Bi Design:
Strategies for Fiction

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Abstract: How can bisexuality be represented in fiction in a way that is realistic and nuanced? This article presents five strategies of representing bisexuality in fiction, listed here as Implying, Demonstrating, Describing, Using Explicit Labels, and Having Conversations. These practical approaches highlight craft techniques that writers can implement in their own work. By articulating some of the ways in which bisexuality is already written in fiction, these strategies provide tools for writers to write bisexuality in ways that work against common stereotypes. These strategies are presented through an interdisciplinary lens, primarily relying upon Creative Writing Studies, Bisexuality Studies, and Queer Studies.

Keywords: Craft, Bisexuality, Craft Theory, Marginalized Identities, Queer Theory, Queer, LGBTQ, Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Fiction writers are expected to create characters that have some sense of reality to them—one might frame this as roundness or realism or verisimilitude or relatability. The exact terminology aside, this expectation points to a character that feels, in some way or another, inexplicably alive despite their existence as mere words on paper. A writer, however, might be hesitant when creating characters that do not share their own personal identities, and this can become even more complicated when the character is of one or more marginalized identities. In Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing, Janelle Adsit (2019) writes that "All forms of representation, including literary production, can be interrogated for assumptions, values, and ideologies" (104). A writer's concerns about crafting marginalized characters might arise because of the cultural baggage that can accompany marginalized identities, the inherited "assumptions, values, and ideologies" that "represent the values of the culturally dominant population: in America… (straight, cis, able, upper-middle-class) white males" (Salesses, 2021, XV). These cultural values have the potential to affect both the

writing process and the reader's reception of the writing. Stereotypes can be one barrier to realistic characters, and this particular barrier comes with larger cultural consequences. In light of such concerns about representation, how should someone write bisexual characters in fiction?[1]

The simplest answer, of course, is to write any character with nuance, with both positive and negative traits, with an interesting background and a web of different relationships, and so on and so forth. Such nuance is a path toward making characters feel realistic and compelling. To speak to a more specific benefit, crafting characters of marginalized identities with nuance can be one method of performing the very interrogation that Adsit indicates: the creative act itself can posit new representations that complicate existing literary productions in which such characters are not represented at all, or it can complicate existing literary productions that rely on stereotypes and oversimplifications. Such nuance begins to break down cultural expectations and challenge these expected norms.

Particular considerations need to be made in light of a character's identities and the experiences that might result from them. This is intricate work that requires crafting a specific character; the character should not solely be defined by a marginalized identity category, its associated stereotypes, or other overly simple assumptions. Simultaneously, this pushes the fiction more toward something like verisimilitude. The cultural assumptions that accompany bi+ representation include preconceived notions that are heteronormative[2] , homonormative[3] , queerphobic, and biphobic.[4]

While writing a character with nuance applies to bisexual characters just as much as any other character, this fact does not specifically illuminate how to incorporate a character's bisexuality[5]

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1   This question is likely to only become more important to consider in future pursuits of realism and authenticating detail. The 2020 Gallup report not only finds a 1.1% increase in Americans identifying as LGBT, but also specifically finds that 54.6% of LGBT people (i.e., 3.1% of the American population) identify as bisexual, compared to 24.5% identifying as gay and 11.7% as lesbian. The highest bisexual percentages are in Generation Z (11.5% of the American population bisexual) and Millennials (5.1% of the American population bisexual) (Jones 2021).

2   Shiri Eisner (2013) describes heteronormativity as "a set of cultural and social norms, according to which there are only two binary sexes and genders (man and woman), and the only acceptable form of sexuality or romance is between one cisgender man and one cisgender woman" (47).

3   Homonormativity is "the acceptance of heteronormative values by gay people and movements" (Eisner 288).

4   In "Deconstructing Biphobia," Miguel Obradors-Campos (2011) describes biphobia as "as the systemic oppression that we, bisexual persons, experience because of our sexual orientation and as a consequence of the hegemonic heterosexist worldview" (211).

5   "Bisexuality" refers here to sexual attraction to more than one gender, and will often but not by necessity include biromantic interest, i.e., romantic interest in more than one gender. This is how the term has long been used by activists such as Robyn Ochs. Bi+ is used here as an inclusive umbrella term for people who are not monosexual/monoromantic. Bisexuality has overlap with other labels under the queer umbrella that are not monosexual (ex: pansexuality); individual terminologies, definitions, and distinctions can differ in application and self-identification. This highlights one advantage of the Using Explicit Labels and Having Conversations strategies.

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among their other traits and experiences. In truth, bisexuality, as with any character trait, has the potential to influence a multitude of craft considerations, including but not limited to backstory, conflict, theme, and motivation. (A character's heterosexuality influences these elements as well, but heterosexuality has a cultural position as normative. As such, it is not treated as remarkable or different in writing, but rather as the expected default sexuality of a character.) If a writer is aiming for realism[6] , then accounting for the ways in which character identities and craft intersect is one way to achieve that goal. Graeme Harper (2017) writes in Changing Creative Writing in America: Strengths, Weaknesses, Possibilities that "Creative writing takes place both in a micro and in a macro habitat, that of the space, attitudes, feelings, physical and biotic conditions of the creative writer, and in the larger realm of culture, society, the nation, the economy, history." Micro and macro habitats certainly have the potential to influence one another. The macro habitat can instill a writer with "assumptions, values, and ideologies" (Adsit 104) about bisexuality and its expression in narrative. It is worth considering the way that a bisexual character is written in terms of what such a literary production is adding to the macro habitats of culture and society. Representation (especially of characters who are not often represented or are not often represented in three-dimensional ways) can become problematic without certain angles of consideration.

