

30 Years of Bisexuality in Russia (1993-2023)

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Short Abstract

This thesis is the first to uncover the specific cultural history of bisexuality in Russia. I chart bisexual sources and voices across a thirty-year period: from 1993, when male homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia, to 2023, when the ‘international LGBT movement’ was branded an extremist organisation. By this time, the national ban on ‘propaganda of non-traditional relations’ had been extended to the entire population. This choice of time frame, bookended by near opposite legislative milestones, has allowed me to trace how attitudes towards—and experiences of—bisexuality have fluctuated throughout a period where LGBTQ+ adults were theoretically legally able to date and express same-sex desire semi-openly in Russia before it became completely unsafe and illegal to do so. Each chapter contributes to identifying an archive of previously unresearched Russian bisexual voices. The structure aims to reconstruct the language and information environments that Russian bisexuals may have been able to access at different times in the period, and to reflect on how these potentially shaped possibilities for (self-)understanding. I then use this contextualisation to illuminate cultural images of bisexuality and establish the ways in which certain themes reverberate across multiple spheres of entertainment, or have, by contrast, been challenged by queer creative teams invested in grounding artistic representations of bisexuality in lived experiences. Specifically, the chapters focus on: discussions of bisexuality in the independent lesbian and gay press of the 1990s and early 2000s; the evolution of bisexuality in the content and structures of landmark LGBTQ+ Russian-language websites; the mobilisation of bisexuality as a plot device in film and music videos; and the bisexual dimensions of plot, character, and aesthetics in literature and poetry. This multi-disciplinary approach provides a holistic view of how bisexual themes, people, and characters have been (self-)represented across the period.

Long Abstract

In writing this thesis, I set out to establish how bisexuality has been treated in Russian history and culture between 1993 and 2023. When I began the project in 2021, very little had been published on bisexuality in Russia. A handful of studies had considered bisexuality in Silver Age poetry and religious philosophy. There was one article about a bisexual activist's social media strategies. Aside from this, bisexuality was mentioned but bracketed away in discussions of Russian cinema and literature, posed as a tangential question rather than significant to the core interpretation of the sources at hand. As such, it was unclear what kind of materials I would be able to locate and there were many unanswered questions. When did the language of bisexual identity become popularised in Russia? Where can we find examples of bisexuality in Russian culture, and which versions of bisexuality have been most prominently portrayed? Which kind of bisexual representation has proven most intelligible to local audiences? And importantly, what work are these models of bisexuality doing in different historical moments across the period? I hoped that in answering these questions, I would be able to tell an interconnected, multimedia story of bisexuality in Russia which illuminated parallels between bisexual lives and their representations in art.

When the prospect of conducting any archival work in Russia disappeared, I was fortunate that my supervisor, Dan Healey, was able to entrust me with a digitised collection of gay and lesbian journals that had been gifted to him on a USB stick by Elena Gusyatsinskaya, founder of the Moscow Lesbian and Gay Archive. This body of materials became the basis for my first chapter. The collection informed the initial direction of research into bisexual lives in 1990s and early 2000s Russia, and I set out to establish the extent to which bisexuality was deemed of interest in the press, whether bisexual content was intentionally incorporated and why, as well as which traces of bisexual readership were contained within its pages.

This archival work led me to consider the role of materiality and information environments in bisexual identity building and community formation. I became increasingly aware that these ephemeral print journals were usually enthusiastic but short-lived, struggling to cover the costs of production particularly as the web took off. I wondered then about LGBTQ+ internet history in Russia. I was surprised to find remarkably little scholarship addressing how shifts in communication technology and the increasing immediacy of accessing information affected this marginalised group, providing new opportunities for self-discovery and organisation. I elected to work with the Internet Archive to trace the transition from print media to the digital sphere, attempting at each stage to spotlight the types of bisexual content that website owners prioritised sharing, as well as the digital footprints of the bisexual users who interacted with these platforms.

This history inevitably involved wrestling with the politicisation and censorship of LGBTQ+ identities and expression in Russia, as attempts to regulate sexuality and the online sphere posed particular challenges for the state. Indeed, cultural images of the bisexual seemed entangled with geopolitics. Bisexual plots centred around love triangles with male and female lovers who represented different subject positions and economic or political influences, meaning that bisexual characters and their uncertain relationships came to represent Russia and its uncertain future against the backdrop of radical historical changes. As had been found in Anglophone bisexual theory, bisexuality seemed to dramatize clashing ideologies and identities according to multiple binary frameworks of insider and outsider groups.

As I analysed these audio-visual depictions of bisexuality, I grew more interested in how matters of form determined the adoption of bisexual tropes and stereotypes for the quick communication and visualisation of abstract concepts. My final chapter considered whether

the same strategies were adopted not only on the screen, but on the page. I found that while some of these techniques and metaphorical mobilisations of bisexuality were utilised, many of the fictional sources I was working with in fact also drew on lived experiences. More often than in the case of films and music videos, the written word provided a means for bisexual subjectivities to be articulated in the first person, and for bisexual lives in the past to be retrospectively documented in narrative form.

Throughout these chapters, I aimed to provide both depth and breadth of analysis through a series of case studies, focusing in on how linguistic, visual, and structural devices shaped theorisations and applications of bisexuality in a range of factual and fictional media. Uncovering this hidden bisexual cultural history, my thesis therefore contributes to the field of queer Russian studies by providing a uniquely bisexual perspective, and to the field of bisexual theory through its focus on the Russian context. It is the first book-length history of bisexuality in Russia, as well as the first sustained research project to explore bisexuality in contemporary Russian literature and audio-visual materials. It brings to light the voices and creative endeavours of and about Russians who self-identify as bisexual, or who otherwise experience attraction to more than one gender. Now more than ever, it is crucial that these voices and artistic representations are preserved.

Introduction: Queering Bi Russia

This thesis investigates the place of bisexuality in Russian history and culture between 1993 and 2023. It contributes to the field by providing a bisexual perspective: bringing to light the voices and creative endeavours of and about people who self-identify as bisexual or otherwise experience attraction to more than one gender. It is the first history of bisexuality in Russia, as well as the first project to explore bisexuality in contemporary Russian literature and film. The chapters which follow tease out bisexual triangulations and identities in sources previously cast as more straightforwardly “gay” or “lesbian” in addition to unearthing a range of new bisexual sources.

The archival element of this project—that is, to identify and curate a Russian bisexual canon—is a motivation I have found reflected in many sources I am working with. Several have made important strides in collating a wide range of bisexual texts and histories from within Russian geographic and linguistic spaces, as well as redistributing the information through their print or digital networks. At different moments in the period, such projects have sought to educate and foster a sense of bisexual community. By adopting a similarly holistic approach in this thesis, I aim to reinforce these disparate attempts by combining them, salvaging their discoveries, and adding a significant body of new materials and greater contextualisation. I hope, therefore, to provide the historicised narrativization necessary to proving the longstanding existence and cultural activities of bisexuals in Russia.

To achieve this, I focus on four key areas, which I outline in greater detail in the sections below. These are: bisexual voices in the independent gay and lesbian print press; bisexuality on LGBTQ+ Russian websites; bisexual characters and plots in film and music videos; and how bisexuality has been represented in literature and poetry. As such, the methodology and

analytical framework I have developed draws on research conducted in multiple disciplines. These span bisexual theory, queer theory, and gay and lesbian studies, as well as Russian queer studies, history, and cultural studies. I provide an overview of this body of literature in the sections below and introduce genre-specific theory and contexts at the beginning of each chapter.

Timeframe

The thesis covers a thirty-year period: from 1993, when male homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia, to 2023, when the ‘international LGBT movement’ was branded an extremist organisation. By this time, the national ban on ‘propaganda of non-traditional relations’ had been extended to the entire population. This time frame, bookended by near opposite legislative milestones, enables us to trace how attitudes towards—and experiences of—bisexuality have fluctuated throughout a period where LGBTQ+ adults were theoretically legally able to date and express same-sex desire semi-openly before it became entirely unsafe and illegal to do so. Though any sense of queer liberation was mitigated by the realities of anti-LGBTQ+ violence, state homophobia, and a legal system which systematically failed to protect victims of hate crimes while holding up the “gay panic” defence (among other injustices), there remained some possibilities for mobilising and creating queer cultural projects.¹

These possibilities came under threat at various moments: the first local bans on ‘propaganda of non-traditional relations’ among minors were introduced in 2006, which laid the foundations for the first national ban in 2013; the foreign agents laws introduced from 2012

¹ Alexander Kondakov, *Violent Affections: Queer Sexuality, Techniques of Power, and Law in Russia* (London: UCL Press, 2022), 112. Kondakov later notes that legal testimonies ‘struggle to articulate unspecified or changing sexualities’ and resort to the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a rigid taxonomy [116].

have been used to target particular professions and groups, including LGBTQ+ activism and gender and feminist studies; and finally, the expansion of the propaganda law to the whole population in November 2023. Cultural events such as QueerFest and the Bok o bok film festival were attacked by right-wing aggressors, intimidated by the police, and violently threatened by political figures such as Vitaly Milonov. Yet as we will see, activists, creatives and academics pushed back against oppressive measures, leading queer Russian culture to flourish despite increasing risks.

State of the Field

In writing this thesis, I am putting bisexual Russian art and life in conversation with the field of Queer Russian Studies. Research into queer Russian lives and representations has grown to be a major area of inquiry since the scholarship first emerged in the late 1990s. Kickstarted by accounts of queer communities in early post-Soviet Russia, such as the travelogues by Laurie Essig and David Tuller or the interview work by Dan Schluter, academic interest in LGBTQ+ Russia has grown rapidly across a range of disciplines.² The foundational texts on homosexuality in revolutionary Russia were written by historian Dan Healey, whose extensive contributions to the field include tracing the roots of state homophobia, interrogating the invention of ‘traditional values’, and analysing the national idea in gay men’s pornography.³ Other historians have expanded on these landmark studies of homosexuality

² Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke University Press, 1999); David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Dan Schluter, ‘Fraternity without Community: Social Institutions in the Soviet Gay World’ (PhD, Columbia University, 1998); Dan Schluter, *Gay Life in the Former USSR: Fraternity without Community* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

³ Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Dan Healey, “‘Untraditional Sex’ and the “Simple Russian”: Nostalgia for Soviet Innocence in the Polemics of Dilia Enikeeva’, in *What Is Soviet Now? Identities, Legacies, Memories*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon, Jr. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008), 173–91; Dan Healey, ‘Active, Passive, and Russian: The National Idea in Gay Men’s Pornography’, *The Russian Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 210–30; Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

in the USSR, particularly in terms of: same-sex intimacy in the Gulag; the impact of the criminal code on homosexual life; first-person, medicalised accounts of homosexuality; the extent to which female same-sex desire was medicalised rather than criminalised in the Soviet Union; and studies of homosexual sources in earlier periods such as late Imperial and fin-de-siècle Russia.⁴ There has remained a tendency to concentrate on male homosexuality, partly due to the historical records available and the fact that male homosexuality specifically was re-criminalised in 1934 under Stalin (and earlier, under Peter I's military codes). Nonetheless, the histories of lesbian lives and subcultures in Russia have been treated in key monographs by Olga Zhuk and Francesca Stella.⁵

Studies of LGBTQ+ culture have flourished alongside the increased academic interest in LGBTQ+ lives and histories. Several key research clusters, which can be grouped roughly by media type, have formed since *Out of the Blue* (1997), an anthology of translated texts by and about gay men, first appeared.⁶ Strides have been made in literature in areas such as: understanding the complex positionality of contemporary queer authors as vulnerable agents; seeing the mechanisms through which homosexuality operates as a phantasmic threat in popular fiction; and how Russian nationality is constructed and contested in fictions about

⁴ Rustam Alexander, *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91: A Different History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021); Rustam Alexander, *Red Closet: The Hidden History of Gay Oppression in the USSR* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); Tomas M. Mielke, *The Russian Homosexual Lexicon: Consensual and Prison Camp Sexuality among Men* ([Scotts Valley]: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); Adi Kuntsman, “‘With a Shade of Disgust’: Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag”, *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (2009): 308–28; Ira Roldugina, “‘Why Are We the People We Are?’ Early Soviet Homosexuals from the First-Person Perspective”, in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C. M. Mole (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019), 16–31; Ira Roldugina, ‘Homosexuality in the Late Imperial Russian Navy: A Microhistory’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 3 (2021): 451–78; Artur Clech, ‘Between the Labour Camp and the Clinic’, in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C. M. Mole (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019), 32–55; Olga Petri, *Places of Tenderness and Heat: The Queer Milieu of Fin-de-Siècle St. Petersburg* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁵ Olga Zhuk, *Russkie amazonki: istoriia lesbiiskoi subkul'tury v Rossii XX vek* (Moskva: Izd-vo Glagol, 1998); Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014).

⁶ Kevin Moss, *Out of the Blue: Russia's Hidden Gay Literature* (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1997).

queer transnational encounters.⁷ Surveys of post-Soviet lesbian writing have identified important literary movements and styles adopted by queer women, while work on particular authors such as the late Soviet writer Evgenii Kharitonov or the poet and photographer Yaroslav Mogutin has analysed how these influential figures challenged mainstream silence and constructed gay identities.⁸ In recent years, several edited volumes have brought together scholars working on art, media, and culture to offer queer interpretations of earlier texts and identify how discourses about queerness have been explored, reflected, or upended in different genres.⁹ Music has proven of particular interest both in terms of the way post-Soviet artists projected and profited from queer personas nationally and internationally, as well as how performers have been received by different audiences over time.¹⁰ While a gay cinematic canon has already been proposed and analysed, work on queer cinema more broadly is

⁷ Roman Utkin, 'Queer Vulnerability and Russian Poetry after the "Gay Propaganda" Law', *Russian Review* 80 (2021): 77–99; Brian James Baer, 'Engendering Suspicion: Homosexual Panic in the Post-Soviet Detektiv', *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (2005): 24–42; Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Connor Doak, 'Queer Transnational Encounters in Russian Literature: Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity', in *Transnational Russian Studies*, ed. Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 213–31.

