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present tense
bisexuality

STEVEN ANGELIDES

A History of Bisexuality

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For many theorists of sexuality, bisexuals don't exist in the here and now. Michael du Plessis has argued that in Freud's sexual schema, and its later reworking by French feminism, bisexuality is always 'out of time', 'always before, after, or outside (rather than alongside) the imposition of cultural order'.¹ This tendency to banish bisexuality to a pre-subjective past or a utopian future poses particular challenges for the writing of a history of bisexuality.

In writing a history of this lack of historical manifestation, Steven Angelides presents a provocative and ambitious account of bisexuality from its modern origins in theories of evolution, through sexology and psychoanalysis, to its scant mentions in the canon of queer theory. Drawing on the projects of gay and lesbian history and queer theory, Angelides deploys a 'queer deconstructive methodology' to produce 'not a social history of the bisexual movement, a history of bisexuality as an autonomous identity, a reading of bisexuality in historical texts of sexuality, or an attempt to determine what bisexuality is'. (13) Rather, *A History of Bisexuality* traces the systematic ways in which bisexuality has functioned as a non-identity necessary for the production of the heterosexual–homosexual binary. The focus of the book is on how notions of bisexuality and bisexual identity have come to be 'unthought, made invisible, trivial, insubstantial, irrelevant' in the construction of modern sexuality itself.²

In the last decade there has been a spate of publications about bisexuality, primarily from Britain and the USA, culminating in the Routledge *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (1999). Often inspired by burgeoning bisexual organisations,

the focus of much of this work has been on legitimating bisexuality as a sexual identity and an object of academic inquiry, typically through highlighting bisexuality's transgressive potential or its universal nature. Angelides avoids many of the theoretically simplistic formulations of bisexuality that characterised the work of theorists in the 1990s. In its breadth and attention to historical detail, *A History of Bisexuality* represents a significant advance on earlier work. In particular, the book's central claim that the erasure of bisexuality is necessary for the production of modern sexuality has significant implications for contemporary and historical studies of sexuality.

Angelides's history takes as its starting point the absence of bisexuality from both queer theory and gay and lesbian history. Against the views of theorists such as Eve Sedgwick and Lee Edelman that bisexuality functions to reinforce the homosexual–heterosexual binary, Angelides suggests that bisexuality has a role to play in its deconstruction. An extended discussion of the invention of bisexuality as a form or primitive subjectivity in mid-nineteenth-century biology and evolutionary theory establishes bisexuality's status as a primitive form of subjectivity. Detailed examinations of Freudian theory, the work of Alfred Kinsey, and the discourses of the anti-psychiatry movement and gay and lesbian liberation all confirm the thesis that bisexuality is consistently erased in order to preserve the intelligibility of the heterosexual–homosexual binarism. In the second half of the book, bisexuality's absence or premature elision is noted in the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and other queer theorists.

One of the strengths of Angelides's account is its attention to historical detail. This is evidenced by the fact that his argument begins with theories of evolution in the mid-nineteenth century, unlike the Routledge reader, which begins its genealogy with the first volume of Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, published in 1897. This discussion of bisexuality's roots in biology and evolutionary theory is powerful because it provides historical evidence for Angelides's claim that bisexuality is central to the constitution of modern sexuality in its nascent years.

The OED dates the first use of the term 'bisexuality' to 1859, the same year as the publication of Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*, by an anatomist named Robert Bentley Todd. Todd's detailed descriptions of the configuration of the male and female human reproductive apparatus in his *Anatomy and Physiology*, along with Darwin's popular presentation of his theory of evolution, helped inaugurate a distinctively modern bisexuality. This modern bisexuality broke with an earlier, largely theological, tradition that had existed since the early seventeenth century, describing the human race as 'bisexed' or 'bisexous'. It also reconfigured the very old tradition of the homo androgynus, that is 'that the original man was bi-sexual', described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1824, calling to mind ancient Greek and Near Eastern mythological thinking about primordial androgyny.³ As Eli Zaretsky suggests, 'bisexuality was an ancient idea that had been reborn in many late nineteenth-century cultural spheres'.⁴ Bisexuality was modern precisely because it was primitive—it helped to anchor an enlightened and civilised sexuality by being its

undifferentiated and undeveloped ancestor, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically.