It isn't difficult to point out problematic representations of bisexuality in fiction. Harmful tropes abound—duplicitous bisexuals, promiscuous bisexuals, villainous depraved bisexuals.[7] These examples don't even delve into harmful tropes about bisexuality itself (ex: that it is a phase.). Certainly, "media contributes to society's view of bisexual identities and assists in the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes" (Corey, 2017, 193). And there are stereotypes that erase or attempt to invalidate bisexuality altogether, causing "bisexual individuals [to] suffer greatly from society's attempts to invalidate them" (Corey 193)[8]. This erasure can manifest as claims that bisexual women just want male attention and are actually straight, or that bisexual men are just transitioning to being gay[9], or

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6   While "realism" can be a genre category (ex: literary realism), having characters who behave, think, and interact realistically is likely a goal for writers in any genre.

7   Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell (2009) enumerate an extensive list of stereotypes in "Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters," highlighting that "Contemporary culture paints bis as promiscuous, greedy, indecisive, duplicitous, confused, fickle, attention-seeking and, ultimately, closeted gays (or straights)" (298).

8   In his foundational text *The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,* Kenji Yoshino (2000) identifies three "strategies of erasure," writing that "The existence of a bilateral contract of bisexual erasure is supported by the fact that both straights and gays engage in the same strategies of bisexual erasure. There are three such strategies: (1) class erasure, (2) individual erasure, and (3) delegitimation" (395).

9   These two examples derive from phallocentric cultural values. Phallocentrism "is a cultural and social system privileging masculinity and the phallus… and granting it power and value above other things" (Eisner 39).

that people use the bisexual label simply to avoid monogamy. Adsit writes that "Creative writing is a form of cultural production. It both reflects and stimulates culture" (104). Fictional representations of bisexuality that rely on stereotypes validate biphobia, bisexual erasure, and monosexism[10] in real life; in turn, real-world stereotypes influence writers to lean on these assumptions in the first place. It is a cycle that can cause real harm to bi+ people.

While problematic representations offer one angle of opportunity to learn about writing bisexuality in fiction, the focus moving forward here will primarily be on the ways in which a writer might go about writing bisexuality with nuance, thoughtful consideration, and awareness of the conversation that they're joining in bisexual literature. Adsit argues that "The creative writing course can teach the art of the counter-narrative and the process of identifying and challenging dominant narratives through representation" (106). The central impetus behind presenting the following strategies is not to exclusively focus on the pitfalls to avoid, but rather to present actionable strategies for including bisexual characters in fiction, and in doing so providing opportunities for "challenging dominant narratives through representation" (Adsit 106). The real-world stakes are a vital and ever-present consideration for the responsible writer to make; as Matthew Salesses writes in Craft in the Real World, "The way we tell stories has real consequences on the way we interpret meaning in our everyday lives… Craft is not innocent or neutral" (14). This article is constructed on two foundational and related premises: one, that the readers of this article already acknowledge that there is potential to cause harm when representing bisexuality, and two, that the impulse to read about these strategies is likely born of the desire to cause as little of this potential harm as possible. The list spells out some practical ways that bisexuality can be incorporated, strategies that are already in use in literature and don't lean on easy and tired stereotypes because, as Graeme Harper writes, "questions of diversity go beyond reading lists and discussion topics to the actual acts of creation." This article positions itself in conversation with texts that discuss issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion within the purview of Creative Writing Studies, and is intended as an expansion of such texts. The exclusive focus on bisexuality in fiction serves as a means of deepening one particular aspect of craft; the ultimate goal is to continue the project of broadening Creative Writing Studies beyond the systemically normalized expectations of a "culturally dominant population" (Salesses XV).

The five strategies outlined here are: 1) Implying, 2) Demonstrating, 3) Describing, 4) Using Explicit Labels, and 5) Having Conversations.[11] In The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure, Kenji Yoshino (2000) writes that sexuality can be defined by "desire, conduct, and self-identification," further writing that "Definitions can rely on a single axis, or on a combination of the axes"

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10   Monosexism is "the privileging of sexual attraction to one sex or gender, from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian communities" (Roberts et. al., 2015, 554).

11   This list is not intended to be exhaustive. See Appendix for a summary of the strategies.

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(371). These axes are implicitly applied to the strategies here, though the connections can be stated explicitly: The strategy of Implying makes ambiguous insinuations of desire and/or conduct. Demonstrating, on its own, relies primarily on conduct, but desire is also highly likely to be present. Describing requires desire and moves toward self-identification, though the latter is not necessarily present as clearly as it is in Using Explicit Labels. Using Explicit Labels primarily utilizes self-identification, though desire is presumed to be present. Having Conversations is likely to rely to some degree on at least desire and self-identification, if not also conduct. These axes can help to clarify a framework for understanding the strategies as they already exist in fiction, as well as how a writer might conceptualize the theoretical underpinnings of implementing such strategies in their own work.

