what the purpose of art is. In "The Creative Process," Baldwin actually pairs this social value with artistic value as inextricably linked. Representation – of the world, of the othered – becomes a necessary artistic duty. It is an issue of representation, but also of change. Art, then, is meant to challenge the "regimes of normal" and push society forward.

In *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing*, creative writing pedagogy scholar Janelle Adsit addresses contempt toward politics in art. Of craft texts, Adsit writes that they "warn against didactic or polemical approaches to creative writing; they warn against explicitly engaging in 'political' issues in literary work" (51). In the classroom and its approaches, Adsit writes, "student-writers may be discouraged from having an intention for their literary work that is activist in nature" (52). But literature is a part of popular culture that can challenge societal underpinnings, simultaneously working toward aesthetic ends as art while also working toward political ends; the latter is something dismissed in some literary circles as propaganda, as though long-esteemed works such as Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" or Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* were devoid of any political function or applications. With bisexual representation specifically, the political lies in the verisimilitude – this representation acknowledges bisexuality and, when done thoughtfully, displays nuance and depth. Gammon and Isgro argue that "Bisexuality became visible through its exposure and emergence in popular media and culture... The 1990s also witnessed not only an increase in media exposure for bisexuality, but also the first sustained and critical

⁶ The contemporaneous prevalence of the Civil Rights Movement (or, as Puzo writes in the opening of this review, "the black revolution that is now changing our society" (par. 1)) and Baldwin's participation in the movement seem to have influenced Puzo's focus on race here. Contemporary queer rights movements are often traced back to the Stonewall Riots, which didn't occur until 1969, and thus sexuality may not have, at the time that Puzo wrote this review, seemed as essential to the review's conclusion. The complexities of the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation problematise moments where Puzo sets aside considerations of sexuality in favour of discussing his assumptions about Baldwin's approach to "the Negro cause." Most of Puzo's engagement with sexuality pertains to his incredulous analysis of Barbara's romantic and sexual involvement with Leo as a white woman.

investigation of bisexual representations among activists and academics” (162). So how much has representation really changed since 1968?

The tendency to portray contemporary culture as more progressive fifty years after this novel’s publication may lead to a dismissal of the relevance of such considerations. However, nuanced bisexual representation is anything but guaranteed. For instance, Jillian Todd Weiss writes in “GL vs. BT” about the process of “Questioning whether a photographer can capture on film a ‘bisexual wedding’ or ‘bisexual family’ as easily as a ‘lesbian wedding’ or a ‘gay family,’” further writing that “one writer noted that bisexuality challenges our monosexual culture’s assumption that sexuality can be identified by appearance or by the gender of one’s partners (Trnka and Tucker 1995)” (30). One easily accessible example of such bisexual erasure in favour of monosexual identification in popular culture comes from the Twitter account Bisexuals of the Blade (@fancy_foxtrot). Before their Twitter account started in December 2019, a friend posted a picture of their wedding as “a lesbian wedding” (@soysaucetime); these brides were labelled lesbians before starting their own account. On January 2, 2020, these women had to clarify that they were not lesbians, writing of @soysaucetime that “she was unaware of our sexuality at the time of posting. None of our friends would engage in bi-erasure, and we wanted to clear up this misunderstanding as soon as possible” (@fancy_foxtrot). Weiss’ point about the difficulty of visually capturing bisexuality is made obvious in the assumptions about the photos of Bisexuals of the Blades’ wedding, and it clarifies the exigency of well-defined and realistic bisexual representation which “challenges our monosexual culture’s assumption that sexuality can be identified by appearance or by the gender of one’s partners” (Weiss 30). Assumptions of monosexuality are easier to make when bisexual representation is erased or otherwise disregarded.

