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The Price of ‘Community’ From Bisexual/Biracial Women’s Perspectives

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When the words ‘identity’ or ‘community’ are evoked, a homogenizing process forms for the sake of community coherence. This article is based upon interviews with nine bisexual and mixed race participants about their conceptualization of identity-based communities. All participants expressed discontent with the ‘established’ gay and lesbian community for being monolithically White in racial composition and also biphobic. More than one half of the participants had been involved in queer Asian American women’s organizations, within which they felt the least conflict and the most inclusion. The ideals of identity-based organizations have only sporadically manifested themselves for the bisexual-biracial women who are otherwise marginalized, silenced or excluded. Because their diverse needs and identities are not represented within these organizations, many of the participants felt they gave more than they received. Finding that communities based upon narrow identity clusters were not ideal, the participants created diverse communities based upon their expanded interests and identities. These bisexual-biracial women have revolutionized their personal concepts of community as they integrated the ideals of identity politics yet moved to include individuals who share similar progressive politics, responsibility and acceptance.

KEYWORDS bisexual, biracial, feminism, gender identity, community

I know that I don’t belong to “a” community. I belong to communities, because there are different communities that incorporate different parts of my identity and my being and there are some that incorporate more of those parts than others. (Bisexual Anthology Collective, 1995, p. 215)
When the words ‘identity’ or ‘community’ are evoked, a homogenizing process begins in which individuals are expected to forsake difference for the sake of community coherence. A unifying experience is sought out to legitimize the identity, the experiences stemming from it and the need for collectivity. Within any identity-based community, those who differ too much from the ‘group platform’ are silenced internally or externally, branded as traitors of sorts, or given token status to speak for ‘difference’—yet often they remain unheard (Uttal, 1990, pp. 317–320). Trinh (1990) questioned the use of ‘difference’ within identity politics:

Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid of difference. . . . Furthermore, where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color, by language, by geography, by nation or by political affinity? What about those, for example, with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? (pp. 372–374)

Although Trinh argued that difference is often used as “a tool of segregation,” she implied that it can instead be a “tool of creativity” if used properly, a meaningful concept for bisexual-biracial women who aspire to formulate ‘community’ based upon their social location.

Where does this need for an identity-based community come from in our current cultural context? The new social movements of the 1960s were largely based on identities such as gender, race, sexuality and disability. In contrast, ‘old social movements’ have been based on class divisions. Crenshaw (1995) credited the development of identity politics to the women’s movement of the 1970s. As Crenshaw stated:

This process of recognizing as social and systematic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African-Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development. (p. 157)

Therefore, it is a natural desire for some people with marginalized identities to seek out others with similar configurations. Identity-based communities usually focus on a singular identity, whereas other identities are obscured. For women who have multiple identities, this is often a hardship, especially in light of their often urgent desire for community and acceptance.

This article is based upon interviews with nine bisexual, mixed-race participants about how they conceptualize identity-based communities. These nine interviewees were spread out geographically across the United States,
so the interviews were conducted over the phone. Interviewees were located using a snowball method of recruitment, as well as through identity-based organizations. Although there was a chance that women participants would be reluctant to speak on the phone about their sexuality (Meyer, Rossano, Ellis, & Bradford, 2002, p. 142), this was not an issue in this case because most of the women are out and engaged in activity around their identities. The phone interviews took between 1 and 3 hours, were transcribed fully and analyzed for common themes.

The vast majority were mixed Asian American and White: Lucki, Kelli, Karin, Sharon, Eve and Steph. Paunani and Sabrina come from mixed race cultures, Hawaii and the Philippines, respectively. One interviewee, Janet, was raised in Singapore and only found out that her father was White when she was a teenager. Although people had questioned her racial background throughout her life, she had considered herself Singaporean until this discovery. Lucki was living on the East Coast and is Chilean and Chinese, yet her appearance was primarily read as Asian American. Karin is Sri Lankan and White, yet she appeared Latino, and because she spoke Spanish, she was embraced by the Latino community. None of the interviewees were mixed with a Native American or African American background; therefore, these interviewees primarily represent those who are mixed with the dominant racial group in the United States.

The interviewees desired to move away from further segregation or additive models of identity-based organizations, in which difference is ‘managed.’ Instead, difference is not something to be ‘managed’ but can act as a force that revolutionizes identity politics and communities. The experiences of the bisexual-biracial women interviewees have been problematic because of the ‘single identity’ model inherent within identity politics. By examining community from a multiple-identity perspective, the concept can be radically reenvisioned.