Writing bi+ representation requires delving beneath the surface to consider different angles of crafting a character's interior life and backstory. In this context, interdisciplinary critical approaches allow for the unique opportunity to apply a key concept of Bisexual Studies—Kenji Yoshino's "epistemic contract of bisexual erasure"—to question assumptions of both writers and readers in terms of a character's sexuality. The societal positionality of monosexuality as default means that a writer intending to write bi+ characters must navigate very particular reader assumptions in ways that they would not necessarily for monosexual characters. A character may be assumed straight until proven otherwise; a character that is with someone of the same gender may be assumed gay. But in articulating ways to incorporate bisexuality/biromanticism, there is the potential for Creative Writing Studies writ large to consider not only the assumptions surrounding bi+ identity, but also other similar assumptions and the various strategies that might be employed to incorporate diverse character traits and identities.

STRATEGY #1: IMPLYING

Implying is the bare minimum inclusion of bisexuality in a piece of writing. To only imply bisexuality means that it is on the page in ways that are not as concrete or explicit as demonstrating, labelling, or other strategies enumerated here. A character may gaze longingly at someone of the same gender but only pursue opposite-sex[12] relationships, or they may only pursue same-sex relationships but gaze longingly at someone of a different gender. A character may just barely hint at a queer past, but not ever really explain/explore that on the page. A character may have an ill-defined relationship with another character, and a reading can be made that they have a romantic and/or sexual aspect of their relationship, but that romantic and/or sexual tension is never clarified for the reader.

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12 "Opposite-sex" is used here in the traditional sense of "man and woman." However, it is also used with the acknowledgement that gender is complex and consideration of gender as a stable and fixed binary with opposite poles of "male" and "female" (with each of these categorizations implied as cisgender) is an oversimplification.

In British author Radclyffe Hall's (1928) *The Well of Loneliness*, for instance, love interest Mary is implied to be bisexual. She is with protagonist Stephen, a woman who is gender non-conforming and identifies as an "invert."[13] Stephen intuits Mary's feelings from a moment when Mary and Martin dance together: "when [Stephen] sat alone at their table… uncomfortably conscious of the interest she aroused by reason of her clothes and isolation—when she glimpsed the girl in Martin's arms, and heard her laugh for a moment in passing, Stephen would know a queer tightening of her heart, as though a mailed fist had closed down upon it" (380). There is another such moment of intuition when Martin is planning to leave Paris: "When [Martin] spoke of his departure, Stephen sometimes fancied that a shade of sadness crept into Mary's face" (383). Bisexuality, in this case, is a negative aspect of Mary, one that grants her the opportunity to escape from the protagonist in favor of a heteronormative life, hurting the protagonist as a result. The prolonged conversations about Mary's potential romantic pairings happen between Stephen and Martin, with Martin saying, "You think that Mary doesn't love me, but you're wrong" (387). Martin even outlines, without specifically naming Mary's sexual attraction to either him or Stephen, that

> You're courageous and fine and you mean to make good, but life with you is spiritually murdering Mary. Can't you see it? Can't you realize that she needs all the things that it's not in your power to give her? Children, protection, friends whom she can respect and who'll respect her—don't you realize this, Stephen? A few may survive such relationships as yours, but Mary Llewellyn won't be among them. She's not strong enough to fight the whole world, to stand up against persecution and insult. (387-388)

Mary never claims a bisexual identity herself and, in fact, is not involved in any serious, in-depth conversations about her relationship with Martin. There is a brief verbal indication that she might be biromantic, where Mary says to Stephen "But for you, I could have loved Martin Hallam!" before immediately backtracking by adding "No, no! Not that, I don't know what I'm saying" (393).

Bisexuality is portrayed here as a temporary state which disappears in a monogamous relationship. Mary is implied to be bisexual, and as such she has an "out" from the queer community, a community in which she does not comfortably fit anyway. Mary would be "free" of her queer reputation if she were in a relationship with Martin because that would allow her to "pass" as straight. Given the cultural context of 1920s English society, implication of bisexuality in some ways seems necessary as queer identities were not socially accepted, though holding back on more explicit

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13 This terminology was used in works such as that of sexologist Havelock Ellis, wherein "The dominant ideology on sexual attraction held that homosexual people were 'inverts' who took on not just the sexual preference, but the gender role of the opposite sex" (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 303). Stephen is portrayed as monosexual and exclusively sexually/romantically attracted to women; *The Well of Loneliness* is widely considered a lesbian bildungsroman.

discussions of Mary's sexuality did not save the book from being ruled against at its obscenity trial. As Emily Donovan (2020) writes in "How Two Queer Brits Dodged Persecution: Firbank, Woolf, and Craft Innovation," "At Hall's obscenity trial, *The Well*'s legal defense attempted to argue that the protagonist's love for women characters was depicted with restraint and reverence and was therefore not obscene. The magistrate ruled that the novel's reverent depiction was exactly why *The Well* was obscene" (145-146).