⁸ Aleksandr Chantsev, "'Our Attitude Toward This Passion": Lesbian Literature, from Subculture to Culture', *Russian Studies in Literature* 45, no. 3 (2009): 53–94; Brian James Baer, 'Body or Soul: Representing Lesbians in Post-Soviet Russian Culture', *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 284–98; Kevin Moss, 'Camp Kharitonov and Russian Gay Identity', in *Go East! LGBTQ+ Literature in Eastern Europe* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, 2020), 101–11; Tatiana Klepikova, "'If a Cutie, Then Always Misha": Evgenii Kharitonov's Queer Masculinities', in *Go East! LGBTQ+ Literature in Eastern Europe* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani, 2020), 72–79; Vitaly Chernetsky, 'Literary Translation, Queer Discourses, and Cultural Transformation: Mogutin Translating/Translating Mogutin', in *Translation in Russian Contexts: Culture, Politics, Identity*, ed. Brian James Baer and Susanna Witt (New York: Routledge, 2017), 306–20.

⁹ Galina Miazhevich, ed., *Queering Russian Media and Culture*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2022); Brian James Baer and Yevgeniy Fiks, eds., *Queer(Ing) Russian Art: Realism, Revolution, Performance* (USA: Academic Studies Press, 2023).

¹⁰ Dana Heller, 'T.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop', *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 195–210; Stephen Amico, 'Visible Difference, Audible Difference: Female Singers and Gay Male Fans in Russian Popular Music' 32, no. 3 (2009): 351–70; Stephen Amico, *Roll Over, Tchaikovsky!: Russian Popular Music and Post-Soviet Homosexuality*, New Perspectives on Gender in Music (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Katharina Weidlack and Masha Neufeld, 'My Ne Rockery, Ne Panki, My Devochki/Not Rockers, Not Punks, We're Lesbian Chicks: Staging Female Same Sex Desires in Russian Rock and Pop Music', in *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 153–76; Philip Bullock, "'That's Not the Only Reason We Love Him": Chaikovsky Reception in Post-Soviet Russia', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C. M. Mole (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019), 103–28; Maria Brock and Galina Miazhevich, 'From High Camp to Post-Modern Camp: Queering Post-Soviet Pop Music', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4 (2022): 993–1009.

garnering interest too, with the first special issue on queer Russian cinema published in 2023 and queer web series likewise gaining attention.¹¹

The research above has by and large been published in English by academics located in the West. Due to crackdowns on gender and sexuality studies, as well as the Russian academy's bolstering of anti-LGBT science, national scholarship on queer topics has long been under threat.¹² Today, conducting and disseminating LGBTQ+ research in Russia is sadly no longer safe. As mentioned above, this is due in large part to the classification of an imagined "international LGBT movement" as a terrorist organisation and the total ban on anything potentially construed as propaganda of "non-traditional" sexuality or gender identity. Draconian legislation, media discourses, and other political and military forces have actively driven LGBTQ+ people out of Russia.¹³ Yet between the first national ban on "gay propaganda" in 2013, and the second extended ban in 2023, a wave of new materials and scholarship surfaced in response to official homophobia—a phenomenon termed 'Putin's incitement to discourse'.¹⁴ Scholars from Russia continued to publish and, in 2014, an

¹¹ Kevin Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy: Gay Male Visibility in Post-Soviet Russian Films', in *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Culture*, ed. Andrea P. Balogh and Narcisz Fejes (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2013), 197–220; Vlad Strukov, 'Introduction: "Different (Everyone Is So)": Conceptualisations of Russian and Russophone Queer Cinema in the Twenty-First Century', *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 17, no. 3 (2023): 140–53; Saara Ratilainen, 'Lesbian Love Stories and Online Popular Culture: The Case of Web Series', in *Queering Russian Media and Culture*, ed. Galina Miazhevich (Taylor & Francis, 2022), 154–72; Artem Prokhorov, 'The Reversed Monomyth in a Queer Russian Web Series', *Textual Practice*, December 2023.

¹² Ella Rossman, 'Rossiiskie Vlasti Snachala Ne Vosprinimali Issledovatelei Gendera Vser'ez, a Potom Nachali Ikh Presle- Dovat'. I, Konechno Zhe, Ob"iavlat' "Innostranymi Agentami" Vot Kak Eto Ustroeno', Meduza, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/10/07/rossiyskie-vlasti-snachala-ne-vosprinimali-issledovateley-gendera-vseriez-a-potom-nachali-ih-presledovat-i-konechno-zhe-ob-yavlyat-inostrannymi-agentami>; Valerie Sperling et al., 'Vladimir Putin, the Czar of Macho Politics, Is Threatened by Gender and Sexuality Rights', *The Conversation*, 2022, https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-the-czar-of-macho-politics-is-threatened-by-gender-and-sexuality-rights-180473?fbclid=IwAR2zgEjZpesjndnNetSmRfHG9nLsLf_eHoRBixFy9DZdNLEDcRP7C6rt1Q; Alexander Kondakov, 'Teaching Queer Theory in Russia', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 2 (2016): 107–18; Kevin Moss, 'Russia's Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made', *The Russian Review* 80 (January 2021): 17–36.

¹³ Alexandra Novitskaya, 'Sexual Citizens in Exile: State-Sponsored Homophobia and Post-Soviet LGBTQI+ Migration', *The Russian Review* 80 (January 2021): 56–76.

¹⁴ Dan Healey, 'Afterword: Making Russia Queerer, or the Strange Paradox of Putin's Incitement to Discourse', in *Queering Russian Media and Culture*, ed. Galina Miazhevich (Taylor & Francis, 2022), 191–99; see also Kondakov, 'Teaching Queer Theory in Russia'.

interdisciplinary volume appeared in Russian following a queer conference in St Petersburg, fostering greater academic collaboration between local and international scholars.¹⁵ As state homophobia solidified and increasingly repressive legislation was introduced, a significant proportion of research was dedicated to studying LGBTQ+ contemporary activist resistance, discovering the diverse strategies mobilised to progress the cause as well as how these movements are being remembered.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Putin's highly contrived, hypermasculine self-presentation has come under close scrutiny as a populist tool for political legitimacy and international soft power.¹⁷ Weaponizing homophobia, Putin's Russia has attempted to assert itself as a world stronghold of masculinity and heterosexuality—and ultimately to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which, by contrast, has been feminised and marked as pro-queer and pro-West.¹⁸

The urgency of studying LGBTQ+ Russia has therefore only increased. As I have demonstrated, the field today is wide-ranging: scholars are uncovering and recovering LGBTQ+ knowledge from various time periods, media, subcultures, and political movements. However, gaps in the literature remain. Calls for papers still rarely produce responses on topics outside of gay and lesbian studies, requiring editors to actively seek out

¹⁵ Alexander Kondakov, ed., *Na pereput'e: Metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniy [Sbornik Statei]* (Sankt-Peterburg, 2014).

¹⁶ For instance: Lucy Pakhnyuk, 'Foreign Agents and Gay Propaganda: Russian Lgbt Rights Activism under Pressure', *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2019): 479–96; Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova, *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Radzhana Buyantueva, *The Emergence and Development of LGBT Protest Activity in Russia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Pauline Stoltz and Anna Khlusova, 'Russian LGBT Activism and the Memory Politics of Sexual Citizenship', *Memory Studies*, 2024, 1–16.

¹⁷ Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julie A. Cassiday, *Russian Style: Performing Gender, Power, and Putinism* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023).

¹⁸ Alexander Kondakov and Laurie Essig, 'A Cold War for the Twenty-First Century: Homosexuality vs. Heterosexuality', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C. M. Mole (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 79–102; Sperling et al., 'Vladimir Putin'; Elizaveta Gaufman, 'Damsels in Distress: Fragile Masculinity in Digital War', *Media, War & Conflict* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1–12.

submissions related to other sexual and gender identities, or which deal with intersections with underrepresented ethnic and religious identities.¹⁹

Interest in transgender and non-binary topics has recently gained traction, with several scholars convincingly arguing for reading certain historical figures as transgender. Nick Mayhew has examined the depiction of masculinity and holy foolishness in the hagiographies of two transmasculine saints canonised as women—the 16th century Russian translation of the Byzantine Feodor/a of Alexandria, and the 19th century local Russian saint known by the names Andrei and Kseniia.²⁰ Margarita Vaysman’s work on the Russian-Ukrainian Napoleonic war hero Aleksandr Aleksandrov likewise draws attention to transmasculine identity in the 19th century and how Aleksandrov’s gender transgression was resolved heteronormatively in biographies and adaptations of his life.²¹ Yana Kirey-Sitnikova’s work on transgender activism, feminism, and language has laid essential groundwork for exploring 20th and 21st century transgender Russian history, as well as outlining the strategies non-binary people in Russia have adopted to articulate gender ambiguity using their native language.²² My own work on the ‘trans* stories’ published by the LGBTQ+ initiative *Vykhod* explored how these linguistic strategies were used in life writing, highlighting the connections that authors saw between their transness and their queerness, often emphasising the fluidity of

¹⁹ Dan Healey and Francesca Stella, ‘Sexual and Gender Dissent in the USSR and Post-Soviet Space’, *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 62, no. 2–3 (2021): 225–50; Connor Doak, ‘Introduction: Queer Life Writing in Russia and Beyond’, *Autobiografija* 11 (2022): 19–32.

²⁰ Nick Mayhew, ‘Holy Foolishness and Gender Transgression in Russian Hagiography from the Middle Ages to Modernity’, in *Medieval Rus’ and Early Modern Russia: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Susana Torres Prieto and Andrei Franklin (London: Routledge, 2023), 49–66.

²¹ Margarita Vaysman, ‘“I Became a Man in a Military Camp”: Negotiating a Transmasculine Identity in Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)’s Personal Documents and Literary Fiction’, *Autobiografija* 11 (2022): 33–62.

²² Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, ‘The Emergence of Transfeminism in Russia: Opposition from Cisnormative Feminists and Trans* People’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 165–75; Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, ‘Borrowing and Imitation in Post-Soviet Trans Activisms’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities* 2, ed. Zowie Davy et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), 774–97; Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, ‘Prospects and Challenges of Gender Neutralization in Russian’, *Russian Linguistics* 45, no. 2 (2021): 143–58.

identity.²³ Sadly, the sense of agency found here may be contrasted with research into how violence operates against transgender Russians on multiple levels—as shown by Evgeny Shtorn’s recent analysis of media reports about the murder of Anzhelina Likina in 2016 by the partner of her ex-wife, in which allegations of domestic violence were used as a narrative justification.²⁴

While not the direct focus of this thesis, in many cases, the sources I analyse underscore a connection between bisexuality and transness. Bisexuality and trans/non-binary subjectivities each confuse the binary systems of sexuality and gender, conceived as falling between, beyond, or across the homosexual/heterosexual and male/female divides – and are therefore rendered ‘unintelligible’.²⁵ Moreover, while no such statistics exist for Russia, a 2012 U.S. survey has found that as many as 25% of transgender youth identified as bisexual.²⁶ As will be seen in several case studies, bisexual and pansexual people may also offer a level of comfort to a transgender partner who is socially or medically transitioning, given that they are not necessarily expected to be attracted to strictly-defined gender presentations or secondary sex characteristics. Strong associations between bisexuality and androgyny in Russian culture and sexology further cement the connection, as I detail below.

²³ Rowan Dowling, ‘Russian Trans* Stories: Collective Transgender Autobiography as Activism’, *Autobiografija* 11 (2022): 161–86.

²⁴ Evgenii Shtorn, ‘Domestic Violence and Murder of a Transgender Women in Russian Media (the Case of Anzhela Likina)’, *Journal of Family Violence*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00625-4>.

²⁵ Sebastian Cordoba, ‘Non-Binary Sexualities: The Language of Desire, Practice, and Embodiment’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, ed. Zowie Davy et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), 881.

²⁶ David Deschamps and Bennett Singer, *LGBTQ Stats: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer People by the Numbers* (New York; London: The New Press, 2017), 62.

Studies of Bisexuality in Russia

An account of how same-sex desire has been treated in Russian culture and society is incomplete without reckoning with bisexual lives and representations. However, like the case of transgender subjectivities, research with a specifically bisexual focus is limited. The underrepresentation of bisexuality is typical not only of Russian Studies, but of LGBTQ+ research in other global contexts. Bi theory continues to lack perspectives from Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Global South. Research into bisexuality has predominantly taken place in the UK and the US, with a focus on bisexual communities and cultures formed within those national contexts. In 2021, the first edited volume was published which brought together bisexual research centring on a wider range of European countries including Austria, Finland, Italy, and the Netherlands.²⁷ The editors acknowledged, however, that the volume lacks Central and Eastern European perspectives, naming Ráhel Katalin Turai's doctoral thesis on bisexuality in Hungary as an example of early career bisexual research in English coming from a post-socialist country.²⁸ Even bisexual monographs which have been praised for addressing the imbalance of national contexts in the field by including data from the Global South alongside the Global North weight their analysis unevenly. For example, Surya Monro's influential book on bisexual identities and theories includes far more empirical research conducted in the U.K. than Columbia, and more data collected from web content and academic literature in the U.K and U.S. than in India.²⁹ Outside of academia, anthologies of bisexual life writing intended to showcase geographically diverse experiences neglect Central and Eastern Europe.³⁰

²⁷ Emiel Maliepaard and Renate Baumgartner, eds., *Bisexuality in Europe: Sexual Citizenship, Romantic Relationships, and Bi+ Identities* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

²⁸ Ráhel Katalin Turai, 'Sexual Transitions: Biographical Bisexuality in Post-Socialist Hungary' (Dissertation, Budapest, Hungary, Central European University, 2017).