BISEXUAL-BIRACIAL WOMEN IN IDENTITY-BASED COMMUNITIES

In analyzing the position of people of color within the ‘bisexual community,’ Rust (1996) argued that painful decisions are often associated with the (perceived) necessity of choosing between an ethnic/racial community and the (White) queer community. She pointed out that of those bisexuals she surveyed, the Whites drew no connection between their racial identity and their sexual identity nor did they feel their racial background was affected by their sexual identity (p. 71). For them, exploring their sexual identity was often the first time in which they had felt assigned to a minority identity that was stigmatized (Herek, 2002). However, bisexuals of color reported feelings of marginalization in both communities because they felt compelled to divide themselves along identity lines and leave part of themselves “at the
door.” This feeling of division along identity lines was expressed by all nine of the interviewees. It was a rare and valued experience for the interviewees to discover an identity-based community which they felt was a near perfect ‘fit.’ Indeed, in most organizations in which the interviewees participated, they felt a lack of connection, yet they remained active instead of dropping out entirely.

All participants expressed discontent with the ‘established’ gay and lesbian community for being monolithically White in racial composition. The participants also experienced biphobia within the gay and lesbian community, another disincentive for involvement. Lucki, who lives near a large and established lesbian community on the East Coast, stated that “it’s really white, it’s really lesbian and it’s really separatist. None of which really work for me.” Rust (1995) captured the tone of this conflict between lesbians and bisexual women in *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty and Revolution*, based upon surveys of lesbian and bisexual women. Rust (1996) was unable to capture the racial dimensions, however, because her sample itself was 92% White, with only 3.4% African American, 2% Indian, with the rest belonging to “other racial groups” (p. 42).

Race and bisexuality represent the location of exclusion for the participants in their relationship to lesbian and gay communities. They stress that their issues around their racial/ethnic and bisexual identities are often marginalized. Because of this lack of racial inclusion, the majority of the interviewees were involved in several organizations. All of them stated that they view their multiple identities as connected, and yet the organizations in which they have participated are fragmented across demarcated lines of sexuality and race, which could lead to the internalization of this division. How does this contradiction affect the interviewees’ participation within identity-based organizations or their own self-understanding?

With the exception of Kelli—who became “the professional bisexual in the lesbian community” as well as a prominent figure in the bisexual community—none of the participants related significant involvement in bisexual organizations. Most have gone back and forth between lesbian and gay organizations and race/ethnicity based groups. Janet, for example, got involved in a bisexual organization when she first came out but quickly moved on to other groups with which she felt more affinity:

> When I first started coming out ... I didn’t know where to go. So I went to mostly mainstream bisexual meetings. It’s mostly all very White American ... and so I couldn’t really identify with a lot of them. But, I started joining more Asian women’s stuff. Then I saw it’s different.

Finding an organization that was inclusive of her racial and sexual identity was an improvement over “White American” bisexual organizations. Generally, bisexual organizations are focused on sexual identity and
representation, to the exclusion of race. Minorities may pass through organizations in small numbers, but when they experience the overwhelmingly White racial atmosphere, many will stop coming to the group, or else use this space to focus on their sexual, rather than multiple, identities (Shapiro, 2007, p. 265; Shokeid, 2001, p. 68). Karin’s experience of coming out was similar to Janet’s, each of whom began to attend predominantly White queer groups to which they did not completely relate. Karin explained:

> When I would go to gay and lesbian meetings, I would be the only person of color in the room sometimes. And that made me feel like I don’t really identify with these people. So that’s kinda a way that racism helped keep me in the closet. There weren’t people around me who were of color and queer, at least earlier on.

Because the White racial dominance of these meetings made “it harder for [her] to identify in some ways,” Karin was less willing to come out if that meant joining a predominantly White organization and remaining one of the few people of color in the room. The positive aspect of relating to individuals who shared a similar sexual orientation did not mitigate her frustration at being unable to share a similar racial identity, and she felt unable to participate to a more meaningful extent.