In 2015, Chinelo Okparanta published *Under the Udala Trees*. Her author’s note cites the 2014 Nigerian law “criminalizing same-sex relationships and the support of such relationships” (325), situating the exigency of such political art within a very specific context. As Adsit writes, “there is a preponderance of activist work in our contemporary literary milieu that addresses specific audiences, that seeks to intervene in contemporary political situations, that advocates on behalf of communities” (52). In *Under the Udala Trees*, protagonist Ijeoma, who is queer, faces “disciplinary forces” (Rodriguez 29) through the man whose servant she was as a young girl, and through her mother’s attempted use of the Bible to ‘fix’ Ijeoma’s queerness. It is, however, unsuccessful, and as an adult she takes up a secret relationship with a woman: Ndidi. At a secret queer gathering, their community is attacked, and after the attack is over, they see one of their friends “in the midst of the logs, burning and burning and turning to ashes right before our eyes” (Okparanta 208). This moment of fear becomes a catalyst, compelling Ndidi to simultaneously push Ijeoma away and attempt to protect her. As a result, Ijeoma’s trajectory is changed, shifted, and complicated afterward by the potential for bisexuality. This is made possible in the narrative because of Ijeoma’s openness to exploring her sexuality, and specifically being open to a possibility outside of monosexuality such as bisexuality. Ijeoma subverts the idea of monosexuality as default or as the only true expression of sexuality even if, as an individual, she does turn out to be a lesbian and not a bisexual woman.

Under the Udala Trees is narrated by Ijeoma, and so the reader is privy to the thoughts of the person being pushed toward a heteronormative alternative for their alleged comfort. Ndidi, when she hears

that a man is interested in Ijeoma, tells her “Go out with him. See how you feel. This kind of life is not for everyone. People like us are getting killed” (Okparanta 214). Her words betray the first layer of fear that Ndidi is trying to leave unspoken in this scene: seeing her friend burn made the potential violence that she and Ijeoma narrowly escaped a looming, ever-present threat. Ndidi is afraid of Ijeoma getting hurt and seems to genuinely want to protect her. When Ndidi asks if Ijeoma has ever tried being with a boy, Ijeoma narrates “Of course I had never tried being with a boy. How could she imply that I even had a choice in the matter? ...if I had had any attraction at all to boys, would it not have expressed itself by now? ... She was the one I loved, the one who had a hold on my heart. It infuriated me that she was trying to push me away” (214). Such nuance problematizes the choice of monosexual characters who push bisexual or potentially bisexual characters from queer relationships that they chose into heteronormative relationships because they are ‘easier.’ Societies where queerness is condemned are, by design, less obstructive for heterosexual people, and thus heteronormativity is purposefully alluring. This means that bisexual people not only destabilise the binary that reinforces heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as other, but that bisexual people also have a theoretical way out of society’s condemnation. The fear of a bisexual partner’s escape into normative society further complicates the position of bisexuals in queer society. In this fear-driven form of queer sociality, these monosexual queer characters might become unwitting tools of social control that reinforce rigid binaries and boundaries of ‘normative heterosexual’ and ‘othered homosexual,’ once again erasing bisexuality by reinforcing the narrative of ‘choosing a side.’

Ndidi explains that if Ijeoma tries one date with a man, then “I’ll also know and will never have to worry about a boy stealing you away... It will be all the confirmation I need” (215). This makes clear the second layer of fear that is happening in this moment. Underneath the immediate life-threatening concern that the burning inspired, Ndidi, whether she is aware of it or not, is afraid that Ijeoma is either bisexual and “confused” (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 298), or else a “closeted... straight” (298). These fears make Ndidi believe Ijeoma might leave her for an easier heteronormative life. One might consider the biphobic fears articulated by Yoshino, which bisexual and queer scholar April S. Callis also indicates in “Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory,” namely the mentality that holds “bisexuals as potential deserters who may give up their loyalty to the gay cause because they decide to be in heterosexual relationships” (302). Ndidi’s motivation might be read as meant to save her partner from the hardships of queer life. However, another reading might suggest a self-imposed queer tragedy. This sort of reading might portray Ndidi as a martyr figure victimised by heteronormativity, or it might portray her as cynical about how the world works.

Ijeoma seems certain in her narration that she is a monosexual lesbian. Still, she is swept up in the courtship with the man and tries to morph into a more socially acceptable role. Ijeoma does not do this simply to live in the closet; she makes an honest attempt to question, engage with, and explore her sexuality and its boundaries. She demonstrates in this process that, even though she is fairly certain that she is gay and not bisexual, she is open to different possibilities for her sexuality. While Leo is a subversive figure in his acceptance of his bisexuality, Ijeoma is in some ways similarly subversive as a lesbian because she dignifies something outside of monosexuality with her efforts. Ndidi’s words seem partially motivated by

biphobia, but Ijeoma herself challenges a rigid binary of sexuality, finding a productive nuance to the circumstances of biphobia.