²⁹ Surya Monro, *Bisexuality: Identities, Politics, Theories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³⁰ Robyn Ochs and Sarah E. Rowley, eds., *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals around the World* (Boston: Bisexual Resource Center, 2009).

The most extensive body of literature on bisexuality in Russia is connected to the Silver Age. Scholars such as Evgenii Bershtein and Philippa Hetherington have illuminated how the religious-philosophical notion of androgynous bisexuality was integrated into the work of literary figures like Vasilii Rozanov and Zinaida Gippius, respectively.³¹ The influential poet Marina Tsvetaeva is widely considered to have been bisexual, although these interpretations, supported by scholars such as Simon Karlinsky and Sophia Poliakova, were unsettled by Diana Burgin's contention that "Tsvetaeva's basic sexual orientation was to her own sex" and arguments for her to be read as lesbian.³² The famous filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's bisexuality has likewise been attracting attention, particularly in terms of how bi elements feature in films such as *Ivan Groznyi* (1945) and in his sex drawings.³³ Like the other cultural figures listed above, it seems that Eisenstein understood bisexuality as 'both a rough model for other dialectics (those "opposites united in a single body"), and a universal experience'.³⁴

Currently, Rustam Alexander's analysis of a ten-page autobiography by a patient anonymised as Pavel Krotov (written at the request of his psychiatrist-sexopathologist Yan Goland) is the most extensive treatment of bisexuality in the late Soviet period.³⁵ Yet Alexander questions the feasibility of writing a bisexual Soviet history at all, and concludes that Krotov was not bisexual in the 'Western post-liberationist understanding' where someone exists 'on

³¹ Evgenii Bershtein, 'The Notion of Universal Bisexuality in Russian Religious Philosophy', in *Understanding Russianness*, ed. Risto Alapuro, Arto Mustajoki, and Pekka Pesonen (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 210–31; Philippa Hetherington, 'Mythos and Eros in Fin de Siècle Russia: Zinaida Gippius' Sexual Revolution' (University of Sydney, 2006).

³² Diana Lewis Burgin, 'Mother Nature versus the Amazons: Marina Tsvetaeva and Female Same-Sex Love', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 1 (July 1995): 62–88 citing; Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World, and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and; Sophia Poliakova, *[Ne]zakatnye ony dni: Tsvetaeva i Parnok* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1983).

³³ Joan Neuberger, 'Strange Circus: Eisenstein's Sex Drawings' 6, no. 1 (2012): 5–52; Maya Garcia, 'The Queer Legacy of Ivan the Terrible' (Harvard University, 2023).

³⁴ Neuberger, 'Strange Circus', 12.

³⁵ Rustam Alexander, 'Taming the desire: Pavel Krotov's "bisexual" closet', *Cahiers du monde russe* 62, no. 2/3 (September 2021): 391–414.

some blurred sexual continuum between homosexuality and heterosexuality'.³⁶ Rather, he contends that Krotov had 'a genuine homosexuality' that he tried to adjust according to compulsory heterosexuality—for while Krotov expressed bisexual aspirations and exhibited bisexual behaviour, he was not equally open to or excited by erotic relationships with men and women.³⁷ While this is undoubtedly a valid interpretation of the source base, it does leave us with the glaring question of how we might bring to light potential bisexual subjectivities in the Soviet past, and if this is a project worth pursuing.³⁸

A sub-field exploring post-Soviet and contemporary bisexuality is only now becoming established. However, apart from three interpretations of the bisexual love triangle in the film *Ya lyublyu tebya* (2004), published around a decade ago, focus is falling on contemporary bisexual lives rather than art and culture.³⁹ Two articles investigating bisexual strands of LGBTQ+ activism have been published in English, both by Olga Andreevskikh: one features a case study of a bisexual activist's online presence; the other outlines how online bi activists have utilised the strategy of sharing confessional narratives across social media platforms.⁴⁰ Most recently, Polina Kislitsyna published an in-depth article on "polysemic bisexuality" [*mnogoznachnaya biseksual'nost'*] among the participants of a bigger interview work she has been

³⁶ Alexander, 412.

³⁷ Alexander, 412.

³⁸ My thesis timeframe is 1993-2023, meaning that I cannot provide an answer to this question; the contexts, possibilities for bisexual identification, and language surrounding bisexuality are markedly different. I do, however, engage with the discussion further in Chapter IV as part of my analysis of the prison camp novella *Setka* (1994) by Gennady Trifonov, who himself spent time in the late-Soviet GULAG and drew on these experiences in his fiction.

³⁹ Alexandar Mihailovic, 'Exotic Diversity: The New Russian Consumerism and the Bisexual Triangle in Olga Stolpovskaya's Film *You I Love*', in *Queer Eroticism: Examining the Queer Exotic Within*, ed. David A. Powell and Tamara Powell (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 63–77; Baer, *Other Russias*; Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy'.

⁴⁰ Olga Andreevskikh, 'Social Networking Sites as Platforms for Transgression: Two Case Studies of Russian Women Involved in Bisexual and Transgender Rights Activism', *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media (Digitalcons.Org)* 19 (2018): 11–39; Olga Andreevskikh, 'Confessional Narratives in Digital Self- and Life-Writing of Bisexual Activists in Russia: A Case Study of Bisexual Identity Building', *Avtobiografija* 11 (2022): 187–210, <https://doi.org/10.25430/2281-6992/v11-009>.

conducting since 2018 on non-heterosexual life narratives and why *rossiiskie* select one identity over another.⁴¹

Kislitsyna's article not only analyses the fluidity and multiplicity of meanings with which her participants thought about bisexuality, but provides a historical overview of key English-language bisexual research and theoretical conceptualisations of bisexuality for a Russian-speaking academic audience. As she notes, Russian-language materials and social studies on bisexuality have practically not been published. Aside from Maxim Kasianczuk's survey of internalised homophobia of bisexual men in Ukraine, which appeared in the volume *Na pereput'e* (2014), there are but a couple of substantial works on bisexuality that have appeared in Russian. The first is an inaccessible PhD thesis (2004) exploring the "foundational" nature of androgyny and bisexuality—only the *avtoreferat* is available to download and the button to purchase the full document is broken (or perhaps disabled).⁴² The other is L. V. Zharov's *Biseksual'naya revolyutsiya* (2003), which I located through the *Biblioteka LGBTIK* website that I will discuss in Chapter II.⁴³ Seemingly like Gershenovich's thesis, Zharov's pop psychology book strongly associates bisexuality with androgyny. Zharov considers bisexuality to have three meanings: first, a fundamental character of human nature; second, a term in sexology and sexopathology to refer to 'истинной' sexual attraction to both sexes and other 'транзиторных' instances of sexual contact with men and women; and finally, 'синоним понятий андрогиния [...] и гермафродитизм'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Polina Kislitsyna, 'Mnogoznachnaya biseksual'nost' i pragmatika seksual'nogo identichnosti', *Laboratorium: zhurnal sotsial'nykh issledovaniy* 15, no. 3 (2023): 72–101.

⁴² Anna Aleksandrovna Gershenovich, 'Androginizm i biseksual'nost' cheloveka v sotsiokul'turnom izmerenii' (Rostov-na-donu, Volgogradskoi gosudarstvennyi meditsinskii universitet, 2004).

⁴³ L. V. Zharov, *Biseksual'naya revolyutsiya* (Rostov-na-donu, 2003).

⁴⁴ Zharov, 6–7.

These definitions closely mirror the theorisation of bisexuality in which I describe in the Russian sexology subsection below. The confusions and anxieties about bisexuality which Zharov reveals align with those ways of thinking about bisexuality which this thesis finds to be most consistently expressed in Russian historical and cultural texts from the period:

«Голубые» и «розовые» тона бисексуальности, конечно, не исчерпывают всю палитру этого сложного явления. В сущности, более половины «великих» геев и лесбиянок являются бисексуалами и их величие не связано прямо с конфигурацией их сексуальности, а относится к их социальным и личностным качествам и достижениям.

Бисексуальность – не клеймо и не «метка», не знак особого таланта или особой порочности, ее не нужно «искать» в себе, а, обнаружив, не следует ударяться в панику и отыскивать «избавление» от этой «заразы». Наверно, труднее всего смириться именно с идеей неустранимой двойственности человека, противоречивости его развития, возможности добра обернуться злом и наоборот, что очень характерно именно для нашей национальной специфики менталитета.⁴⁵

For Zharov, bisexuality's characteristic of *dvoistvennost'* situates it in an uncomfortable liminal space. Bisexuality is both *goluboi* and *rozavaya*, and not. It is both universal potential, and not, perceived as a sign of “infection” or slippage into a homosexual lifestyle. Bisexuals are both seen as normal people, and not, because while bisexuality is a universal human potential well-documented throughout history, those who act on their bisexuality are duplicitous. Depicted as promiscuous characters or cheaters, bisexuals threaten switching from moral to immoral actions, heterosexuality to homosexuality, at any moment. Moreover, in my analysis of cinematic and written narratives, I outline the ways in which bisexuality introduces tension into a plot. Will the character cheat? Which “side” will they choose? Bisexuality says something about Russia's national anxieties too [as Zharov puts it, ‘нашей национальной специфики менталитета’]: particularly its status as the double-headed eagle looking East and West, two other seemingly irreconcilable opposites which somehow merge within the borders of the Russian Federation. As we will see, bisexual characters are therefore frequently used to embody the border. Their romantic relationships become proxies for exploring

⁴⁵ Zharov, 171.

different avenues open to Russia in contemporary international politics, or those paths which were open to Russia and former Soviet Republics in the aftermath of the Union's collapse.

All this to say: the ways in which bisexuality has been conceptualized and portrayed are complex and contradictory because the logic surrounding bisexuality is itself complex and contradictory. As stated by the bi scholar Michael du Plessis, popular accounts of bisexuality have often lent themselves to exaggeration and all-or-nothing thinking, oscillating between contradictory definitions:

there has never been, it seems, one single bisexuality, but only more or less incoherent *versions* of bisexuality [which] have had currency at particular places and times [and] necessarily have some strategic import. Why *this* bisexuality, and not that? What does a particular model of bisexuality *do* in a given place and time?⁴⁶

I pass these questions on and hope to provide initial, but well-documented, answers in this thesis. Namely: which versions of bisexuality are prominent in Russian culture? Which kind of bisexual representation has proven most intelligible in the Russian context? And importantly, what work are these models of bisexuality doing in different historical moments across the period?

Bisexuality in Queer Russian Studies

Of course, bisexuality is mentioned in queer Russian Studies scholarship beyond those few studies which focus exclusively on bi texts and identities. Sometimes bisexuality appears in the title alongside “gay” or “lesbian”. Yet bisexuality often takes the form of a question. Stephen Amico characterises Andrei Daniilko, the Ukrainian Russophone drag artist known as Verka Serdutchka, as ‘a (possibly) gay man singing as a heterosexual (possibly bisexual)

⁴⁶ Michael Du Plessis, ‘Blatantly Bisexual; or, Unthinking Queer Theory’, in *RePresenting Bisexualities* (New York University Press, 1996), 20.

woman'.⁴⁷ Rachel Morley describes the 'queer (lesbian/bisexual) relationship' which develops through a female-male-female love triangle in the film *Pro Lyubov*' (2015).⁴⁸ Where bisexuality is not tentatively suggested as a viable reading, it may be rejected. Analysing the novella *Setka* (1994) by Gennady Trifonov, Dan Healey suggests that labelling the protagonist, Korolenko, as bisexual leaves him 'the psychological freedom to return to "normal" heterosexuality upon release from prison'.⁴⁹ I discuss how textual evidence supports or confuses bisexual interpretations further in the following chapters, but the point here is that bisexuality, when it is at least considered by researchers, has frequently proven hard to pin down. In each case, the open question of a bisexual reading is either bracketed away as an afterthought or otherwise dismissed. The implication is that seriously engaging with the bisexual potential in these texts and performances would distract from the central argument.

I posit, however, that bisexual readings are far from a tangent and are in fact frequently essential to untangling the ways in which same-sex desire has been constructed in the Russian cultural imagination. Bisexuality is central to many thematizations of homosexuality. Whether named or not, it is often imagined and mobilised in plots as a "slippage" between homosexual and heterosexual lives, relationships, and (sub)cultures. Innate bisexual potential is usually taken in these sources as a given fact about human nature, either acting as a mechanism enabling characters to move between contrasting experiences or coming to represent the nation's purportedly precarious position vis-à-vis the West through romantic triangulations. I identify a wide range of sources which attest to this use of bisexuality in film, music, and literature to critique same-sex desire and its imagined disruptive and destructive impact on the heteronormative status quo. Far rarer is the kind of source where bisexuality

⁴⁷ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 87.

⁴⁸ Rachel Morley, 'Queering the Mainstream: Anna Melikian's *About Love* (2015)', *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 2023, 16.

⁴⁹ Healey, 'Active, Passive, and Russian', 230; this footnote that was later removed in an updated version of the article as a book chapter in Healey, *Russian Homophobia*.

is either named or conceived as a long-term, stable identity—and I find that frequently, these are texts which have been produced with a significant element of autobiography. Semi-fictionalised first-person experiences tend to be most interested in bisexuality as an emotional “split” within the self, as authors recall feeling confined by the binary categories available to them, try to negotiate the lack of belief in bisexuality they observe in society, and slowly settle on a new more fluid understanding of sexuality than they had previously allowed.

