**Book Reviews**


Reviewed by Jill C. Humphrey, Ph.D. 1

This book represents quite a remarkable accomplishment, both as a text and as a study. As a text, it is written by a lesbian-identified feminist sociologist whose open-minded approach to the territory of women’s sexuality and women’s politics is quite refreshing, and whose capacity to attract diverse audiences is maximized by an inclusive mode of address which is rare among scholars. Lay readers should find the text accessible insofar as the author summarizes and simplifies the background context of sexological theories and scientific methods. Political activists should find it useful insofar as it contains an overview of bisexuality debates in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual press. Social scientists will find that Rust has undertaken an innovative research project and an incisive analysis of sexual identities and political ideologies.

As a study, it draws upon over 400 self-administered questionnaires completed by lesbian, bisexual, and “nonidentified” women in the mid-1980s. The snowballing technique enabled these questionnaires to reach a wide variety of women in terms of political involvements, age range, and geographical location, although the sample was still predominantly Euro-American lesbians. But the real methodological feat resides in the deceptively simple question—“What is your opinion of bisexuality?”—since it is the detailed analysis of rich replies that constitutes the core of the study, with the replies to other questions acting as secondary supplements. As a proponent of qualitative research into sensitive topics, I was impressed by the role of the survey in surpassing a tin-opener role, and by sensitivity of the researcher in analyzing the contents of the tin.

Some of the findings around the bisexual conundrum presented in the chapters on “Lesbians’ Voices” and “Bisexuality’s Voices” may not be too surprising, although this is a far cry from suggesting that they can be taken-for-granted or trivialized. Lesbian and bisexual women articulated the entire gamut of opinions about bisexuality, with the former placing more emphasis upon the “negatives” and the latter placing more emphasis upon the “positives.”

I gleaned four main lessons from the empirical data and conceptual schema provided by the author. First, there is the complexity of real-life identities, activities, and lifestyles which is congruent with the findings from other large-scale research studies, but incongruent with the presumptions of identity-based political movements. Here, we are informed that 90% of lesbian-identified women have had a heterosexual relationship, that 40% have self-defined as bisexuals at some time, either pre- or postcoming out as lesbians, and that about 65% experience some emotional-erotic attraction to men. Second, there is the prevalence of invalidating bisexuality within the lesbian community—a multilayered invalidation stretching from existential and emotional to social and political levels. This seems to be part of a rite de passage in the lesbian community, serving to explain away previous heterosexual experiences and guard against bisexual self-identifications in order to preserve and purify the lesbian feminist body-politic. Third, there is the salience of extrapolating from experience in making sense of the world, which both creates and conceals misunderstandings between women. Although lesbians assume that other lesbians are just like themselves, they are not necessarily cognizant of how diverse their own inner realities are, so that those with lesbian-only feelings tend to assume other lesbians to be exclusive lesbians, whereas those with bisexual feelings tend to assume other lesbians to be closeted bisexuals. Fourth, there is the problematic conceptualization of hybridity at the heart of bisexuality. Rust examines how bisexuals can be viewed as having “the best of both worlds” only if we construe them as chameleons who pass as perfect straight in one world and pure lesbians in the other. However, if we reframe them as properly bisexual-at-all-times, then they seem to suffer “the worst of both worlds” inasmuch as they can never hide their other side, and will therefore be refused full membership in both worlds. Both frameworks are predicated upon bisexuality as an individual sociosexual phenomenon rather than a collective sociopolitical phenomenon, and Rust sets out to remedy this in the rest of the book.

The first remedy is to retrace the trajectory of lesbian feminist politics in a way that demonstrates that bisexuality was its blind-spot and boundary-marker, and that an excavation of the bisexual trope can uncover the