Ijeoma does escape what turns out to be compulsory heteronormativity. She marries her husband after Ndidi's suggestion that she try dating men. Ijeoma's husband becomes cruel and controlling, and Ijeoma has a dream in which she sees her daughter hanging from a tree. When Ijeoma wakes, she narrates, "It was then that I made the realization: Chidinma and I were both choking under the weight of something larger than us, something heavy and weighty, the weight of tradition and superstition and of all our legends" (Okparanta 312). Ijeoma only tried heteronormativity to please Ndidi, and then genuinely tried to make this relationship work, but she and her daughter became trapped by this "weight of tradition." This "weight" can be interpreted in myriad ways, but is perhaps most relevant here in terms of the traditions of marriage and heterosexuality. This sense that she and her daughter are choking is what convinces Ijeoma to leave. As Ndidi's fear motivated Ijeoma to test the boundaries of her sexuality, Ijeoma's fear for herself and her daughter motivated her escape from the heteronormative "weight of tradition." The novel ends with her and Ndidi returning to one another and continuing their relationship in secret for their own safety. It is not an idealised happily ever after, but it does end with the queer relationship that is desired by both characters intact. Accomplishing this is, in itself, a measure of subversive potential. It provides an opportunity to explore the ways that narrative can arrive at subversive iterations of queerness, even when that queerness is mostly closeted.

Considered in relation to a much earlier queer text, Radclyffe Hall's 1928 *Well*, Okparanta offers a much more nuanced representation of bisexuality. In Hall's novel, Stephen, the gender nonconforming lesbian protagonist, is in a relationship with Mary. Towards the end of *Well*, Martin, the man who previously proposed to and was rejected by Stephen, arrives in France. After noticing Mary's attraction to Martin (an attraction that Mary never attempts to act on), Stephen decides to lie to Mary by claiming that she has cheated on her with another woman. Stephen ostensibly does this for Mary's own good, to drive her into Martin's arms and away from the hardships of queer life, even though they have found safety and comfort together in France. Stephen fears that Mary will leave and hurt her as her previous romantic interest Angela did (by turning to a man), and so Stephen makes the choice for her. This fear is rooted in both the character's history and in cultural assumptions about bisexuality. In "Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters," Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell point to stereotypes of bisexuality, citing that "contemporary culture paints bis as promiscuous, greedy, indecisive, duplicitous, confused, fickle, attention-seeking and, ultimately, closeted gays (or straights)" (298). These connotations of bisexuality are the sorts of associations that one might make of Mary as a bisexual character; it can be read as Stephen's reasoning as well, especially since her history with Angela as a bisexual figure was one marked by Angela's "duplicitous," "fickle," and "attention-seeking" nature. Stephen's fears in this matter are not without a rationale, but they are unduly applied to Mary purely by virtue of the latter's bisexuality. Stephen is enacting a self-fulfilling prophecy with Mary; while the fulfilment of a queer tragedy is realised when a bisexual female character leaves a woman for a man, this is complicated by the fact that the

bisexual woman was manipulated into this choice. Even though *Well* has a bisexual character and *Under the Udala Trees* does not, the latter's narrative takes a more careful approach to representation; while Ndidi acts as Stephen does, Ijeoma's sexual exploration is made in good faith and legitimises bisexuality as a queer identity, whereas Stephen's point of view does not afford Mary the same legitimisation of her queerness, seeing her bisexuality instead as a way to 'opt out' and assimilate into heterosexual society.

Fictional texts such as *Well* and *Under the Udala Trees* can have a role in either reshaping or reinforcing cultural expectations. It is vital that bisexual erasure and bisexual representation in literature be considered in terms of the knowledge production role that they play in society as a part of popular culture. As Yoshino writes,

The epistemic contract is epistemic insofar as it relates to the nature of knowledge. It is a social arrangement about what can be acknowledged or known. This arrangement arises between groups that have distinct but overlapping interests in the promulgation or repression of certain kinds of knowledge... I focus on the latter – that is, on an epistemic contract that relates to what cannot [be acknowledged or known]. (392)