Several participants discuss feeling more affinity and connection to racial/ethnic based communities or organizations. This points to a key difference in the comparisons between racial identity and sexual identity. In identity politics theory, comparisons between these identities consistently draw upon the concept of ‘visibility.’ Visibility—of race, gender, sexuality, ‘class,’ individual mannerism or self-decoration—can be a fundamental identification marker for individuals and communities. However, there is no hard-and-fast rule about which of these will take central importance. Although sexual identity and racial identity are revealed in different ways, neither should be ranked nor assigned different levels of significance (as they often are in debates around identity). The “appearance” of racial identity is written more obviously upon the body for most—but, significantly, not all—of the participants. Behavior is also ‘raced,’ in which a reserved sexuality is attributed to Asian American cultures (Okazaki, 2002), and a submissive femininity is attributed to Asian American women (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). To be a ‘proper’ Asian American woman is to be chaste and submissive, whereas White racial identity is more closely associated with permissiveness in sexuality and gender expression. Asian American women are expected to demonstrate their level of ‘Americanness’ by acting assertively and being more sexually adventurous.

Sexual minority identity can also be perceived as ‘American’ from the Asian community. Indeed, defining oneself on the basis of a sexual minority status is a Western concept that is not necessarily generalizable to an
Asian cultural context (Mao, McCormick, & Van de Ven, 2002; McLelland, 2000). Often, Asian cultures have been positioned as ‘family oriented’ against the American ‘individual orientation.’ Asian children often weigh their self-expression against the family expectations of their proper place within the kinship structure. Many are more reluctant to come out to parents and family members if they perceive rejection (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, p. 818).

In contrast to race, the ‘appearance’ of sexual identity was more subdued for the interviewees; therefore, they retained more control over revealing or concealing that aspect of their identity. Nevertheless, several of the participants felt they could “pass as white,” which challenged some to prove their ethnicity and (re)claim with difficulty their ethnic heritage. Overall, however, because of the heightened ‘visibility’ of racial identity over sexual identity, the interviewees felt more included within racial/ethnic organizations in which they “look like everybody else” than in gay and lesbian organizations, where they share a more covert identity yet stand out physically.

Physical appearance is an important issue for mixed race individuals because of the array of assumptions and expectations they elicit from others. Karin explained:

I feel really comfortable around them because when you’re Sri Lankan there’s so few of you you’re always stoked to meet another Sri Lankan. . . . However, the community I’m around the most is the Latino community. . . . A lot of my friends are Latino and I speak the language, and usually they think I am (Latina) until I tell them otherwise. So I’m very embraced by that community too.

In this passage, Karin discusses key points of identification based on racial identity: appearance, language and ethnic heritage. She is embraced by Sri Lankans because of their shared ethnicity and is “most comfortable” with Latinos because of a shared language and appearance. Whereas Karin is White and Sri Lankan yet ‘passes’ as Latina, Lucki is Chilean and Chinese and ‘passes’ as Asian, which influences her relationship to different ethnic communities. As she stated:

I mean a part of it is, I look Asian. I totally pass. People assume that I’m Asian and I get sucked into that group really fast. . . . More of my friends out here (the East Coast) are Latino. I’m pretty tight with some people in the Latino community but I think I’m much more a part of the API [Asian/Pacific Islander] community in San Francisco than I am in the Latino community there.

Although theoretically Lucki is equally able to identify with either an API or Latino community, her choice is altered by her physical appearance, which dictates outsiders’ expectations about her racial heritage—and thus acceptance within specific communities. She described being “sucked into”
the API groups because of her appearance, and states that she doesn’t have “a lot in common” with Chicanos because of her different ethnic heritage. Similarly, Sharon discussed how “ethnicity tests” (often imposed upon mixed race individuals) divide people and make building “a sense of community” difficult:

Some people have made me feel as if I kind of had to prove that I was half Asian for the way that I look. ... And so we get into these strange discussions about which would make you more Filipino. And what is “more Filipino”? Whether you can speak Tagalog or whether you look Filipino while you’re in the United States? You know, it’s kind of been a constant discussion and it’s one that I don’t dismiss but it makes it hard when you’re trying to build a sense of community.

Bisexual-biracial women face fragmentation along lines of identity within mono-identity based organizations and communities. Every participant desired communities that were accepting, responsible and proactive on all their issues. These organizations fell short of that requirement because of their foundation on single identities and issues. Therefore, the interviewees were compelled to foster communities on their own terms, based on their multiple-identity location and the politics that stem from it, often cutting across lines of gender, sexuality, race and class.