Mary is clearly situated under the queer umbrella, as she is in a romantic and sexual relationship with Stephen. Therefore, she is definitively queer; however, she also seems to be bisexual-coded, i.e., implied to be bisexual but never confirmed as such. The implication of bisexuality occurs in dialogue, description, conflict, characterization, and the climax of the novel; these are some options for the craft techniques that one might employ when implying bisexuality in their writing. When done delicately and thoughtfully, it can potentially be a way to portray a character who might be bisexual but is not out yet, or is not aware of that fact themselves. This would require a very careful balance and a very clear reason for this particular choice.

While Mary is definitively queer if ambiguously bisexual, the titular character of *Fire,* a fantasy novel by Kristin Cashore (2009), is ambiguously queer. If Fire is, in fact, queer, then she is implied to be bisexual. Though in a love triangle with two men during the main plot of the novel, Fire's sexuality may be queer in light of the backstory and dialogue. Specifically, Cashore writes that

[Liddy] sat beside Fire and stroked her hair, at Fire's forehead and behind her ears, against her neck, and down to the small of her back. The touch was kindly meant, and the deepest and tenderest comfort in the world. Fire found herself resting her head in Liddy's lap while Liddy continued stroking… That day, from that moment, something quiet grew between them. An alliance. They brushed each other's hair sometimes, helped each other dress and undress. They stole time together, whispering, like little girls who've discovered a soulmate. (243)

It is possible to read this as simply platonic when, as narrated later, the "gentle love of Liddy had been intolerable" to Fire's father (244), or this could be romantic but not sexual, making Fire biromantic but not necessarily bisexual. Their relationship can be read as sexual when Fire later tells her lover Archer "'Don't you dare start accusing me of taking some man to my bed,'" and Archer replies "'A woman, then? It wouldn't be entirely without precedent, would it?'" (251) Because of the ambiguous nature of Fire's sexuality, she might be biromantic or not, and she might be bisexual or not. It may even be the case that she was exploring her sexuality, and the strategy of implication comes from a place of the character still figuring that aspect of herself out. However, without something more solid than implication, it becomes difficult to detect how her sexuality is functioning in the story, especially in terms of exactly why Archer brings Liddy up much later on.

Implying bisexuality is not inherently problematic in the way that biphobic stereotypes, such as the cheating bisexual, are. Implication can happen in description, as with Stephen's observations of Mary and her relationship with Martin. The description might come from an observer with a vested interest in the story (ex: Stephen's observations of Mary and Martin), which might affect the observations/implications/denials. Implication can be laced into dialogue, as in Stephen and Martin's conversation about Mary which implies that Mary might have a fulfilling relationship with either of them. Archer, too, implies Fire's bisexuality in dialogue, which he brings up as a jealous jab at her. In dialogue, the implication might come from a character who is not the alleged bisexual character, or the alleged bisexual character themself might imply their bisexuality in conversation. Bisexuality can be implied through backstory, such as the vague indication that there may have been some romantic/sexual element to Fire's relationship with Liddy. With this approach, backstory might serve as a breadcrumb to lead the reader to queer interpretations without so many words. Donovan writes about scholars who have come to the conclusion that certain writers used a strategy of implying queerness "to write as clearly as [they] could about queer love for in-group readers while avoiding detection and persecution from a litigious and conservative public" (147). Implied bisexuality is a source of conflict in both Archer and Fire's relationship and in Stephen and Mary's relationship, and with the latter it becomes the central tension of the climax. Overall, implication is a strategy that depends on light touches and ambiguity.

At worst, an implication of bisexuality that is absent of any other strategy for representation can lead to queerbaiting[14] , where the queerness is never made explicit on the page so as not to "scare away" queerphobic readers. In this case, bisexuality would be implied just enough that readers who are looking for bisexual content are made to believe that this will be explored on the page, which is never followed through. When there is a dearth of nuanced representation, or any representation at all, then queerbaiting becomes all the more troubling to readers who crave unambiguous bisexuality on the page.

STRATEGY #2: DEMONSTRATING

Bisexuality can be demonstrated by the attraction that a character displays, whether the character pursues every relationship that is presented as a viable opportunity or not. Perhaps a character recently broke up with a woman but is now in a relationship with a nonbinary partner, or a character has an ex-boyfriend and an ex-girlfriend. Perhaps in the course of the plot a character is in a

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14 Judith Fathallah defines queerbaiting as "a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes" (qtd. in Brennan, 2018, 190).

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love triangle with people of two different genders. This sort of demonstration makes the bisexuality clearer on the page than implication does, and it works to better satisfy "the readers who crave to see 'otherness' textualized" (Hegamin, 2016, 4). If done with an extremely light touch, such representation might fall into the category of implying bisexuality. Demonstration alone can potentially leave some ambiguity in the narrative, especially if it lacks labels.

One should consider the specific ways in which demonstration can be dismissed by monosexist cultural narratives. In "Creating a Bisexual Display: Making Bisexuality Visible," Julie E. Hartman (2013) notes the tactics by which bisexuality can be erased, actively or otherwise, writing that "This dichotomous organization of sexuality in our society means that the perceived gender of one's object choice is assumed to dictate her or his sexual identity. Bisexuals are assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual based on the gender of the person they are dating at any given moment, making it impossible to have a visible bisexual identity" (40). (This harkens back to how Mary is treated in *The Well of Loneliness*.) Demonstrating a character's bisexuality is a strategy with specific advantages and disadvantages, the latter only complicated by bisexual erasure and cultural assumptions of monosexuality. The strategy of demonstrating can be paired with describing, using explicit labels, and/or having conversations, which can help to clarify the author's intent. Demonstrating could potentially be used in the plot of a coming out narrative, though it certainly doesn't have to be; demonstration could also be used for the narrative of a bisexual person who already decisively labels their own sexuality.