Bisexual Theory

Since Marjorie Garber published her landmark book *Vice Versa*, the field of bisexual theory has grown massively.⁵⁰ Garber’s work made significant contributions in bringing together wide-ranging bisexual discourses: from Calvin Klein advertising campaigns and celebrities to vampires. Yet her book was swiftly criticised for making sweeping claims about bisexuality and the nature of human ‘eroticism’, as well as for going too far in framing bisexuality as a utopian, subversive, fluid alternative to homo- and heterosexuality’s ‘fixed’ identities.⁵¹ It has since been a major project of bisexual scholarship to capture the voices of self-identified bisexuals and analyse how they conceptualise their experiences alongside, or as opposed to, bisexuality over their life course.⁵² Interview work has unveiled bi-specific struggles with acceptance in lesbian and gay spaces, attempted development of modes of self-presentation to visually communicate bisexuality, and adverse effects on bi people’s sense of security and belonging.⁵³ The issues which bisexuals face fluctuate in intensity over time depending on

⁵⁰ Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁵¹ Du Plessis, ‘Blatantly Bisexual’; Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵² Paula C. Rust, ‘Two Many and Not Enough: The Meanings of Bisexual Identities’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 1, no. 1 (2000): 31–68; Jenny Kangasvuo, ‘“There Has Been No Phase in My Life When I Wasn’t Somehow Bisexual”: Comparing the Experiences of Finnish Bisexuals in 1999 and 2010’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no. 2–3 (2011): 271–89; Rebecca L. Jones, ‘Life Course Perspectives on (Bi)Sexuality: Methodological Tools to Deprivilege Current Identities’, *Sexualities* 22, no. 7–8 (1 October 2019): 1071–93.

⁵³ Clare Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Deschamps, ‘Visual Scripts and Power Struggles: Bisexuality and Visibility’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 8, no.

their current partners, age, and the community they are involved in: for instance, while someone might consistently identify as bisexual, they must navigate alternating norms of gender performance in same- and opposite-sex relationships.⁵⁴

The project to elucidate bisexual voices goes hand in hand with finding depictions of bisexuality which present it as a stable identity and counteract ‘binegativity’.⁵⁵ Examples of binegativity include characterisations of bisexuals as ‘shady characters, untrustworthy partners, and promiscuous sluts’, or other stigmatising associations with ‘immaturity’ and deception.⁵⁶ These stereotypical portrayals have been investigated in terms of cinema, TV, music, literature, and, most recently, video games.⁵⁷ Given the extensive nature of these stereotypes, research has indicated unfavourable outcomes for mental and physical health, with calls for therapeutic practitioners to introduce more bi-aware measures.⁵⁸ The task for

1–2 (1 September 2008): 131–39; Julie E. Hartman, ‘Creating a Bisexual Display: Making Bisexuality Visible’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 13 (2013): 39–62; Rosie Nelson, “‘What Do Bisexuals Look Like?: I Don’t Know!’” Visibility, Gender, and Safety among Plurisexuality’, *Journal of Sociology* 56, no. 4 (2020): 591–607; Nikki Hayfield, *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities: Exploring and Challenging Invisibility and Invalidity* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

⁵⁴ Suzanne Pennington, ‘Bisexuals “Doing Gender” in Romantic Relationships’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 1 (2009): 33–69.

⁵⁵ Annukka Lahti, ‘Research Perspectives on Bisexuality’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, ed. Zowie Davy et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), 123–24.

⁵⁶ Christian Klesse, ‘Shady Characters, Untrustworthy Partners, and Promiscuous Sluts: Creating Bisexual Intimacies in the Face of Heteronormativity and Biphobia’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no. 2–3 (1 April 2011): 227–44.

⁵⁷ Examples include, but are not limited to: Maria Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen: Bisexual Spectatorship and Contemporary Narrative Film’, in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, ed. Donald E. Hall and Maria Pramaggiore (New York; London: New York University Press, 1996), 272–97; Brett Beemyn and Erich Steinman, eds., *Bisexual Men in Culture and Society* (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2001); Karen Yescavage and Jonathan Alexander, ‘BI FILM-VIDEO WORLD: Seeing What We Want to See: Search for Bisexual Representation in “Threesome” Films’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 3, no. 2 (2003): 109–27; B. C. Roberts, ‘Muddy Waters: Bisexuality in the Cinema’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no. 2–3 (2011): 329–45; Maria San Filippo, *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Kate Harman, “‘Bad at Love’: Halsey’s Bisexual Display’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 19, no. 4 (2019): 554–77; Steffi Shook, ‘Bisexual Representation in Games: Erasure, Stereotypes, and Independent Game Development’, in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sex and Sexuality in Game Studies*, ed. Matthew Wycsocki and Steffi Shook (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 89–102.

⁵⁸ Hannah J. Johnson, ‘Bisexuality, Mental Health, and Media Representation’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 16, no. 3 (2016): 378–96; Shani Habibi and Florence Stueck, ‘Well-Being: Bisexuality and Mental and Physical Health’, in *Bisexuality: Theories, Research, and Recommendations for the Invisible Sexuality*, ed. D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 165–88; D. Niki, ‘Now You See Me, Now You Don’t: Addressing Bisexual Invisibility in Relationship Therapy’, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 33, no. 1–2 (2018): 45–57.

some bi scholars has therefore become identifying how ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ bi representations are and advocating for particular types of storylines and characters over others given the real-world impact.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, this approach has proven divisive insofar as dedication to identifying and combatting binegativity does not encourage in-depth reflection on how understandings of bisexuality have been constructed over time (because the scholar’s main investment is in disproving stereotypes and misconceptions in the present).

[C]ontemporary accounts have generally sought to legitimate bisexuality as a sexual identity and an object of academic inquiry, through highlighting bisexuality's presence in history, the specificity of bisexual experiences, and its existence as a viable form of sexual identification. This focus on reparative history and positive representations of bisexuality means that contemporary theory has often been reluctant to historicise the category of bisexuality itself.⁶⁰

In their respective work, Merl Storr and Stephen Angelides instead sought to analyse the historical construction of bisexuality as an epistemological category.⁶¹ Angelides notably traced the ways in which bisexuality has systematically functioned as a kind of non-identity, an essential Other in the production of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. His account has been highly influential, yet not without being criticised for the opposite to the above: the book was seen to separate out the institutions of knowledge production too far from popular culture. Angelides’ historicization did not sufficiently account for how cultural texts not only circulate but generate discourses of bisexuality, such as in film, where bisexuality can simultaneously appear both ‘repressed and popular, erased and highly visible’.⁶² The split structure of my thesis, covering both historical and cultural sources, addresses this issue.

⁵⁹ Sarah Corey, ‘All Bi Myself: Analyzing Television’s Presentation of Female Bisexuality’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 17, no. 2 (2017): 190–205; Rachel Chickerella et al., ‘Janelle Monáe vs. Katy Perry: Depiction of Bi + Identities and Relationship to Depression and Stigma’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 21, no. 1 (2021): 71–93.

⁶⁰ Lachlan MacDowell, ‘Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9 (2009): 4.

⁶¹ Merl Storr, ed., *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*.

⁶² MacDowell, ‘Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality’, 8.

A central question across this entire body of bisexual research is that of bisexual visibility and ‘bi-erasure’: a term used to describe how bisexuality is invisibilised in culture, language, and professional fields.⁶³ In academia, sexualities research has only unevenly addressed bisexuality.⁶⁴ Attempts to “reclaim” the bisexuality of people in the past, uncover “hidden” histories, and figure out how individuals make themselves visibly bi in the present, all remain high on the academic agenda.⁶⁵ Calls for greater visibility are extremely common within this scholarship. Essentially, why are bisexual behaviours and narratives seemingly everywhere, but still frequently undefined and not recognized? Or rather, why is it that bisexuality is still not considered as valid or legitimate as other sexualities?⁶⁶ Kenji Yoshino’s formulation of the ‘epistemic contract of bisexual erasure’ offers a particularly resonant explanation.⁶⁷ Yoshino’s theory roots the misalignment between the higher incidence of bisexuality in the population and its limited visibility in American political and legal discourse in the idea that heterosexuals and homosexuals share an overlapping investment in keeping bisexuality invisible. An increasing number of articles consider the impact of this erasure in contexts outside of the U.S., such as Germany, Australia, and Italy.⁶⁸ Recent intersectional

⁶³ Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge, ‘Bisexuality: Working with a Silenced Sexuality’, *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2008): 389–94; Kirsten McLean, ‘Bisexuality in Society’, in *Bisexuality: Theories, Research, and Recommendations for the Invisible Sexuality*, ed. D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 77–93.

⁶⁴ Surya Monro, Sally Hines, and Antony Osborne, ‘Is Bisexuality Invisible? A Review of Sexualities Scholarship 1970–2015’, *The Sociological Review* 65, no. 4 (2017): 663–81.

⁶⁵ Nikki Hayfield et al., ‘Visible Lesbians and Invisible Bisexuals: Appearance and Visual Identities among Bisexual Women’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 40, no. September-October (2013): 172–82; Hayfield, *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities: Exploring and Challenging Invisibility and Invalidation*; Julia Shaw, *Bi: The Hidden Culture, History and Science of Bisexuality* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2022).

⁶⁶ Deschamps and Singer, *LGBTQ Stats*, 67.

⁶⁷ Kenji Yoshino, ‘The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure’, *Stanford Law Review* 52, no. 2 (2000): 353–461.

⁶⁸ Rachel Korinth, Sonya Bröning, and Urszula Martyniuk, ‘Making the Invisible Visible: Experiences of Identity (In)Visibility in Bi + Sexual Individuals in Germany’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 24, no. 4 (2024): 508–33; Misty Farquhar, ‘Real, Visible, Here: Bisexual+ Visibility in Western Australia’, *Critical Social Policy* 40, no. 2 (2020): 258–78; Salvatore Monaco, ‘Being Bisexual in Contemporary Italy: Between Stigma and Desire of Visibility’, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 41, no. 5–6 (2021): 673–88.

interventions have also articulated how bi-invisibility/bi-erasure becomes compounded by other identity categories like gender, ethnicity, and disability.⁶⁹

Bisexual theory has often found itself at odds with the anti-identarian nature of queer theory and frustrated with the lack of visibility of bisexuality in research. Early bi theorists were particularly critical of prominent queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for their perceived lack of engagement with bisexuality, some going so far as to refer to this exclusion as a ‘structuring silence’.⁷⁰ Indeed, arguing that bisexual perspectives are distinct from those which are gay, lesbian, or more broadly ‘queer’, bi scholars and activists have demonstrated that queer theory’s broadened focus—key to its attempt to move away from fixed identity categories—has the unintended consequence of ‘homogenising disparate experiences and identities’.⁷¹ Queer studies frequently consider all ‘non-heterosexuals’ together, meaning that the wide range of attractions, experiences, and representations that are (self-)reported under that umbrella can end up being effaced. That tendency to invisibilise through inclusion has been criticised widely by bi theorists, with some even going so far as to liken queer theory to a ‘cloaking device’.⁷² The idea is that when people and sources are analysed in this way, bisexuality gets obfuscated by the umbrella terms ‘queer’ and ‘LGBTQ+’, both of which risk becoming shorthand for “gay” or “lesbian” while only inconsistently including or excluding various sexual and gender identities and practices.⁷³ The

⁶⁹ Kate Caldwell, ‘We Exist: Intersectional In/Visibility in Bisexuality & Disability’, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3–4 (2010); Monica A. Ghabrial, “‘We Can Shapeshift and Build Bridges’”: Bisexual Women and Gender Diverse People of Color on Invisibility and Embracing the Borderlands’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 19, no. 2 (2019): 169–97.

⁷⁰ See MacDowell, ‘Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality’, 5 citing the following; Christopher James, ‘Denying Complexity: The Dismissal and Appropriation of Bisexuality in Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Theory’, in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology*, ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 217–40; Du Plessis, ‘Blatantly Bisexual’; Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*.

⁷¹ Meg Barker, Christina Richards, and Helen Bowes-Catton, “‘All the World Is Queer Save Thee and ME...’”: Defining Queer and Bi at a Critical Sexology Seminar’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 3–4 (13 November 2009): 369.

⁷² Amber Ault, ‘Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women’, in *Bisexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Merl Storr (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 167–85.

⁷³ Barker, Richards, and Bowes-Catton, ‘All the World Is Queer Save Thee and ME’, 368.

effect of this can be seen obscuring potentially critical data points, for instance, in reports on violence and discrimination which only distinguish between gendered categories.⁷⁴ By contrast, bi theory argues that identifications and behaviours should be disambiguated to better understand the full spectrum of sexualities and experiences in addition to differences in how people navigate the world based on their real and ideal attractions. Many scholars promote greater engagement with this rift between bi and queer theory, seeing it as a space of creative potential for better reflection on how bisexual respondents think about themselves and the calls that bisexual activists have long been making.⁷⁵ Ultimately, bi theorists must take the productive parts of queer theory and adapt them to incorporate bisexual perspectives.⁷⁶

Polina Kislitsyna's article acknowledges these issues in practice. Her inspiration was a call from one of her "non-heterosexual" interlocutors who realised after their interview that she not been encouraged to talk about something very important: the ways she has been judged for her bisexuality, made fun of, and been called the slur 'двустволка'.⁷⁷ This name, along with 'двухопый крокодил' and several other terms, appears to have been applied to bisexual and heterosexual women by those who wanted to express hatred, disgust, or a sense of superiority in their own "genuine" homosexuality compared to this romantic rival's affiliation with the "opposite" sex: 'явно выражает ревность и неприязнь истинного гея к «конкурентке»' [*Gei dialog*, 1995, No.2-4(16), 2]. Kislitsyna reflected on this conversation and

⁷⁴ Oksana Kovtun and Elvira Tilek Kyzy, 'Invisible Voices: Regional Report on Violations of the Right to Health of LGBT People in the Region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia in 2022' (Tallinn: Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity (ECOM), 2023), 27–28 uses the categories 'MSM, gay, bisexual people', 'Lesbian, bisexual and queer women', 'Trans people' (including 'of which trans women'), and 'LGBT community in general'. My thanks to the IHLIA.