PIRCIAL-BISEXUAL WOMEN CONSTRUCT THEIR COMMUNITIES

A “sisterhood” that I want to belong to allows me to be different and still be able to work together. To this sisterhood, I will bring my individual history, listen to others’ stories and know that we are building a foundation together. (Uttal, 1990, p. 320)

As shown in the previous section, the bisexual-biracial interviewees reported varied complaints about their position within single identity-based organizations. This enforced homogeneity is at odds with the bisexual-biracial women because their own identities embody border-crossing and hybrid existence. Therefore, the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with established identity-based organizations and sought communities built on different models. The current section, then, explores the dynamics of how the bisexual-biracial women construct, understand and participate in their own communities.

More than one half of the participants had been involved in queer Asian American women’s organizations, within which they felt the least conflict and the most inclusion. Each participant constructed communities based upon a diversity of individuals across race, sexuality, gender and personal
interests. These communities reflect a model based upon alliance; as Molina (1990) stated, they “are about individuals, they are about love, they are about commitment and they are about responsibility” (p. 329). This model should form the foundation of identity politics because it connects people across socially constructed divisions while responsibly promoting difference and acceptance and establishing methods of fighting against oppression from all subject locations.

The umbrella queer API organizations were a welcoming space for the participants because they were diverse in ethnicity, biraciality and bisexuality and yet represented a very specific ‘identity constellation’ that naturally included them. Sharon mentioned that she “worked for a really long time in an Asian Pacific Islander queer community and definitely had a good experience there.” Lucki was involved with women who later formed a queer API organization in Southern California. Overall, queer API women’s organizations were the formal associations in which these women found the most acceptance for their multiple identities and discovered other like-minded and -situated women with whom they could relate. These organizations broadly include a vast array of ethnicities and multiracials, are inclusive of lesbians and bisexuals and tend to have progressive politics unifying the group.

As we see, the interviewees did idealize the concept of meeting women who shared their same ‘constellation of identities,’ yet they were also aware that their ability to connect with individuals crossed identity lines. Therefore, they gave primacy to an open-minded mentality and progressive politics as their requirements for individuals with whom they could best connect. They each established their circle of friends and made choices about whom to date based upon these ‘requirements.’ The logic of identity politics might presume that these women would prefer to seclude themselves within circles of shared identities and thus become a small and alienated group. Yet their ability to transgress several identity lines promoted the crossing of socially demarcated lines—an open-minded ability to forge alliances and friendships with anyone. Molina (1990) pointed out that the feminist movement has discussed, analyzed and deconstructed ‘difference’ yet remains unable to celebrate and accept it due to its emphasis on sameness. Her argument is central to understanding the construction of community for bisexual-biracial women:

We have a hard time accepting and celebrating differences. Why? I think it is because we are immersed in a society where “sameness” is venerated as the most desirable quality. It is so internalized that even when we construct alternative organizations, we establish norms and regulations that create just another category of sameness—the politically correct person. We chastise each other if we do not speak the same language, look at society with the same eyes, or even dress and eat the same food. It takes an act of love, then, to recognize, and celebrate our differences. (p. 330)
Because of their experiences with single-identity organizations, the bisexual-biracial women were highly motivated to construct communities that actively include diversity instead of ones rigidly segregated along multiple lines.

NEW MODELS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

Psychologists Kirstyn Yuk Sim Chun and Anneliese A. Singh (2010) developed the bisexual youth of color intersecting identities development model, which stresses the need for a systemic, multiculturally competent and bi-affirmative approach for clinicians working with bisexual youth of color, one that can be applied to identity-based community organizations. Contemporary queer theory attempts to integrate an intersectional analysis when examining sexual identity; however, often an integrated multicultural inclusion fails after race is briefly mentioned within the literature (Gamson & Moon, 2004). For the bisexual-biracial women in this study, they already establish their personal communities based upon an integration of politics, identity-based considerations and open mindedness. However, this contrasts with current established communities based upon identity, which leads Karin to state that “there’s no group that I feel totally included in,” and Sabrina to ask, “where am I supposed to find anything that addresses my sexuality and my ethnic identity?” The bisexual-biracial women have participated in many organizations based upon different identities; as Eve commented, “I have so many different communities.” Therefore what are the ways in which these women have constructed their community? Lucki responded:

My community is something that I define personally. ... And it’s way more handpicked people who I have commonalities with of some kind or another, whether they be racial or sexual identity based or political or intellectual or artistic. ... To be perfectly honest I’ve never felt comfortable in a label identified community.