In the fantasy novel *Labyrinth Lost*, Zoraida Córdova's (2016) protagonist, Alex, is a bisexual bruja who, through the course of the novel, has crushes on both a mysterious boy who guides her through the magical land of Los Lagos and her female best friend. Alex demonstrates her attraction to the male guide in the narration: "His eyes are so bright, like tiny stars gracing his brown skin. It's hard not to notice how pretty they are" (122). Later in the novel, however, Alex demonstrates her romantic feelings toward her female best friend by telling 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. Alex never uses an explicit label, and so she can fairly be interpreted as having an identity under the bi+ umbrella that is not bisexual. However, she is at minimum clearly demonstrated as not monosexual.

Kristin Cashore's (2017) speculative novel *Jane, Unlimited* is similarly set up in its potential for two romantic pairings. The protagonist, Jane, finds both a young man and a young woman attractive. The novel is split into sections, each representing a different alternate universe and a different version of Jane, which provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate different iterations of Jane's relationships. The alternate universes in sections two and six end with the clearest implications of Jane ending up in a relationship with the young woman. In at least one alternate universe in the

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book, Jane is engaged in a sexual relationship with the young man to whom she's attracted. In three of the universes, she does not definitively conclude the narrative in a relationship with either character. While Cashore uses description in addition to demonstration, the lack of explicit labels means that "bisexual" may not be entirely accurate to the character, or it might be open to different interpretations, as is the case with Córdova's novel.

Carmen Maria Machado's (2017) science fiction short story "Inventory," rather than present two particular romantic options in the form of one man and one woman, enumerates the narrator's different sexual encounters with both men and women. The implication, since the narrator engages in fulfilling sexual encounters with those of the same and different genders, is that this character is at least not monosexual. They might be considered bisexual, or under a bi+ umbrella in some way, but it's always best practice to be careful imposing a sexuality label, even if it is in reference to a fictional character and not a real person. That said, it is not unreasonable to interpret this narrator as bisexual.

These examples of demonstration—especially in *Labyrinth Lost* and "Inventory"— highlight some of the nuances and difficulties of relying on demonstration as the sole technique of representing a character's bisexuality: on the one hand, this normalizes bisexuality as simply another aspect of the character. However, there is space to misinterpret or misread a character that might not be bisexual. Making the assumption and imposing a label is dubious at best and, at worst, potentially harmful to those of other sexualities (ex: pansexuality) who have such mislabeling of their own identities occur in real life scenarios. It is important not to harm people of a different sexual identity in order to unearth representations of bisexuality. This returns once more to the concept that "The way we tell stories has real consequences on the way we interpret meaning in our everyday lives" (Salesses 14). A writer who is considering solely using demonstration would have to weigh the benefits (such as normalization of bisexuality, bi+ identity, or general queerness) against the potential interpretations of the story once it is in a reader's hands. What is the harm, what is the good, and what seems more essential to the narrative?

Contrary to the previous examples, Jen Wilde's (2017) *Queens of Geek* and James Baldwin's (1968) *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* both combine their uses of demonstration with Using Explicit Labels and Having Conversations. When *Labyrinth Lost* and *Jane, Unlimited* demonstrate bisexuality, those novels use two viable potential relationships during the course of the plot; Jen Wilde's *Queens of Geek* instead demonstrates bisexuality via a combination of backstory and the current plot. Charlie (a young actress/internet celebrity) has an ex-boyfriend, Reese. Her current love interest in the book is a woman. The backstory of her relationship with Reese demonstrates one aspect of Charlie's sexuality, and her current romantic pursuits demonstrate another. There is a push to "pick a side" from Reese while they're together, where Wilde uses the strategies of Using

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Explicit Labels and Having Conversations, but Charlie clearly argues with him about this and how it isn't true to who she is.

James Baldwin also pairs demonstration with other strategies in his novel *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Bisexuality is demonstrated with protagonist Leo Proudhammer, the character whom the reader gets to know most intimately through the first-person narration. Throughout the novel, the two main romantic/sexual relationships that Leo returns to are with Barbara and a young man. Leo has deep emotional investment in both relationships, for as complicated as they each are, and he demonstrates his bisexuality by engaging in both of these relationships on the page. Each relationship evolves in its own particular way, which affects each of the three characters in their individual characterizations as well as in their interactions with one another. Baldwin combines this demonstration of bisexuality with Using Explicit Labels and Having Conversations.

STRATEGY #3: DESCRIBING

This strategy, as referenced here, relates specifically to describing a character's sexuality, using the narrative (or potentially dialogue) to communicate the character's overall sexual expressions/ inclinations and not just a specific sexual attraction to one or more particular people. One might consider the point of view choice and the level of interiority that it allows. How much insight, if any, is the reader granted for this character? Is it first person from their point of view? Is this character not the point of view character, but perhaps discusses their sexuality? Is the point of view third person objective, where no one's thoughts are revealed? Is the point of view third person limited, which might allow access to a description of the character's sexuality? Is the point of view third person omniscient, which can potentially give the reader access to the innermost descriptions of sexuality of any character?