⁷⁵ Barker, Richards, and Bowes-Catton, 'All the World Is Queer Save Thee and ME'; Jonathan Alexander and Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio, eds., *Bisexuality and Queer Theory: Intersections, Connections, and Challenges* (London, 2012).

⁷⁶ April S. Callis, 'Playing with Butler and Foucault: Bisexuality and Queer Theory', *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 3–4 (2009): 213–33.

⁷⁷ Kislitsyna, 'Mnogoznachnaya biseksual'nost', 83.

concluded that her interview structure, aimed at non-heterosexuals in general, did not contain questions to draw out specifically bisexual experiences. Yet after going through her data set, she observed that many people had written or spoken about bisexuality regardless.

These reflections included instances where participants expressed strong lack of belief in bisexuality. One homosexual woman born in 1973 responded to a question about her experiences of therapy by saying: ‘Есть три вещи, в которые я не верю: бисексуальность, депрессия, и Бог.’⁷⁸ Others, remembering their own path to coming out, thought about bisexual identification as a defensive mechanism to minimise the stigmatisation that they would face, believing that bisexuality positioned them as at least half “normal” [‘полупривычный’; ‘полунормой’].⁷⁹ As it turned out, Kislitsyna even had enough material to write an article about the ways in which her interlocutors variously used the label. Her approach, drawing on Sedgwick and Hemmings, was to see ‘bisexual’ not as a term with a fixed meaning but as a as a changeable means of categorisation. Most important was not self-identification but noting the contexts in which this categorisation was used and the meanings it was being given.⁸⁰ I adopt a similar approach throughout this thesis, paying attention to the meanings with which bisexuality is being imbued in fictional and non-fictional sources as well as analysing the motivations for mobilising bisexuality specifically in those texts.

Terminology

What am I talking about when I talk about bisexuality? Anyone researching gender and sexuality knows that defining terminology is a necessary yet inevitably contentious project. It becomes further complicated when drawing on Anglo-American theories for an analysis of

⁷⁸ Kislitsyna, 83.

⁷⁹ Kislitsyna, 84.

⁸⁰ Kislitsyna, 73–75.

materials produced in—or people living in—different linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts. Bi theory is particularly lacking in engagement with transnational nomenclature.⁸¹ This section summarises the discussions happening around terminology first in Anglophone bi theory, and then in my Russian-language sources, in order to justify my own approach to language and the selection of what counts as “bisexual” for the purposes of this thesis.

Plurisexual, Non-Monosexual, Bi

There is extensive debate concerning how bisexual and pansexual identities (among other multigendered attractions) relate to one another, as well as if there is an appropriate umbrella term researchers should employ. Even within the same volume, scholars have argued opposing viewpoints. For instance, D. Joye Swan stresses the need for bisexuality to remain more strictly defined as ‘a sexual orientation that encompasses a continuum of relational possibilities including, sexual behaviors and/or feelings toward, emotional attachment to, and/or desires or fantasies for, both men and women’.⁸² Swan acknowledges that this intentionally excludes non-binary people as valid objects of attraction, but argues that this move is necessary in order for bisexuality to remain distinct from other ‘multisexual’ attractions. However, in the chapter which immediately follows, M. Paz Galupo investigates the ‘paradox of the bisexual umbrella’ whereby bisexuality’s ‘relative specificity’ is used to refer to a broader range of sexualities, even though its common definition is slightly more specific than the definitions of those terms it is covering.⁸³ This use of bisexuality as an umbrella term, Galupo explains, is due to its historical conception as a middle ground in the

⁸¹ Clare Hemmings, ‘What’s in a Name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies’, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 11, no. 1–2 (2007): 13–32.

⁸² D. Joye Swan, ‘Defining Bisexuality: Challenges and Importance of and Toward a Unifying Definition’, in *Bisexuality: Theories, Research, and Recommendations for the Invisible Sexuality*, ed. D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 55.

⁸³ M. Paz Galupo, ‘Plurisexual Identity Labels and the Marking of Bisexual Desire’, in *Bisexuality: Theories, Research, and Recommendations for the Invisible Sexuality*, ed. D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 68.

traditional three-identity model for sexual orientation, as well as the fact that pansexual, queer, and other plurisexual identities are usually defined in comparison to bisexuality. Elucidating the similarities and differences in how self-identifying bisexual, pansexual, and queer participants conceptualise their sexuality and in their reports of sexual behaviour, Galupo ultimately argues that we should talk about ‘plurisexual identities’ with the understanding that ‘taken together, these labels [bisexual, pansexual, queer], rather than being mutually exclusive, allow for a shift in emphasis when articulating the range of bisexual desire’.⁸⁴ Researchers have indeed found that respondents strategically use both bi and pan labels in different contexts.⁸⁵ Rosie Nelson has likewise adopted the term *plurisexual* as an umbrella term in order to be expressly inclusive of a range of multigendered attractions—that is, ‘for the ‘political’ rather than ‘linguistic’ reason of trying to avoid erasure of other identities in applying the term *bisexual* to them’.⁸⁶

While I am sympathetic to this desire to avoid erasure of a range of plurisexual, multisexual, or otherwise non-monosexual identities (such as polysexual, omnisexual, etc.), I use the term ‘bisexuality’ in this thesis because it best reflects the language *and* politics of my sources. It is specifically bisexuality which has been politicized in the media I am analysing. The medicalized term ‘бисексуализм’ was used in seven regional propaganda laws.⁸⁷ Labels like pansexuality simply do not have the same history in Russia as bisexuality does. Even the most recent resources shared by activists struggle to translate and recontextualize pansexual-specific issues into Russian: for instance, in 2022 the initiative Vykhod marked Pansexual Pride with an Instagram post showcasing a commissioned comic by a queer artist from

⁸⁴ Galupo, 71.

⁸⁵ Nikki Hayfield and Karolína Křížová, ‘It’s Like Bisexuality, but It Isn’t: Pansexual and Panromantic People’s Understandings of Their Identities and Experiences of Becoming Educated about Gender and Sexuality’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 21, no. 2 (2021): 167–93.

⁸⁶ Nelson, ‘What Do Bisexuals Look Like?’, 592–93.

⁸⁷ These regions are Kostroma (2008), St Petersburg (2012), Magadan (2012), Samara (2012), Bashkortostan (2012), Vladimir (2012), and Kaliningrad (2013). My thanks to Xavier Rock.

Russia. One frame read ‘Моя пансексуальность: Это я знаю наизусть все шутки про сковородки’, although the joke that someone is attracted to frying pans, dismissively thrown at pansexual people in English-language contexts, simply does not work in Russian.⁸⁸ Finally, even when bisexuality is not named explicitly in my sources, narratives most frequently construct characters who are attracted to men and women who do not suggest any gender fluidity or expression beyond the male-female binary. In rare, invariably recent cases where a person or character *is* (self)-identified with a plurisexual identity other than bisexual, I specify the terminology used and consider the intentions and effects of this choice.

The Russian Bisexual Lexicon

Notably, Russian relies on loaned terms to discuss gender and sexuality. Excluding ‘гендер’ which was borrowed from English, there is no native word for gender, the closest being ‘пол’ [biological sex]. Contemporary guides on using appropriate language to discuss LGBTQ+ individuals, often inspired by Anglo-American sources, consistently utilise transliterations from English to articulate various identities and behaviours and counteract the lacuna of language available to express key concepts related to gender and sexuality in Russian. I find that the translation of resources and terminology began quickly in the print press and that the process sped up in tandem with faster, more accessible internet connection in Russia. For instance, articles originally written in English explaining biphobia [‘би-фобия’] appeared online for Russian readers as early as 1999.⁸⁹ English resources have overall proven invaluable to activist initiatives attempting to generate greater discussion of sexual orientation

⁸⁸ This linguistic separation was doubly noticeable with a switch to English in their post caption ‘отмечаем Pansexual pride day!’ See Vykhod, ‘Моя пансексуальность’, Instagram, 8 December 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C16XvVftERK/>.

⁸⁹ Lani Ka’ahumanu, Rob Yaeger, and Albert Lunde, ‘Bi-fobiya’, trans. Nikita Ivanov, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 11 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991011205310/http://www.gay.ru/bi/biphobia.htm>.

and gender identity (SOGI) due to the barriers to publishing LGBTQ+ information in Russia. Yet reliance on these international materials alone has likely exacerbated the scapegoating of Western influence (especially the U.S.) in homophobic government legislation and the media.⁹⁰ As I explore in more detail in Chapter II, projects like BiPanRussia.com have attempted to mitigate this effect: as well as including Russia in their domain name, they have endowed their glossaries with a Soviet-style title (*Likbez*) and implemented an interactive map showing pinned locations of LGBTQ+ help centres within Russian geographical territories.⁹¹

The first chapters of this thesis demonstrate that ‘би’, ‘бисексуал’, ‘бисексуальный’, ‘бисекс’, ‘бисексуальность’, and ‘бисексуализм’ were quickly taken up as viable identity labels in the 1990s. The reasons that people had for identifying (or not identifying) with these terms were multifaceted: from experiencing attraction to men and women/regardless of gender, to being a ‘женатый гей’ and cohabiting with someone of the opposite sex even though their primary attraction was to the same sex. Yet before greater access to foreign media and the Web led to the adoption of the globalised identity labels ‘лесбиянка’, ‘гей’, ‘бисексуал_ка’ and ‘транссексуал_ка’ (later ‘трансгендер’), Russian speakers in the late Soviet period had developed their own language for discussing same-sex attraction and identity.⁹² Due to the continued criminalisation of sodomy, this “homosexual lexicon” was deeply connected to the GULAG and prison subculture. It therefore contained many terms

⁹⁰ Presidential decrees have specifically named ‘вестернизация’ as a cultural threat: Vladimir Putin, ‘Ukaz Presidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii. O Strategii natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii. No. 400.’ (Official Internet Portal for Legal Information, 2 July 2021), <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>.

⁹¹ ‘Likbez’, BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/likbez/>; ‘Initsiativy Rossii’, BiPanRussia.com, accessed 11 December 2022, <https://bipanrussia.com/initiatives/>.

⁹² In 2003, the first bi-lingual Russian-English map of St. Petersburg was printed as a guide for queer tourists which used a mixture of these labels, like ‘тематических’, ‘лесбиянок и бисексуальных женщин’, and ‘геев и бисексуалов’: *Karta Rasshirennoi Orientatsii / Queer Map of St Petersburg* (St Petersburg: Association HS, 2003); For an explanation of the gender gapping strategy I am using, see Kirey-Sitnikova, ‘Prospects and Challenges of Gender Neutralization in Russian’.

specific to prison hierarchies, sexual violence, and surveillance by the authorities.⁹³ Alongside this were words for consensual relationships, preferred sexual roles, and specific sex acts. On the cruising circuit, the lexicon extended to encoded place names and nicknames for the different “types” frequenting the *pleshka*.⁹⁴

Select slang terms eventually proliferated to such a degree that they became understandable to a wider public. Men who had sex with men, and women who had sex with women, were referred to as ‘голубой’ and ‘розовая’ respectively. Somewhat lesser-known euphemistic terms ‘тема’, ‘тематический’, and ‘другой’ signalled more broadly that the person or cultural touchpoint under discussion was *different* from the mainstream (i.e. the heteronormative, cisgender standard). While scholars such as Laurie Essig and David Tuller may have seen here a remarkable fluidity that allowed for same- and different-gender desires, there has since been substantial debate about whether the labels were effectively analogous to “homosexual”, “gay”, or “lesbian”.⁹⁵ The labels *goluboi* and *rozavaya* were certainly gendered, and alongside *tema*, their meanings and use may have fluctuated over time in different Russophone spaces.⁹⁶ Still, whether these terms were inclusive of bisexual people at the peak of their use remains unclear. Did bisexuals think of themselves in this language? Were these terms applied to bisexuals as well as homosexuals? Or were people who had sexual and romantic relationships with men and women, people who loved people regardless of gender, not quite seen as belonging to the subculture?

⁹³ Vladimir Kozlovskii, *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury: materialy k izucheniyu* (Benson, VT: Chalidze Publications, 1986); Mielke, *The Russian Homosexual Lexicon*; Healey, *Russian Homophobia*.

⁹⁴ Yevgeniy Fiks, *Rodnaya rech' / Mother Tongue*, trans. Brian James Baer (Pleshka Press, 2018).

⁹⁵ Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 1999; Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*; For criticism of these works, see Brian James Baer, ‘Russian Gays/Western Gaze: Mapping (Homo) Sexual Desire in Post-Soviet Russia’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 499–521.

⁹⁶ Georgii Mamedov and Nina Bagdasarova, ‘Tema, a ne “LGBT”?: Vremia i prostranstvo seksual'no-gendernogo dissidentstva v postsovetском Kyrgyzstane’, *Cahiers du monde russe* 62, no. 2–3 (2021): 283–306.