A History of Bisexuality lays out this history in detail, emphasising the importance of bisexuality's modern origins in biology and evolutionary theory to the development of Freudian thought. From the middle of the nineteenth century the term 'bisexuality' is used in the fields of anatomy and physiology to refer to forms of life that are sexually undifferentiated or thought to exhibit characteristics of both sexes. By the early years of the twentieth century, bisexuality was used to describe a combination of masculinity and femininity in an individual—psychical rather than physical traits—and had also come to signify a sexual attraction to individuals of both sexes. While the three meanings of bisexuality (a combination of male–female, masculine–feminine or heterosexual–homosexual) have different histories, they are far from distinct. This range of historical models of bisexuality continues to impact on how bisexuality is articulated. As Angelides notes, 'In contemporary discourses of sexuality ... what bisexuality does and what bisexuality might do are in large measure conditioned by what it *has done* and *has made happen* within discourses inherited from the past.' (191) Even Woody Allen's oft quoted observation that being bisexual doubles your chance of a date on Saturday night suggests the continuing influence of evolutionary theory on the articulation of bisexuality.

The most recent historically orientated research on bisexuality has been the work of British academic Merl Storr. Aside from editing the Routledge reader, Storr has written on the relationship between bisexuality, race and sexology.

In a 1999 article she argues that one of the most pressing questions for bisexual theory is an analysis of its relationship to postmodernity, as the historical location of the emergence of bisexual identity.⁵ Storr suggests that bisexual theorists have overplayed the resistive and disruptive potential of bisexuality and have failed to account for its relationship to capitalism and processes of commodification. It is a limitation of Angelides's book, albeit an understandable one, that the recent emergence of a highly commodified version of bisexuality is not taken into account. A footnote to the book adds: 'the notion of bisexuality as a superficial fashion trend and marketing tool is not discussed any further'. (209) This dismissal, however, implies that the sphere of culture simply recirculates the truths of the human sciences or reproduces the capitalist relations at its base. Instead, the diverse appearance of bisexuality in popular culture—in films such as *Chasing Amy* (1997) or *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1998), or in recent television drama and talk shows—demonstrate that in late-capitalist postmodernity, bisexuality is both repressed *and* popular, erased *and* highly visible. Viewing culture as a commodified, yet contested and productive, space is essential for understanding contemporary bisexuality.

A History of Bisexuality engages the politics of the contemporary bisexual movements, cautioning against unelaborated notions of bisexuality and the uncritical celebration of the transgressive nature of bisexuality, while offering qualified support for the production of bisexual identities in the present tense. Angelides argues that bisexuality can present a challenge to the fixity of the hetero–homo opposition, that 'the

politicisation of bisexuality in the 1990s and beyond represents more than an extremely useful countermove for its historical erasure'. (195) In this he retains the hope of much bisexual theory that bisexuality in the present tense can provoke the collapse of sexual boundaries and produce 'a crisis of sexual identity'. (17) Through this engagement with contemporary theory, Angelides refuses the social and intellectual marginalisation of bisexuality.

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1. Michael du Plessis, 'Blatantly Bisexual; or, Unthinking Queer Theory', in Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore (eds), *Representing Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, New York University Press, New York, 1996, p. 29.
2. du Plessis, p. 21.
3. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, E. Moxon, London, 1866.
4. Eli Zaretsky, 'Bisexuality, Capitalism and the Ambivalent Legacy of Psychoanalysis', *New Left Review*, no. 223, May–June, 1997, p. 77.
5. Merl Storr, 'Postmodern Bisexualities', *Sexualities*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1999, pp. 309–25.