In *Jane, Unlimited*, Jane thinks of her sexuality, which translates through the limited third person narration: "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). Here, it is possible to read Jane not as bisexual, but as pansexual or some other non-monosexual identity. The lack of labels makes this a potentially ambiguous representation of bisexuality. *Jane, Unlimited* has the benefit of also incorporating the strategy of demonstration, which might help to guide readers more directly toward an interpretation of her as a bisexual or bi+ character, but representations that lack explicit labels and conversations about bisexuality can make the interpretation of the character's sexuality more precarious. This is a risk that both demonstrating and describing share, though using these strategies without explicit labels and/or conversations might simultaneously work in a direction of normalization. That said, use of a label might also work toward normalization, so the decision to not use the label can be one that

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comes down to a particular character's personality, culture, etc. A description of a bisexual character's sexuality might not read as clear, convincing, or authentic[15]. And, without labels, bisexuality could also be interpreted differently. First-person narration might make for the most definitive description, especially when paired with explicit labels.

STRATEGY #4: USING EXPLICIT LABELS

In "All Bi Myself," Sarah Corey writes about a "lack of terminology/self-identification" in television shows, concluding that "Overwhelmingly, the term 'bisexual' is absent" and "Even when the context of a situation calls for use of the term, the word 'bisexual' is inexplicably absent" (196). Explicit labels literally include some variation of the word "bisexual," "biromantic," "bi," "bi+" etc. Corey writes that "Naming a sexual identity gives the identity credibility... Failing to have bisexual characters self-identify as bisexual contributes to bisexual invisibility" (197). It is this exact sort of invisibility in narrative that contributes to cultural erasure of bisexuality and assumptions of monosexuality. A craft choice such as diction can affect both the literature being produced and the wider cultural milieu, the "macro habitat," as Graeme Harper refers to it. In "The Craft of Writing Queer," Barrie Jean Borich (2012) points out that "Those of us who've spent decades attempting to be seen—in literature, in families and communities, in workplaces and academic departments, in American law—might be less inclined to give up the names it took us so long to claim, or to spend our intellectual lives arguing about why we won't" (par. 7). This is certainly true of queer identities, but is a particularly important consideration for bisexual people who are erased and mislabeled, who are challenged on the bi label or subsumed under other labels. The examples used here will be discussed in more depth in the Having Conversations section; all explicit label examples used here happen to occur in novels which also involve conversations about bisexuality.

In *Queens of Geek*, Charlie says to her then-boyfriend in a flashback, "Reese, I'm bisexual. Do you believe in me?" (105). This positions the term as one that Charlie has established as a part of her identity by the beginning of the main narrative. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Leo asks potential lover Barbara in a flashback, "Do you know I'm bisexual?" (274). This clarifies that when the novel opens with Leo's heart attack, he has already claimed the bisexual label for himself and it is not something which he is trying to figure out in the novel's contemporary narrative arc. And in Isabel Sterling's (2019) fantasy novel *These Witches Don't Burn*, love interest Morgan explains to protagonist Hannah during a date shortly after they've first met one another, "I'm bi"

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15 Authenticity is a loaded term when applied to the experiences of marginalized peoples. It is important to recognize that each bi+ person has a different experience, even if certain experiences seem especially common among people in the bi+ community. A reading for authenticity will vary from reader to reader, and as such it is a difficult goal to grapple with. However, it remains something which may appear in either positive or negative critical evaluations.

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(139). This declaration happens in the current plot of the story, but, as will be addressed shortly, Morgan comes to the narrative with her sexuality and its label pre-established.

Explicit labels are likely the easiest way to make bisexuality clear on the page, but writers would also be wise to exercise caution in regards to making it part of the character. It could feel superficial to simply use a sexuality label and then otherwise ignore said sexuality as one of their traits. How does it factor into backstory? Love interests or potential love interests? Romance plots or subplots? Issues that the character is concerned about? World views? Lenses for understanding other people? In essence, in the process of holistically crafting character, using an explicit label such as "bisexual" in dialogue and/or narration should be thought out beyond the singular moment of declaration.

STRATEGY #5: HAVING CONVERSATIONS

The benefit of having conversations surrounding bisexuality is the opportunity that it allows for working through characters' feelings, beliefs, and experiences. When done with nuance and depth, these conversations could explore bisexual experiences, whether they are positive, negative, or neutral. This strategy could include coming out narratives, "get to know you" moments, and/or confrontations with biphobia. Having conversations can touch upon a number of craft elements, and it is advantageous to be aware of this ripple effect and the ways that it might change an element such as character relationships or clarify elements such as stakes or setting.[16]