Keeping all of these factors in mind, it would still be imprudent to create a historical narrative of pure progress of the representation of bisexuality; in truth, such a narrative would not only be inaccurate, but would also remove the exigency that makes nuanced bisexual representation so necessary in contemporary literature. To echo Adsit's concerns about a "ban [of] political writing from the study of creative writing," misunderstanding the political potency of bisexual representation works to "potentially silence or ignore the exigencies that give rise to these forms of art-making" (Adsit 52). In a review titled "Bisexual Erasure and Monosexism in Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On*," Casey Stepaniuk writes about the lack of acknowledgement of bisexuality in the 2015 novel *Carry On* as a viable identity or identity label; the character in question, Simon, is pressured into 'making a choice,' a monosexist notion that reinforces rigid binary boundaries of sexuality. Or, as Yoshino asserts, "Self-described bisexuality is thus seen not as a stable individual identity but a place from which a stable monosexual identity is acknowledged or chosen" (396). Stepaniuk writes of *Carry On* that "the last comment about sexuality is where Simon flippantly says 'I guess I am gay'" (par. 7). Stepaniuk goes on to write that "What's worse is that Rowell is actually using monosexism as a narrative device: a lot of the tension of whether Simon could possibly reciprocate Baz's feelings hinges on the fact that he has/had a girlfriend and therefore could never also like a boy... The romance is essentially structured around the erasure of bisexuality" (par. 8). In "GL vs. BT," Weiss writes that "In the gay and lesbian community, it was widely assumed that bisexuals were confused about their sexual identity, and that bisexuality was a pathological state. From this point of view, 'confusion' is literally a built-in feature of 'being bisexual'" (44).

This sort of "unequivocally 'gay now' narrative" (Stepaniuk par. 9) is one that can be seen in popular culture that otherwise seeks to represent queer characters. The phrase "gay now" can be traced back to Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Queer character Willow assures Anya in the episode "Triangle" (which aired in 2001) that she will not cause Anya's boyfriend to cheat because she is "gay now!" As I wrote in "Exploring Bisexual Tension in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," Willow's "season five 'Triangle' declaration of

‘gay now’ feels like a tight clinging to a label rather than a genuine expression of her sexuality” (Carroll par. 12)⁷. This assertion erases bisexuality as an unnamed and unexplored possibility, in spite of Willow’s previous attraction to at least two men. Such a move, in both *Carry On* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is a demonstration of Juana Maria Rodriguez’s assertion in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, where Rodriguez writes about how in long-term relationships “heterosexual social norms generally demand that we erase past loves, naming them... developmental phases” (52). Such social norms are especially loaded in terms of bisexuality, which is itself often dismissed as a developmental phase. But the insistence that “gay now” equates to a lack of promiscuity also encourages an epistemology that Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell articulate, wherein bisexuals are associated with socially unacceptable traits that make them inherently unable to commit in monogamous relationships (298).

However, to provide a counterbalance, bisexual representation is gaining traction in terms of its presence on the page, as well as its nuance. Criticisms of literature and popular culture such as *Carry On* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are not intended to minimise such progress, but rather to clarify the contemporary milieu in such a way as to make clear the political – and politicised – nature of including bisexuality in narratives. In short, representation of bisexuality (and especially nuanced bisexuality) is still not unequivocally commonplace. In 2016’s *Labyrinth Lost*, Zoraida Córdova’s protagonist, Alex, is a bisexual character who, through the course of the novel, has crushes on both Nova, the boy who eventually betrays her and her family, and Rishi, her best friend. Of Nova, Alex narrates “His eyes are so bright, like tiny stars gracing his brown skin. It’s hard not to notice how pretty they are. But Nova said it himself. I can’t just go running for something because I think it’s pretty. After seeing my mom hurt so much, I told myself I’d never get fooled. My dad had pretty eyes too” (122). Later in the novel, after being reunited with Rishi, Alex tells her “I have all these feelings that I can’t sort out. I think I’ve felt it since the day you found me. But when this is all over, we’ll figure it out, okay?” (274–275), after which, the pair kiss. While the terms “bisexual” and “bisexuality” are not used here, the presence of a legitimate and legitimised sexuality that is not monosexual is obvious in the dual attractions that Alex experiences.