The relation of the “new” bisexual labels to the Soviet *argot* was certainly complex. Sources offer sometimes contradictory evidence. As Zharov’s musing from *Biseksual’naya revolyutsiya* suggests, bisexuality was partly included and partly excluded from the concepts of *goluboi* and *rozovaya*. It was not uncommon for print materials produced in the 1990s to include phrasing like ‘голубые и бисексуалы’, subtly implying a division between the two groups.⁹⁷ First-person sources show that bisexuals were unclear if they could claim these labels and which would accurately fit their experiences: ‘Я понимаю, что я бисексуал, а может, и голубой, но как-то боюсь этой жизни, и во всем этом совсем запутался’.⁹⁸ This is perhaps indicative of broader discomfort and rejection in gay and lesbian spaces.⁹⁹ The subculture’s slang indeed included a handful of slurs applied to bisexuals [e.g. ‘двустволка’] and potentially more neutral terms like ‘Кругляк – бисексуальный мужчина.’¹⁰⁰

At the same time, some bisexuals did identify with the old argot to a degree: ‘Я с тобой согласен в том, что мы боимся произносить: «я голубой» [...] никто не знает, что я бисексуал...’.¹⁰¹ Others, like bisexual writer Vadim Kalinin, toyed with the language to create space for bisexuality, using ‘синий’ when contrasting his experiences with other bisexual men to his relationships with women:

С моей теперешней женой я живу уже семь лет. С предыдущей женщиной я жил пять лет. Всё это не мешало мне время от времени заводить кратковременные романы с другими женщинами. Так что здесь ситуация более-менее ясная. А с "синими" всё сложнее. У меня был роман с "синим" - серьёзный, со всеми полагающимися при этом сложнейшими чувствами, отношениями, взаимовыручками, планами.

⁹⁷ See *Gei dialog*, 1994, No. 2-3, p.8, where the Contact Club is introduced with a short foreword by “Natal’ya Lesbos” which laments the general lack of *rozovye* ads in the publication so far compared to *golubye* and *biseksualy*: “К сожалению, нас значительно меньше, чем-голубых и бисексуалов.”

⁹⁸ *RISK*, 1992, No.2-3, 24.

⁹⁹ AnzheLiKa, ‘Lesbi prezirayut bi, ili Pochemu ya ne mogu nosit’ labris?’, *Lesbi.ru*, accessed 13 October 2021, http://www.lesbi.ru/health/psychology/lesbi_bi.html.

¹⁰⁰ *Golubok*, 2001, No.17, 11.

¹⁰¹ *1/10*, 1995, No.17, 11.

Although Kalinin additionally associates bisexuality with polyamorous/open relationships here, it seems that some bisexuals might simply have thought of themselves in terms of another shade of blue.

Elsewhere, I have found that bisexuality was referred to using the prefix ‘полу-’ to designate a halfway state on a heterosexual-homosexual continuum. This could be relatively neutral, as with ‘полуголубой’, or combined with a slur, as in the case of ‘полупидор’. Kalinin remembered being called the latter by a young woman for his style of dress, which he described as blending punk with gay aesthetics. His interviewers thought the term provocative and selected it for the headline.¹⁰² The earliest example I have located of this trend in language dates from 1995, when Dmitry Lychev, editor of *1/10*, wrote about Lilya Taranenکو’s organisation Ganimed, the first Ukrainian lesbian and gay initiative [*1/10*, 1995, No.17, p.3]:¹⁰³

Дружила она в юношеские годы с парнем-бисексуалом. Классно дружила, а потом его за полуголубизну и убили. Только лишь за то, что он был бисексуалом. Тогда, много лет назад, она пыталась понять, почему общество так ненавидит людей, немножко отличных от основной массы.

Aside from the use of ‘полуголубизна’, what is important is the understanding that bisexuals are only slightly different [‘немножко отличных’] from the mainstream, yet that deviation was enough to make them the target of violent homophobic attacks. Acknowledging this remains crucial today given that, as mentioned above, Kislitsyna found that some of her participants spoke about bisexuality as a halfway state between difference and normality [‘полупривычный’ or ‘полунормой’], making their safety precarious.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ed Mishin and Sergei Bulavin, ‘Vadim Kalinin: “Polupidor v polukedakh”’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 11 May 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000511112044/http://www.gay.ru/people/view/vkalinin.htm>.

¹⁰³ For more information on Ganimed, see: ‘Gei-soobschestvo v Ukraine’, Nash Svit: Pravozakhisnii LGBT Tsentr, n.d., <https://gay.org.ua/publications/bluebook/community.htm>.

¹⁰⁴ Kislitsyna, ‘Mnogoznachnaya biseksual’nost’, 84.

Russophone Sexology

In Russian pop psychology and sexology, *biseksual'nost'* or *biseksualizm* may be seen as overlapping with—yet still distinct from—the concept of “pseudohomosexuality”. The figure of the pseudohomosexual was promoted by popular writers like Dilya Enikeeva in *Gei i lesbiyanki* (2003). Alongside other conspiracy theories put forward in this polemic, Enikeeva is adamant that 9 in 10 homosexuals were recruited by genuine homosexuals (and consequently, most are not authentic homosexuals but victims of genetically gay predators).¹⁰⁵ The logic of her argument hinges a long history of psychiatry and sexopathology in Russia.¹⁰⁶ A number of scholars have productively interrogated unscholarly Russian “scientific” work drawing on this historical legacy—such as Enikeeva’s book—through reference to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of universalising and minoritising views of homosexuality.¹⁰⁷ As Dan Healey explains:

Her views draw on ideas about homosexuality which have been prevalent in Russia since the late tsarist period, as well as reflecting discourses from the Stalin era and late Soviet years. “Minoritizing” views of homosexuality conflict and coexist with “universalizing” notions, ‘as a form of sexual activity or expression anyone might engage in, perhaps via “mental infection” (a favorite trope of Soviet thinking).¹⁰⁸

As everyone is considered to have bisexual potential, everyone is susceptible to the allegedly small percentage of “true homosexual predators” who might infect them with the “illness”. In his review of Russia’s anti-LGBT scholarship published between 2012-2014, Kevin Moss similarly underscores that the universalising view of homosexuality is Russia’s dominant political, legal, and scholarly position.¹⁰⁹ He emphasises that the term *gomoseksualist* is a

¹⁰⁵ Healey, “Untraditional Sex” and the “Simple Russian”, 188.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander, ‘Taming the desire’; Healey, “Untraditional Sex” and the “Simple Russian”.

¹⁰⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, c2008).

¹⁰⁸ Healey, “Untraditional Sex” and the “Simple Russian”, 176.

¹⁰⁹ Moss, ‘Russia’s Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made’.

diagnosis, while *gomoseksualizm* suggests an ideology. Both imply infection. A contemporary survey indeed found that two thirds of Russians believed homosexuality was acquired through societal influence.¹¹⁰ Sympathetic practitioners equally followed this well-ingrained theorisation of the emergence of homosexuality in society. Dmitrii Isaev, for instance, distinguished more objectively between “primary” and “secondary” homosexuality, believing the former to be rooted in biology and the latter to be a result of external factors.¹¹¹ Innate bisexual potential is integral to these universalising notions of homosexuality, with bisexuality seemingly operating as a switch between “gay” and “straight” modes. Sedgwick’s minoritising/universalising system paradoxically reproduces the opposing notions that “everyone is bisexual” (everyone has this switch) and that “no-one is bisexual” (the switch is temporary).¹¹² Bisexuality therefore represents ‘an extreme oscillation’ between the two.¹¹³

More intangible still is the concept of *pseudobiseksual’nost’*. In the Russian-language encyclopaedia *Seksologiya*, published in Belarus in 1993, bisexuality is illustrated using six distinct examples:¹¹⁴

- (1) Attraction to both sexes.
- (2) Hermaphroditism.
- (3) A combination of straight and homosexual behaviour, for instance within a marriage [‘когда официальный гетеросексуальный брак совмещается с тайными гомосексуальными привязанностями мужа или жены’].
- (4) Indifference to the biological sex of one’s partner during group sex.
- (5) An immature state typical of teenagers experimenting during puberty.
- (6) A phase caused by isolation in same-sex environments such as prison and the army, which leads heterosexuals to engage in same-sex acts [‘ситуационно обусловленная, или псевдобисексуальность’].

¹¹⁰ Moss, 19 citing VTsIOM 2012, RIA Novosti.

¹¹¹ Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 235.

¹¹² Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*; Garber, *Bisexuality*.

¹¹³ MacDowell, ‘Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality’, 5.

¹¹⁴ ‘Biseksual’nost’, in *Seksologiya: Entsiklopedicheskiĭ spravochnik po seksologii i smezhnym oblastyam* (Minsk: Izdatel’stvo ‘Belaruskaya Entsiklapedyya’ imeni Petrusya Brovki, 1993), 33.

Bisexuality is made to appear dubious here, in most cases not an orientation but a kind of behaviour or transitional developmental state [‘В отечественной сексологии различают транзиторные (преходящие) формы бисексуальности и собственно перверзное (истинно бисексуальное) поведение’]. The concepts of ‘situational bisexuality’ and ‘pseudobisexuality’ add a further degree of abstraction to a phenomenon normally described as ‘situational homosexuality’ in academic literature. Contrasted here to “genuine” bisexuality, same-sex acts under this framework point only to a temporary state of sexual experimentation brought about by external circumstances, limited options, and re-activated, Freudian bisexual potential. The tension between wanting to view same-sex desire as a non-native perversion and to rationalise why it can be found throughout history, even in the former Soviet Union, is evident.

These multifaceted understandings of bisexuality, combined with Russia’s political posturing as a straight stronghold, are reflected strongly in popular culture. Brian James Baer has shown that this logic underpins contemporary Russian crime fiction, with the ‘spectre of the homosexual’ functioning as an intangible threat: any man, every man, could secretly harbour same-sex desire and temporarily “infect” others.¹¹⁵ It is the temporary nature of the threat which cements pseudohomosexuality’s conflation with bisexuality. Both involve moving between relationships with same- and opposite-sex partners and are considered transient states, a stepping stone between homosexual “perversion” and heterosexual “maturity”.

¹¹⁵ Baer, ‘Engendering Suspicion’.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised into two parts, each of which contain two chapters. This structure is designed to sort through the “facts” and the “fiction”, emphasising how sources have been positioned this way despite genres bleeding into one another. I aim to reconstruct the information environments that Russian bisexuals may have been able to access at different times in the period and reflect on how these potentially shaped possibilities for (self-)understanding. This contextualisation is then used to illuminate cultural images of bisexuality and establish the ways in which certain themes reverberate across multiple spheres of entertainment, or have, by contrast, been challenged by queer creative teams.

The structure is further motivated by a desire to combat the three key mechanisms of bisexual erasure identified by Kirsten McLean.¹¹⁶ First, the *absence* of bisexual voices (real and fictional); second, *appropriation* (claiming real and fictional bi individuals as gay/lesbian/straight instead); and third, *assimilation*, an internal process forcing many bisexuals to hide their bisexuality or identify with a different label for fear of discrimination or exclusion. Each chapter of this thesis contributes to constructing an archive of previously unresearched Russian bisexual voices. In my analysis, I point towards instances when bisexual readings of sources have not been sufficiently considered and texts have therefore been miscast as gay or lesbian. And throughout, I ground the analysis in the historical, social and legislative contexts in which these factual and fictitious representations were produced. By doing so, I identify the reasons that bisexuality has been overlooked in the Russian LGBTQ+ canon as well as the day-to-day discrimination bisexuals have faced living under a homophobic authoritarian state.

¹¹⁶ McLean, ‘Bisexuality in Society’, 89–90.

Part I: The “Facts”

First off, the “facts”. Part I investigates how, where, and what knowledge about bisexuality has been published in Russia(n) on LGBTQ+ friendly platforms in the absence of discussions in other media and educational spheres. Through case studies of journals and websites produced by LGBTQ+ individuals and initiatives, I consider the extent to which these resources facilitated exchange and meetings between bisexuals, such as granting possibilities for dating, disseminating bisexual life writing, and fostering a sense of community. By identifying the kinds of information that has historically been available to bisexuals, as well as the “factual” content that bisexuals have been interested in producing or which has been produced about them, I untangle a range of associations with bisexuality and question the extent to which bisexuals were integrated into lesbian and gay projects. What “facts” about bisexuality have been shared at different historical moments? What non-fictional stories were spotlighted in Russia’s independent LGBTQ+ media? How might Russians coming to terms with their bisexuality have discovered more about themselves and others like them?

Before delving further into the chapter breakdown, I need to emphasise that not all the information in the sources analysed in Part I is, in fact, factual. Many of the earlier sources include unverifiable reports—recollections of relationships, experiences, and specific events submitted by anonymous authors, or quoted from pseudonymised interviewees—which are impossible to fact-check today. The strategy I adopt is simply to draw attention to their dubious nature and recognise that ultimately, whether the “information” being spread and analysed is objectively true does not matter in the way one might expect. The “reports” still show us how bisexuality was being discussed, imagined, and fantasised about. They reveal how people (or their personas) identifying as bisexual at that time conceived of bi attractions

and identities. If this media stretches the truth or invents events (which some likely do), the texts still speak to how authors imagined realistic bisexual behaviour, attempting to characterise someone as bisexual in a way they felt would be believable *enough* to readers. At the very least, even the most questionable of sources encapsulate what bisexuals would have encountered when actively searching for information and speculation on bisexual topics. Indeed, a few contemporary sources include such recollections: short texts written by bisexuals about times when they sought out information, and what they were ultimately confronted with.

Chapter I: The Bi Zine Scene

The first chapter concentrates on the alternative print press run by gay and lesbian activists in the time before the internet, when it still enjoyed popularity despite financial and practical challenges. Examining a selection of major journals, I establish how bisexuals fit into the readership according to survey data and reader contributions like letters and personal ads. I find that bisexuals were particularly prominent in Contact Clubs. In one case, a reader even called for a specifically bisexual dating service to be launched—and it was, albeit briefly. The Contact Clubs evidence widespread interest and participation in a bisexual dating scene across Russia: single bisexuals hoped to meet men and women; bisexual couples looked for other pairs to date; married individuals, occasionally explicitly identifying as bi, tried to elicit illicit affairs; and some bisexuals stated outright that they were only interested in other bisexuals. I compare these snippets of bisexual voices, lives, and desires with the ways in which bisexuality was being theorised in informational articles and editorials. Ultimately, I find that while there was no single consensus of what it meant to be bisexual, the idea of universal bisexual potential was integral both to scientific discussions about the origins of same-sex desire and the fantasies generated through reportage and photography.