Uttal (1990) offered an explanation for the disillusionment expressed by the interviewees. She pointed out that “we are limited when we organize women’s groups around assumed and certain sets of shared experiences” (p. 318). The interviewees are able to exist within the scope of many identity-based organizations yet are made invisible or marginal once inside. Facing the pressure to measure themselves against a lowest common denominator of identity politics, they are sometimes made to feel as if they must choose between the organization and their own dignity. Lugones (1990) agreed that there are “‘worlds’ that construct me in ways that I do not even understand or I may not accept the construction as an account of myself, a construction of myself” (pp. 395–396). Once the interviewees enter one of these worlds/communities, they may realize that they no longer recognize
their own construction within the group context. Dean (1996) suggested that “with the realization that uttering ‘we’ does not presuppose the existence of a ‘they,’ we can move away from rigid identity categories, the limits of which are established by the dualities of any opposition” (p. 32).

Dean (1996) offered a theory of ‘reflexive solidarity’ that can “conceive of a ‘we’ without labels,” arguing that “the key to this overcoming can be found in the margins and spaces that mark the limits of our concepts, the boundaries of our discourses” (p. 3). Bisexual-biracial women like Sharon re-create their concepts of identity and community along these “margins and spaces.” Their complex constructions of identities and communities provide concrete models for the future direction of identity politics.

Sabrina has actively constructed a community around herself that can serve as an example for this model. She often struggled to find a ‘place’ where her multiple identities would be recognized, addressed and accepted, yet consistently these ideals failed to manifest themselves. Instead, she established a place for herself:

And so I said, well I want to write a little something, so I started to write and kind of gripe, really. It was really just to vent things out on those issues. And it turned out that I started getting mail from all these hapa [mixed-descent] women also who were either straight or gay or in the middle or whatever they were, and they were like “well I’m glad you brought that up because I feel the same way”. And I was like, oh my god, you know? And I didn’t really realize that until I came out with my ‘zine that other women felt that way. But I knew that they were out there somehow, you know. And so like, to me it was that my ‘zine was a very validating tool for me to get in touch with other women who had similar interests.

Sabrina says that she didn’t know “other women felt that way” until she self-published her ‘zine in which she discussed her multiple identities and her politics. She created a situated community around herself, based not necessarily upon a common identity but upon a common progressive and inclusive mentality among many individuals.

Rather than continuing the logic of identity politics and creating communities based upon shared identity—communities that can become more exclusive, oppressive and restrictive upon the addition of multiple identities—communities could be based upon shared progressive, responsible and proactive ideas and actions.

A bisexual-biracial women’s community recognizes the promises and ideals of identity politics, despite the shortcomings in its logic, and actively seeks to achieve them by connecting individuals who can “work and fight together.” Biracial-bisexual women seek out individuals who share similar experiences and issues, but who do not necessarily reside in single identity-based communities in a multitude of locations. The importance of organizing
on the basis of identities is problematic yet imperative for the participants, but of equal importance are the movements taken after this understanding of their specific issues and the ways in which these tie into the larger global movements. To exponentially explode identity categories (bi^2) and connect with others on the basis of progressive politics allows them to develop their dignity and wholeness outside of the identity categories that cut them into pieces and to create a movement that recognizes their humanity and their potential.

The ideals of identity-based organizations have only sporadically manifested themselves for the bisexual-biracial women who are otherwise marginalized, silenced or excluded. Because their diverse needs and identities are not represented within these organizations, many of the participants felt they gave more than they received. Therefore, many created more personal communities in which they realized some of the ideals that identity politics promises. The desire for sameness that identity politics follow becomes problematic, and sometimes oppressive, for those with multiple identities. Similar identities do not necessarily guarantee similar mental outlooks and therefore disappointments are inevitable, and not only for those with multiple identities.

The bisexual-biracial women have revolutionized their personal concepts of community as they integrate the ideals of identity politics yet move to include individuals who share similar progressive politics, responsibility and acceptance. Perhaps this will point to the future direction of identity-based communities, as alliances are built upon common commitment and struggles for solidarity against multiple forms of oppression and exclusion.

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_Beverly Yuen Thompson_ earned her PhD in Sociology from the New School for Social Research in New York City. She earned a postdoctoral fellowship in Women’s Studies at Florida International University, taught Women’s Studies at Texas Woman’s University, and currently teaches Sociology at Siena College in Albany, New York.