A similar representation of bisexuality appears in Kristin Cashore’s 2017 *Jane, Unlimited*. The protagonist, Jane, finds both Ravi, a young man, and Ivy, a young woman, attractive. In at least one alternate universe in the book, she is engaged in a sexual relationship with Ravi. In some universes, she does not conclude the narrative in a relationship with either character. In several universes, including the first and last ones featured in the book, she does end in a romantic relationship with Ivy. Although “bisexuality” is never mentioned explicitly, when Ivy is explaining Ravi’s sexuality, Jane thinks of her own: “Jane gets being attracted to different kinds of people. To men and women, to people of different shapes and sizes, looks, personalities; she gets not having one type. But there are certainly qualities she prefers” (77). With Alex in *Labyrinth Lost* and Jane in *Jane, Unlimited*, it is possible to read their sexualities as not

⁷ One might also consider Whedon’s May 2020 comments about Willow’s sexuality, and Vaneet Mehta’s response to them in the Metro article “Buffy The Vampire Slayer’s Willow deserved to be openly bisexual,” both of which demonstrate how this particular representation in popular culture and its wider implications are still being discussed nearly twenty years later.

bisexual, but instead with a label such as pansexuality⁸. Reading with different labels, such as pansexuality, would still be true to these texts; at any rate, whether these characters are read as *specifically* bisexual or not, they are nuanced, thoughtfully written characters who are neither heterosexual nor homosexual, representing people outside of the monosexual mould.

While *Labyrinth Lost* demonstrates bisexuality and *Jane, Unlimited* describes bisexuality, Jen Wilde's 2017 novel *Queens of Geek* applies the identity label while challenging – and reinforcing – bisexuality as a legitimate identity. This novel has some of the same benefits for bisexual representation as James Baldwin's 1968 *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Leo, already self-assured in his bisexuality, tells Barbara, a potential romantic partner, about his identity. In *Queens of Geek*, Charlie's boyfriend Reese claims "I'm not a homophobe or anything... I'm all for gay marriage and all that, but bisexuality? I just don't believe it's real... I just don't believe in bisexuals" (105). This frames bisexuality in terms of a heterosexual man's inability to believe in bisexuality, which demonstrates the way that conversations surrounding queerness can be presented through a privileged lens of someone who is heterosexual and monosexual. This aspect of whether or not one might "believe" in bisexuality relegates the lived experiences and identities of non-monosexuality to how easily a monosexual person can conceptualise and accept such experiences and identities. The validity of the experiences and identities are, in this framework, contingent on whether or not monosexual people buy into the premise that sexualities outside of monosexuality exist. Representation of bisexuality in literature and popular culture legitimises bisexuality, working as an explicit or implicit argument against the need for heterosexual or homosexual people to "believe" in bisexuality for it to exist. Where Barbara is understanding and accepting of Leo immediately, Reese is a figure who espouses the kinds of biphobic and bisexual erasing attitudes that Charlie and her friend, Taylor, can then argue against. Taylor retorts "What do you mean you don't *believe* in bisexuals? They're not mythical creatures... They're real people, just like you" (105). Charlie then says "Reese, I'm bisexual. Do you believe me?" Reese tells her that she can't be bisexual because she's with him, and she's never been with a girl. Charlie says "I'm still bi" (106). Wilde offers the unique opportunity to challenge Charlie's sexuality from a biased standpoint and have her assert the stability of that identity. This combines the label with an assured identity and directly works against the stereotype that bisexuality is a refusal to commit to a more stable sexuality.

Bisexuality in fiction is still political, and politicised. It operates as a form of creative resistance against the "regimes of normal" (Warner qtd. in Gammon and Isgro 173) and the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure. In "What Does Pride Mean Now?" Carmen Maria Machado writes that "Pride should not be a smug acknowledgment of a job well done, or a job that's done at all. If you understand the work to be over, you are mistaken... History has opened a door for you. To go through it, you need two things: to know the world is not enough, and to do something about it" (par. 23). While strides have been made in bisexual representation, it is important to maintain a broader understanding of its place in contemporary culture. Bisexuality is not universally accepted, either by heterosexual or homosexual people. It is still questioned and challenged. It is still dismissed, both in literature and in life. But as representation increases, as it is

⁸ A term such as "bisexual+" or "bi+" might be used here as an umbrella term for sexualities that are not monosexual.

made more ubiquitous and written with nuance and depth, it moves the culture in the direction of acceptance.

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