Chapter II: Bi-Bi-Print, Hello World

Given the rise of the internet, personal computers, and smart phones, the ways in which people accessed information and contacted other people obviously underwent rapid changes over the thirty-year period covered by this thesis. My second chapter traces the transition from print to digital media and locates where bisexual voices congregated online. I tell the history of the Russian internet (RuNet) from a bisexual perspective. This is accomplished through a selection of major case studies, beginning with the origins of the “Blue Web” in 1997 with Gay.ru, and ending in 2021 with the launch of first bisexual Russian-language website, BiPanRussia.com. In the intervening period, I characterise how major shifts in technology, censorship, and the ways that people interacted with each other online affected possibilities for articulating same-sex desire. I speak to the primacy of life narratives, which I argue was brought about in the wake of social media and in response to dehumanising state rhetoric. To this end, I draw attention to first-person recollections posted by bisexual and pansexual contributors to major platforms and smaller activist websites alike.

Part II: The “Fiction”

The second half of the thesis tackles “fiction”. What do cultural images of bisexuality reveal? The sources I analyse provide insight into how bisexuality circulates in public discourses at different historical moments and how the tropes associated with it reflect political stances. While the “facts”—the examples of authentic bisexual voices explored in Part I—are frequently anonymised, fragmented, and in some cases questionable, the “fiction” often offers something more real. Authors invested in articulating a bisexual subjectivity draw on their own lived experience to inform their language, style, and plots. As with the caveat on

“facts”, the “fiction” in Part II is therefore not purely fictional. Furthermore, sustained narratives like novels, films, or poetry collections built around a bisexual persona provide the opportunity to flesh out characters with deeper backstories and more complex personal development than is usually possible to cover in the autobiographical snippets explored in Part I.

Chapter III: Bi Themes on Screen

The third chapter explores the theme of bisexuality in Russian audio-visual culture through case studies of film and music videos. I dedicate significant discussion to the narrative mechanism of *bi-textuality*, whereby bisexuality gets mapped onto another discourse which similarly resists the binary frameworks through which it is usually understood.¹¹⁷ I find that across audio-visual texts created about bisexuals, bi-textuality has most consistently been entangled with questions about the compatibility of queerness with Russianness. Bisexual characters, caught in love triangles, struggle to negotiate their relationships with both the man and woman they are dating, and the alternate lifestyles or influences these lovers represent. Often, uncertainty over which partner—and therefore side—they will choose reflects a bigger question about the future of the nation in the new globalised marketplace after the collapse of the USSR. In newer sources focusing on queer awakenings in the late 2010s and early 2020s, secondary characters labelled as bisexual mediate the protagonist’s journey, meeting them at a moment of uncertainty over whether they will embrace or reject their same-sex desire. These bi characters behave in ways outside of narrowly prescribed (hetero)sexual norms and appear unphased by the expectations placed on them by society to conform to the binary, without fully becoming an outcast. Finally, in rare sources created by or based on a bisexual person’s life, the internal experience making sense of your desires is

¹¹⁷ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 41.

at the forefront. This entails a journey from a state of confusion and feeling pressured to choose to finding pleasure and acceptance on your own terms.

Chapter IV: Putting the Bi in Biblioteka

The fourth chapter begins by briefly summarising the small canon of late-Soviet literary texts with bisexual protagonists, underscoring their common themes and plots and the use of bisexuality to symbolise a failure to conform to Soviet values. I then investigate how this legacy was reflected or challenged in the early post-Soviet period. Writers soon took advantage of relaxed censorship and new publication opportunities to depict bisexual characters in the Soviet past: they situated bisexuality in settings ranging from prison camps and production lines to Literary Institutes. Following this discussion of prose, I find that poetry lends itself well to exploring the fragmentation of the bisexual individual. Writers adapt form, structure, and language to obscure clarity and inscribe multiple meanings and associations within a single word or phrase. Their poems blur the lines between autobiography, documentary, and creative (re)imagining. The ambiguity these strategies creates captures the unintelligibility of the persona's bisexuality to those around them. In these poems, as well as in other partially autobiographical prose works, a tangible sexual history with men and women is contrasted with this abstract sense of confusion. Such sexual encounters provide the evidence the persona sees as necessary while they go through the process of recognising themselves as bisexual. Sex, pornography, and arousal thus become the best means of knowledge about the self, providing irrefutable somatic and psychological evidence. I end the chapter with a reflection on how the evolution I trace over the period—from bisexuality's mobilisation as a shock factor and sign of non-conformity, to authors invested in depicting bisexuality as a viable identity—is at its most extreme when comparing

the literary sections of 1990s and early 2000s journals with the digital zine culture of the 2020s.

Together, this intermedia, interdisciplinary approach captures a holistic view of how bisexuality has been treated in key areas of LGBTQ+ public discourse over the past thirty years to address the question at the core of this thesis: is there a bisexual Russian culture?

Part I

The “Facts”

Chapter I

The Bi Zine Scene: Bisexuality in the Alternative Press

Жена ссорится с мужем. В запале ссоры она выкрикивает:
– Да я! Да я!.. Я спала с твоим другом Колькой!
Муж, опешив:
– А я!.. А я!.. А я – тоже!

— *Golubok*, 2004, No.17, p.15

While some studies of Russia’s gay and lesbian press of the 1990s and early 2000s have been conducted, the presence of bisexual material has gone unnoticed and under-analysed. The press offers an invaluable insight into the voices of the early post-Soviet queer community who seized the chance to speak for themselves for the first time in decades. This chapter revisits this body of sources with an explicitly bisexual lens, updating older scholarship and uncovering substantial new material.¹¹⁸ What research had been completed so far has focused on nationalism and military themes in gay men’s erotica; the press as a politicised means of queer emancipation from Soviet repression; and contemporaneous observations about its emergence and reception.¹¹⁹ Overviews of select publications have been posted online, one as a library guide for the University of North Carolina, and two for the *Muzei istorii LGBT* website.¹²⁰ Dynamic bibliographical data has also begun to be captured by the *kvir_izdat* Digital Humanities project at Ohio State University.¹²¹ Yet even such U.S. initiatives are now

¹¹⁸ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 105.

¹¹⁹ Respectively: Healey, 111–30; Ira Roldugina, ‘Dissidents of Love: The Politics and Practice of Russian LGBT Samizdat after the Fall of the USSR’, in *In Defence of the Mainstream*, ed. Lyudmila Alyab’eva, Aleksandr Gorbachev, and Lev Danilkin (V-A-C Press, 2021), 240–45; Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke University Press, 1999), 287–89.

¹²⁰ Kirill Tolpygo, ‘LGBTQIA+ Studies Resources: Russian Federation: Periodical Press, 1990-2013’, UNC Lib Guides, 2024, <https://guides.lib.unc.edu/russian-lgbt-press/journals/>; Il’ya Davydov, ‘Gei-pressa Rossii v 1990 - 2000-e gody. Obzor.’, *Muzei istorii LGBT*, 28 June 2017, <https://lgbtru.com/movement/smi/3660/>; Il’ya Davydov, ‘Gomoseksual’naya i lesbiiskaya pressa Rossii, 1990 - 2005 gg. (vtoraya chast’), *Muzei istorii LGBT*, 5 June 2018, <http://lgbtru.com/movement/smi/3756/>.

¹²¹ Philip Gleissner and Lily Conway, ‘Kvir_izdat: Queer Publishing in Russia(n)’, *Kvir_izdat*, Ohio State University, 2021, <https://u.osu.edu/kvirizdat/>.

under threat due to the Trump administration pulling federal grants and blacklisting research terms linked to gender and sexuality.¹²²

Overall, this small body of research found a strong bias in the publications toward depictions of (and for) White homosexual men, even when titles suggested that there would be lesbian, bisexual and queer content.¹²³ Some have gone so far as to suggest (based primarily on a survey of the contents of the glossy magazine *Kvir*, first published in 2003) that in Russia the word “квир” was only ever a substitute or synonym for “White male homosexual”.¹²⁴ Much remains to be learned about the circulation and translation of knowledge in these publications, as well as how the experiences of queer women, bisexuals, and transgender people, (especially those outside of Moscow and Saint Petersburg) were documented. Through teasing out the bisexual dimensions of the alternative press, this chapter addresses these gaps in scholarship and responds to Dan Healey’s call to research ‘this archive of queer freedom’.¹²⁵

After considering the historical contexts in which the press was operating, I introduce the archive of journals I analysed to produce this chapter, identifying the strengths and limitations of the source base. I consider the question of whether these publications indeed represent the output of an alternative LGBTQ+ press, or whether they marked a continuation of *samizdat* culture. Then, through examination of the survey results, reader contributions, scientific theories, and reportage, I argue that bisexuality featured more prominently in both content and readership than has previously been acknowledged. Despite

¹²² Carla K. Johnson, ‘Trump Administration Cancels at Least 68 Grants Focused on LGBTQ Health Questions’, *The Associated Press*, 24 March 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/lgbtq-research-grants-terminated-trump-5b2810312de1420ca3df875314b0a1e9>.

¹²³ Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 1999, 288.

¹²⁴ Olga Andreevskikh, ‘“Kvir” as Discourses of Decolonisation and Self-Colonisation in Russian LGBT and Queer Online Media’ (BASEES, University of Cambridge, 2022).

¹²⁵ Healey and Stella, ‘Sexual and Gender Dissent in the USSR and Post-Soviet Space’, 245.

the overall privileging of gay male subjectivity, bisexuality underscored many of its pages, from photography and illustration to theoretical articles and first-person reporting.

Historical Contexts

The 1990s were a turbulent time in Russia. Against the backdrop of the hyperinflationary economic crisis and the crisis of national identity (as the Soviet Union dissolved into newly independent states), the media landscape was drastically changing. It was in this slippery historical context that the elusive nature of sexuality, and bisexuality specifically, was being conceptualised openly for the first time in over half a century. Alongside the economic instability and sweeping political and societal changes, Russia experienced an explosion in public discourses of sex and sexuality.¹²⁶ The era of sex media was ushered in.¹²⁷ With Soviet censorship mechanisms gradually eased and the rise of a free market, sex quickly became a commodity in popular culture. In advertising, erotic imagery appeared on magazine covers and billboards.¹²⁸ The Russian language was changing rapidly too. Local queer slang terms *goluboi* (queer/gay man), *rozovaya* (queer/lesbian woman), *tema* (“the theme”, i.e. same-sex desiring people), and *nasha* (“our”) were being edged out by the language and identifications of the global LGBTQ+ community.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 111–13; Miazhevich, *Queering Russian Media and Culture*, 3.

¹²⁷ Masha Gessen, ‘Sex in the Media and the Birth of Sex Media in Russia’, in *Genders 22: Postcommunism and the Body Politic*, ed. Ellen E. Barry (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 197–228.

¹²⁸ Paul W. Goldschmidt, ‘Pornography in Russia’, in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker, 1999, 318–36, <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2755/books/book/1735/chapter/183372/Publicly-QueerRepresentations-of-Queer-Subjects>; Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture*, *Overkill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

¹²⁹ Brian James Baer, ‘Beyond Either/Or: Confronting the Fact of Translation in Global Sexuality Studies’, in *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, ed. Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl (New York: Routledge, 2017), 43–44.

Queer Hope, Queer Hype

Shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, queer activists began organising. Taking advantage of relaxed censorship, they published the first queer Soviet magazine, *Tema*, in December 1989.¹³⁰ In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, independent gay and lesbian journals were highly politically involved: describing police brutality; satirising political leaders such as Stalin, Brezhnev and Yeltsin; arguing for the abolition of Article 121.1, which had seen tens of thousands of men convicted for *muzhelozhstvo* (sodomy); and reporting on the creation of queer associations across the former Soviet Union.¹³¹

As time passed, stances on sex and sexuality were felt to be improving. When the informational centre affiliated with the Novosibirsk publication *Sib-10* published a psychological advice column promoting the benefits of ‘Coming Out (выход из подполья)’ and its ‘процесс признания и примерения’, the authors emphasised that recent years had seen a wave of films, books, life writing, and psychiatric studies change attitudes toward homosexuality for the better [1996, No.2, 3]. Commercial LGBTQ+ venues were established in urban centres, while queer community networks appropriated space in more remote cities.¹³²

During his fieldwork in St Petersburg between 2003 and 2011, Stephen Amico heard the clubs *Mono* and *Metro* informally called spaces for bisexuals, even if many interlocutors felt they catered to homosexuality.¹³³ Amico attributes the ‘popularity (even stylishness)’ of the term bisexual with the number of men among his informants in Moscow and St Petersburg

¹³⁰ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 105; Elena Gavrilova, ‘«Тема» – Первая Gei-Gazeta, Izdannaya v Rossii’, *Muzei istorii LGBT*, 18 April 2019, <https://lgbtru.com/movement/smi/3322/>.

¹³¹ Roldugina, ‘Dissidents of Love’, 241–43.

¹³² Francesca Stella, ‘The Politics of In/Visibility: Carving Out Queer Space in Ul’yanovsk’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 10 (2012): 1826 and 1829.