In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin uses the conversation between a young Leo and Barbara to flesh out Leo's character and the relationship between these two, as well as clarify the cultural setting in which they are situated. Barbara reveals her romantic/sexual feelings for Leo, who is trying to convince her that starting a relationship with him is a bad idea. Leo asks Barbara, "Do you know I'm bisexual?" (274) This is a coming out moment of sorts, in that Leo is coming out to Barbara. However, Leo is not struggling with discovering his sexuality, and he is not unsure of this particular aspect of his identity; it is a plainspoken declaration. This is also a scene that serves as a "get to know you" moment. Barbara, however, knows Leo better than he assumes she does; her response is, "Yes. At least I supposed it… It just seemed logical to me… Normal" (274), adding, "I'm *glad* you know you're bisexual. Many men don't" (275). The characters do not invalidate bisexuality here, though Leo seems to fear some kind of blowback from his revelation, which illustrates the setting and stakes of this moment. This conversation strengthens the

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16 Note that instances such as Archer's coded and jealous accusations in *Fire* do not constitute enough direct discussion to qualify as having a conversation, and as such it remains in implication. An expression which is meant to be hurtful but does not unpack either the bisexual character's sexuality or the potential biphobia at play can be relegated fairly easily to a character flaw (here, in Archer) and not true to Fire's own feelings, experiences, or sexuality.

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understanding and bond between these two characters, compelling the reader to emotionally invest while simultaneously providing a model for how this sort of revelation *could* work when bisexuality is not a deterrent from romantic/sexual/emotional pursuit of a person.

Wilde takes a very different approach in one particular *Queens of Geek* moment, instead tackling biphobia head-on. While Charlie and her friend are speaking with Charlie's then-boyfriend Reese in a flashback, his biphobia is exposed. The direction of sympathy is a vital consideration here; that is, Wilde is focusing the reader's compassion directly on a maligned bisexual Charlie, with no narrative energy dedicated to justifying or explaining away Reese's bigotry. Compared to Barbara, who is Leo's oldest friend and love interest and a figure whom Baldwin makes multifaceted, Reese is clearly positioned as a narcissistic antagonist who lacks empathy or even basic consideration of others. 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).[17] Charlie's friend takes the opportunity to say, "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 in me?" When Reese dismisses her bisexuality as impossible because she's a) with him, and b) never been in a relationship with a woman, Charlie very clearly shuts that line of thinking down when she says, "I'm still bi" (106).

This strategy of debating biphobia directly in dialogue offers the opportunity to write bisexuality into a narrative and to represent the kinds of issues that bisexual people face and the assumptions they all too typically combat. It allows the bisexual character to assert the validity of their own sexuality, a sexuality that readers might themselves share. It can offer perspective to readers who might not consider certain attitudes as biphobic or monosexist, and it can challenge harmful cultural assumptions.

In *These Witches Don't Burn*, Sterling taps into a subtler moment of biphobia than Wilde does. Here, bisexuality is infused into a "get to know you" conversation during a date. While talking about her ex-boyfriend, love interest Morgan leaves protagonist Hannah "trying to piece together what might have happened" (139). Hannah implicitly believes that Morgan cannot have an active interest in both men and women, though Hannah does not immediately recognize this as a problematic

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17   Milaine Alarie and Stephanie Gaudet (2013) conducted interviews and reported the results in "'I Don't Know If She Is Bisexual or If She Just Wants to Get Attention': Analyzing the Various Mechanisms Through Which Emerging Adults Invisibilize Bisexuality." A "self-identified homosexual" depicts it as a phase, saying "Bisexual people … Personally, I don't believe in it…. The more you sleep with or date men and women, the more you'll discover your preference" (201). The fictional conversation has root in real experiences of bisexual people. This conversation—and its confrontation of biphobia and monosexism— works toward verisimilitude.

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assumption. What follows is an uncomfortable conversation that illuminates a certain line of pre-sumptive thinking in the protagonist, one that can spur the reader to question their own assumptions. Hannah asks, "Did you date him before you came out? …Is that why you broke up?" Morgan responds, "No, I came out in middle school. I'm bi… That's not a problem, is it?" Hannah notes in the narration that "her question [is] more challenge than curiosity, and I hate that I've put her on the defensive like this." Hannah immediately says, "No, of course not. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed" (139).

Here, Sterling has taken the opportunity to give the reader insight into the protagonist, the char-acter that we should feel for and root for, and clarifies that even people we might empathize with can make problematic missteps—and, by extension, so can we. Hannah recognizes her heteronormative and homonormative thinking (and her internalized monosexism) and, while she did not mean harm by it, she apologizes after recognizing the problem. Sterling writes a character who is not perfect, but who is open to learning despite this. It is this potential to grow and unlearn harmful thought patterns that makes this conversation an important moment in the narrative even beyond these par-ticular characters and their relationship.

Using the strategy of conversations might be the most likely to get a piece of fiction labelled as "heavy-handed" or "preachy." However, this is in some ways the risk that a writer takes when writing about a marginalized character or community. Janelle Adsit writes about how "student-writers in creative writing may be discouraged from having an intention for their work at all, based on a rhetoric-versus-aesthetic binary[18] that argues only the former mode of discourse, rhetoric, can be driven by a specific purpose" (51). Such intentions or specific purposes may simply become more obvious to a reader (especially a reader who doesn't want "social messages" in fiction) when detailed conversations take up space on the page. Matthew Salesses writes that "Craft is the history of which kind of stories have typically held power—and for whom—so it is also the history of which stories have typically been omitted. That we have certain expectations for what a story is or should include means we also have certain expectations for what a story isn't or shouldn't include" (19). All writing is built upon intention, and so Adsit's observation of discouraging authorial intention highlights the question of what intentions are flagged as problematic. What is the overlap between these allegedly problematic intentions and the stories which Salesses points to as having typically omitted? To put it more plainly: is this distaste for intentionality in fiction predominantly a criticism leveled at stories

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18   In his review of Baldwin's Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Mario Puzo (1968) wrote of the novel as "polemical fiction," claiming that Baldwin seems to believe "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 not time for Baldwin to forget the black revolution and start worrying about himself as an artist, who is the ultimate revolutionary" (par. 13).