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contradictions of lesbian feminist ideology. Indeed, Rust’s
deft handling of this in the chapter entitled “The Pink and
Blue Herring” also illustrates the predicaments of hetero-
sexual women in the lesbian feminist orthodoxy. On the
one hand, an essentialist model of sexuality has been im-
portant for lesbians in asserting the legitimacy of their ex-
istence in the heterosexist historical world order. In posit-
ing a distinct lesbian “essence” and in reconstructing a
distinct lesbian ancestry and herstory, a quasi-ethnicity
can be mobilized to insist upon the naturalness of lesbian
existences and the necessity of civil rights. However, this
model is vulnerable to deconstruction and reconstruction
by bisexuals claiming an equally valid bisexual essence
and proclaiming the actual bisexuality of many women-
identified women in herstory. On the other hand, a social
constructionist model of sexuality has been just as signifi-
cant to lesbian feminists, since this hinges upon choice as
the axis around which women’s liberation must revolve.
Given the patriarchal history of virtually compulsory het-
ereosexuality, women’s choices in the here-and-now need
to prioritize feminist separatism in the service of polit-
ic if not sexual lesbianism, and women who declare
themselves bisexual or heterosexual are guilty of dilut-
ing their commitment if not betraying the cause. How-
ever, this model is also vulnerable to criticism in the ser-
vice of more radical liberation. Feminists, humanists, and
sex radicals complained that women’s emancipation be-
came meaningless if it violated individual’s right to self-
definition and self-determination, and, that if sexual eman-
cipation was to mean anything, then it had to include
sexual experimentation beyond prescriptions and prohibi-
tions. These arguments about the relative value of lesbian,
bisexual, and heterosexual women in the feminist move-
ment raged from the late 1960s to the late 1980s on both
sides of the Atlantic, only to be supplanted by the emer-
gence of queerdom, of which bisexual politics is a key
moment.

The second remedy, then, is to examine the emer-
gence of bisexual politics in the United States from the late
1980s onwards, contained in the final chapter on “Another
Revolution in the Political Wheel.” The message here is
that bisexual politics is about celebrating diversity. First,
bisexuality activists are operating with the benefit of hind-
sight, so that they set out to eschew the cardinal errors of
identity politics to date. This means that they welcome
all kinds of difference—sexual and gendered, racial and
cultural, social and moral—and refuse to succumb to es-
sentializing the bisexual identity, homogenizing a bisexual
community or mythologizing a bisexual history. Second,
bisexuality is about complexity and change, which rup-
tures binary categorizations of sexual and gendered iden-
tities as well as linear life-trajectories. This postmodernist
turn holds out the promise that politics may yet become
more reflective of, as well as reflexive about, real life as
lived by real people. Third, the burgeoning bisexual move-
ment is open to diverse alliances with feminist, lesbian,
gay, and queer movements. Clearly, this presupposes reci-
procity, and this seems to be more forthcoming from gay
and queer camps than from lesbian and feminist camps,
although some progress in creating a LesBiGay model and
movement has been made.

Rust also stresses that this should not be misread as
proselytizing the superiority of bisexuality or multiséxu-
ality, or as presuming any superior political acumen or in-
tellectual privilege among bisexual or multiséxual people.
In other words, if a new generation of queers owe their
present insights to past political struggles and debates,
then they will owe any future breakthroughs to ongoing
coalitions with comrades in a variety of left libertarian
movements.

As an exploration of the relationship between lesbian
feminists and their ideology on the one hand, and bisexual
women and the nascent bisexual politics on the other, this
book should be placed on the “compulsory reading” list.
Nevertheless, this relationship also demarcates its limits.
The major omission is, of course, “men”—they are in the
background as creators and defenders of male supremacy,
but there is little or no consideration of gay men in the
lesbian and gay movement, bisexual men in bisexual net-
works, black and disabled men who challenge hegemonic
masculinities, or indeed pro-feminist men who march in
support of women’s liberation. As soon as lesbian sepa-
ratism becomes untenable on a large scale, and bisexuality
is recognized as a prevalent phenomenon, and alliances be-
tween different oppressed peoples are countenanced, then
the question of men rears its head. Indeed, this is at the core
of contemporary debates and struggles, for if we are seri-
ous about inhabiting a world which cherishes sexual and
gendered diversity while crushing sexual and gendered
oppression, then the deconstruction and reconstruction of
men and masculinity will occupy center-stage, and this
is an endeavor which feminists would be ill-advised to
entrust to men alone.

By Antonia Young. Berg, Oxford, 2000, 168 pp.,
$19.95 (paperback).
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As transgender/transsexual identities worldwide have be-
gun to receive attention from students of gender and

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