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that center marginalized peoples and their experiences?

The expectation for a story to not include social messages is not a reason to avoid the strategy of Having Conversations; it is simply something to be aware of. Regardless of such risks, a conversation about bisexuality can add one angle of depth to a character, theme, and/or plot.

CONCLUSION

Representing bisexuality does not have to focus the story entirely around sexuality. It does not need to shape a story into a coming out narrative, or a romance, or a story about a breakup, though these are all certainly narrative options at a writer's disposal. However, bisexual characters exist with other complex character traits, and have stories beyond their romantic/sexual relationships. It is important to recognize the sheer range of stories that serve as examples here. These stories cover realism, fantasy, science fiction, and romance. Some of them center on the queer romantic/sexual journey of their characters, while others simply include their characters' queerness in the process of exploring other plots and themes. And so, while analyzing how these authors represent bisexuality, note that they have written about bisexual actors, bisexual brujas and witches, bisexual adventurers, bisexual internet celebrities, and bisexual pandemic survivors. Bisexuality in no way limits fiction, or means that a story by necessity must become an "issue book."

Bisexuality, like sexuality in general, is complicated and nuanced and no single writer and/or bisexual person can speak to The Bisexual Experience™. Experiences vary based on the individual's personality and how the individual's specific sexual and romantic iteration works (and this can even shift for a person over time). Experiences can be influenced by intersectional considerations such as gender, race, and disability. A writer shouldn't feel pressured to represent all of bisexual experience in one single story; it is not an achievable goal and only sets a writer up for inevitable failure. The strategies of craft that are presented here come from one particular bi writer's perspective after years of studying creative writing, literature, and bisexuality. Other bi+ folks will not agree with every point that is presented here, and they might have different perspectives and approaches that a writer could consider.

James Baldwin writes in "The Creative Process" that "The role of the artist… is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest; so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place" (669). The goal, even beyond these five particular strategies, is to help writers create fair and responsible representation. This might involve reading craft essays from multiple perspectives, reading bi+ literature,

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19 When Adsit discusses researching as a part of writing fiction, she specifically lists the resources of interviews, archival research, immersion, observation, and other artforms (86).

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watching documentaries/interviews, hiring sensitivity readers, and utilizing other such resources as available.[19] This particular discussion of craft is meant as one way to start to consider how to actually go about writing bisexual characters into fiction, but it is intended as one perspective in a sea of many, and it will, ideally, be the beginning of a conversation and not misinterpreted as an end of one.

APPENDIX

Strategy #1: Implying

The bisexuality of a character is hinted at in some limited way but is never made explicit. It offers the strength of allowing for some level of bi+ representation, especially in sociocultural contexts that otherwise limit or prevent such representation. However, its weaknesses include the ease of bi erasure (particularly in a reader's ability to explain such implications away) and the risk of queerbaiting. Craft techniques most often used in this strategy include description (which is considerably influenced by point of view), dialogue, and conflict.

Strategy #2: Demonstrating

Actions clarify some form of non-monosexuality. The central strength of demonstrating is that this is observable representation of non-monosexuality that can be clearly identified in the narrative. If used as the sole strategy, especially in absence of a bi/bi+ label, two primary weaknesses can result: the bisexuality can be erased/explained away, and it could result in mislabeling a character who is not bi as bi. Demonstrating can include the craft techniques of character relationships, description (about specific attraction to specific people), backstory, and plot.

Strategy #3: Describing

A character's attraction is described in a way that clarifies an attraction to more than one gender. The strength of describing is that it clarifies specific iterations/experiences of bi+ attraction. However, without an explicit label, it shares a weakness with demonstrating in its potential to mislabel a character as bi when it might not be appropriate. Craft techniques that can incorporate this strategy include description, point of view, interiority, and dialogue.

Strategy #4: Using Explicit Labels

Some iteration of bi, bisexual, biromantic, or bi+ is used. Its strengths include clarity and certainty of bi identity for the reader. Its weakness is that the label might be briefly used without the identity having any effect on other craft elements such as characterization, backstory, and plot. Craft techniques for using explicit labels include diction, dialogue, and narration.

Strategy #5: Having Conversations

Bisexuality is discussed directly beyond the use of the label. Its strength is that it can deepen bi+ identity/experience as represented in the narrative, expanding detail and nuance. This strategy also allows the potential to confront biphobia directly. Its central weakness is that readers might label such conversations in fiction as "heavy-handed" or "preachy." Having conversations primarily uses the craft technique of dialogue, though it can affect other craft elements such as theme, plot, stakes, and characterization.

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