¹³³ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 10.

who were married but continued an active sex life with other men at bathhouses, online, or at *pleshki* and clubs. The ways in which men who identified as bisexual viewed themselves, and were viewed by others, varied, and many informants felt the use of the word bisexual to indicate one's "complexes"; or to be a 'necessary expedient in a strongly patriarchal society, one in which family ties are often essential for social, emotional, and financial support, and heterosexual marriage is assumed'.¹³⁴ Amico further explains that some men compartmentalised their social lives, as opposed to their erotic lives, along the axes of hetero/homo. Francesca Stella's work confirms that queer women similarly strategically negotiated the (non-)disclosure of sexuality across social settings.¹³⁵

The Press Disappears

The sexual revolution was sadly short-lived for Russia's queer community.¹³⁶ By 2005, Putin's presidency had encouraged a conservative turn on the topic of so-called "family values" and the first regional bans on "gay propaganda" were under discussion. A rapid growth in commercialisation and "Western" influence reinvigorated Cold War rhetoric and was blamed for the apparent crisis in masculinity that Russia was facing.¹³⁷ Additionally, increased access to the internet meant that LGBTQ+ individuals and activists were turning away from print media.¹³⁸ In a single page, *Veselyi chelovek* excitedly showcased the dawn of the 'голубой интернет' and Gay.ru, and announced the end of its publication due to production difficulties and declining readership [1999, No.4, 12]. The trend of LGBTQ+ independent

¹³⁴ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 10.

¹³⁵ Stella, *Lesbian Lives*.

¹³⁶ Miazhevich, *Queering Russian Media and Culture*.

¹³⁷ Baer, *Other Russias*; Kondakov and Essig, 'A Cold War', 80. I show in Chapter III how bisexual plots and characters were used to explore these themes in film and music videos from this time.

¹³⁸ Davydov, 'Gei-prensa Rossii'.

publishing—and public queer visibility—was in decline by the late 1990s and all but gone by the mid-2000s.

The Source Base

This chapter takes as its source base a digitised collection of journals from the Moscow Lesbian and Gay Archive (MLGA). The private archive was established jointly in the early 1990s by Elena Gusyatsinskaya and Viktor Oboin. The journals themselves advertise the library, which invited readers to contribute materials, visit, and browse [e.g. *Partner(Sha)!*, 1995, No.10-11-12, 48; *Organicheskaya ledi*, 1998, No.3, 5-6; and *Sofa safo*, 1999, No.2, 36]. Broadly speaking, the journals also promoted one another, such as the advertisement for *Partner(sha)!* placed in *Gei dialog* [1995, No.1(13), 2], and those for *Uranus*, *Partner(sha)!*, and *ARGO* in *Sib-10* [July 1996, No.1, 4]. The press was invested in promoting LGBTQ+ businesses and events, as well as other publications and, later, websites. The informational bulletin *Probuždenie*, for instance, shared a list of LGBTQ+ journals and the addresses at which they were registered, as well as the same information for lesbian and gay organisations operating across Russia—Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Astrakhan', Saratov, Novokuznetsk, Novosibirsk—and cities in former Soviet Republics—Kyiv, Tashkent, Kishinev (now Chişinău), and Tbilisi [June 1994, No.2, 4 -6].

Indeed, while most clustered around Moscow and Saint Petersburg, journals were printed across Russia. *Shans* in Rostov-na-Donu, *Gei dialog* and *Raduga* in Nizhnii Tagil, *Sibirskii Variant* in Barnaul, *V temu* in Arkhangelsk, and *Sib-10* in Novosibirsk. This geographic diversity challenges the assumption that Moscow and Saint Petersburg were the centres of

Russian queer life and culture.¹³⁹ Moreover, despite the overall geographical imbalance toward the two major metropolises, practically all journals featured reader contributions from a far broader range of cities. A table detailing the journals and the bibliographical information about circulation, editorial teams, and printing locations, is included in the Bibliography.

Activist Origins

Many journals were associated with an activist or cultural group, although it is not always clear how active these groups were.¹⁴⁰ Early priorities included the decriminalisation of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS awareness, in some cases due to affiliations with organisations like *My i vy* and the *Vsesoyuznogo tsentra po bor'be so SPIDom*.¹⁴¹ Informational bulletins such as *Spektral'* in Tver' shared global LGBTQ+ news, aligning themselves with the priorities of international networks. Where men's journals often ran features on safe sex, women's publications had additional priorities and addressed issues such as sexual assault, giving guidance on self-care in the aftermath and how to access gynaecologists, sexual health clinics, and rape crisis centres [*Probužhdenie*, June 1994, No.1, 5-6].

Beyond activism, bigger publications usually combined amateur literature, erotica, queer history, celebrity features, and personal ads. More unusual content comprised of comic strips [e.g. *Vesehyi chelovek*, 1999(4), 9], or even a scanned poem hastily written in a pocket diary after being fingered to the point of orgasm ['Oda k dvum pal'tsam', *Labris*, 1998, No.4, 11]. Music occasionally graced the pages too; be it original lyrics with chords provided for guitar players

¹³⁹ Roldugina, 'Dissidents of Love', 239–40.

¹⁴⁰ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 104–9; Tolpygo, 'LGBTQIA+ Studies Resources'.

¹⁴¹ Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 1999, 92; Vladimir Kirsanov, *69: Russkie Gei, Lesbiyanki, Biseksualy i Transseksualy* (Tver': Ganimed, 2005), 530. I address the specific ramifications of the content about HIV/AIDS in terms of the conceptualisation and stigmatisation of bisexual men later in this chapter.

[*Piramida*, 2006-7?, No.1, 37-41] or the score for Mikhail Kuzmin's *Ditya i Roza* [*Probuždenie*, men's edition, July-August 1995, No.3, 11-14].

Plenty of men's journals included sections for amateur literature. A select few like *Gay, slavyane!* were dedicated to creative writing. Yet it was women's publications which were particularly motivated by literary representation of sapphic desire.¹⁴² The group MOLLI ('Московское объединение лесбиянок литературы и искусства'), founded in 1990, hosted events and supported the publication of lesbian literature. Although disagreements and a lack of funds kept the group's original project, an almanac titled *Adelfe*, from materializing, five issues of its supplement *Literaturnoe prilozhenie k "Adelfe"* were created. This inspired a string of periodicals aiming to develop tolerance and respect for lesbians through literary representation, including *Organicheskaya ledi*, *Sofa-Safo*, and *Ostrov* [*Ostrov*, December 1999, No.1, p.3-4].¹⁴³

Production and Distribution

The first LGBTQ+ journal *Tema* appeared in 1989. For at least the first three issues, the publication process involved a team of twenty or so pseudonymised editors typing up the content on a computer and printing a run of approximately 5000 copies. The newspapers would then be sold by volunteers on the street for one rouble each—far more than mainstream newspapers such as *Pravda*, which cost just five kopeks at the time—rather than at a newsstand or kiosk. While this was taking place in Moscow and Leningrad, the team also

¹⁴² While I include some references to the literary sections both in the present chapter and in Chapter IV, the creative writing contained in this archive merits its own study.

¹⁴³ *Ostrov* (a journal which framed itself as radical feminist first and foremost, rather than lesbian) is not contained in the digitized the MLGA collection, but the British Library holds copies. The journal's contents have been surveyed by Liza Koroleva, 'Kontent-analiz zhurnala "Ostrov" i literaturnykh prilozhenii kak analiz smyslovogo prostranstva zhizni lesbiyanok v Rossii v period s 1999 po 2013 g.', in *Na pereput'e: Metodologiya, teoriya i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniï*, ed. Alexander Kondakov (Sankt-Peterburg: Tsentr nezavisimykh sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniï, 2014), 220–28.

sent out copies to some subscribers who lived elsewhere; the editors were aware that some copies even made their way to prison camps given that they received letters from inmates.¹⁴⁴ Later publications were sold through a network of kiosks, clubs, and sex shops [*GayTimes*, 2003, No.6, 21-22]. While *Tema* and other long-running periodicals (e.g. *1/10*) were published in tens of thousands of copies, most publications were small operations produced by an individual or a small team. More often, the advertised circulation did not exceed 999 copies to circumvent registration requirements.¹⁴⁵

Yet was this wave of print activity primarily a continuation of samizdat culture, as Ira Roldugina dubs it, or did it mark the beginnings of a new alternative gay and lesbian press, as Masha Gessen and Dan Healey write?¹⁴⁶ Though *Tema* established a precedent for typing pages, materiality ranged considerably, as did overall style and content. The press was formed of large black-and-white newspapers, glossy erotic magazines, and small, hand-stapled collections of literary interest. Editors excitedly experimented with new technologies, testing fonts and word art, layering text over photographs for novel aesthetics. *ARGO*'s design hindered readability as full colour, full frontal nudes formed backgrounds for low-contrast text. Moreover, whereas many could be purchased from street sellers, websites, or via a postal subscription, the most elusive publications proved tricky to locate even by those most engaged in Russia's LGBTQ+ movement. For instance, Ol'ga Gert was unsuccessful in her attempt to track down *Arabeski*, a half typed, half hand-written illustrated almanac of translated poetry and biographies published in April 1993 [*Ostrov*, 1999'12, No.1, 3-5].

¹⁴⁴ The details on the production and distribution of *Tema* are based on John Hammond, 'Gay Activism in Russia : An Interview with Evgenia Debryanskaya', *New York Native*, no. 395 (12 November 1990): 22–23. Thanks to the IHLIA.

¹⁴⁵ Philip Gleissner, 'Queer Periodicals in Post-Soviet Russia: From Leningrad Underground to Transnational Publishing' (Sawchen Lecture, UBC CENES, online, 2021).

¹⁴⁶ Roldugina, 'Dissidents of Love'; Gessen, 'Genders 22'; Healey, *Russian Homophobia*.

It seems, then, that the answer may depend on the time frame and exact publication—or lie in the in-between. After all, the press was likely inspired by late-Soviet dissident self-publishing, but it adapted these strategies for the new market. What began as an activist initiative responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis and the laws criminalising homosexuality then evolved into entrepreneurial projects. Held back by difficulties securing advertisers willing to work with an LGBTQ+ publication, many were unable to raise funds covering production costs. Most journals in the MLGA collection were published irregularly, with only a few issues ever materialising. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of projects and variety of styles speaks to the excitement with which the editors embraced new opportunities for LGBTQ+ representation and organisation.

The Missing Pieces

While the digitised collection from MLGA is extensive, not every journal was captured. The collection also focuses on publications by the alternative press, rather than content about LGBTQ+ topics which appeared in mainstream media. These are two notable omissions, and in the subsections below I outline the impact on my project of searching for bisexual representations and readerships.

xxBi

One publication which is unfortunately not included in the digitised materials from the MLGA is the magazine *xxBi*, which launched in 2004 for a total of three issues.¹⁴⁷ As the title and its tagline ‘для геев, бисексуалов, и метросексуалов’ suggests, the journal was at

¹⁴⁷Информация о LGBT по-русски: Kvir-SMP, LGBT.fandom.com, n.d., <https://lgbt.fandom.com/ru/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80-%D0%A1%D0%9C%D0%98>.

least superficially aimed toward attracting a bisexual-identifying readership. Amico attributes this to ‘the editorial staff’s desire to reach as wide an audience as possible’, stipulating that ‘[t]he magazine’s contents [...] were notable for the fact that virtually all images and articles were of or devoted to men’.¹⁴⁸ Without consulting *xxBi*, it is impossible to verify Amico’s interpretation that the bisexual spin on the magazine was purely a branding exercise. Yet it should be noted that until now, the wealth of bisexual material in the press overall has gone unnoticed; so it remains plausible that *xxBi* was in fact targeting bisexual men interested in men and may have included bi-specific content.

Mainstream Comparisons

While a full comparison of bisexual content in the alternative press with articles about bisexuality in the mainstream press would fall beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth highlighting that Viktor Oboin did record the bi-themed news stories he came across as part of his journal *Zerkalo* and its associated GenderDok collection. That archive was originally founded as the *Biblioteka lesbiyanok i geev* in 1994, with the aim of collecting, referencing, and archiving information published about homosexuality in Russia. The name was changed in 1996 to reflect the widened interests of the project and a desire to include materials not only about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, but about trans people specifically and gender more broadly.¹⁴⁹ When Oboin emigrated, he donated a catalogue of the GenderDok collection as of 15 April 1998 to the IHLIA in Amsterdam.

¹⁴⁸ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 137.

¹⁴⁹ Viktor Oboin, *GenderDok kolleksiya* catalogue (Moskva: GenderDok, 1998), 11–12. My thanks to the IHLIA.

Forming just a small part of the catalogue was a bibliography of eleven articles about bisexuality that had appeared in Russian-language newspapers.¹⁵⁰ At least three of these texts spotlighted first-person bisexual voices through an interview or letter format. Though multiple publications are represented in the list (*Vechernyaya Moskva*, *Inform Polis*, *Molodezh' Buryatii*, *Sovershenno istinno*, *Simona*), six of the articles originated from the same supplement to *Argumenty i fakty* in February 1997, simply called *Lyubov'*. Unfortunately, none of the articles are accessible today: they have not been digitised on East View or Factiva, whose holdings start at a later date; nor are copies available in libraries like the Bodleian. *Argumenty i fakty* also does not feature the *Lyubov'* supplement in its own database, instead dating the first issue of *AiF. Lyubov'* to December 1999—suggesting that this was a different, though similarly named, spin-off publication.¹⁵¹ While it remains possible that these texts might be held by MLGA or other private archives in Russia, the current political context makes it impossible to track down these sources.

Based on the titles and short excerpts (none exceeding a few lines) presented alongside the bibliographical information in the catalogue, what we can conclude is that there were at least some examples in the mainstream press of bisexuality being normalised and doubted.¹⁵² For while the investigative article ‘Он и она? Бисексуалисты, кто они?’ stated that it was exceedingly rare to meet a bi person ‘у которого проявляется равновесие обеих склонностей’ [*Sovershenno istinno*, 1991(?), No.4, 265], it was elsewhere reported that as many as one in five may be bisexual [*AiF. Pril.: Lyubov'*, February 1997, No.4(13), 13]. Indeed, questions were raised as to whether bisexuality was so universal as to be the norm ‘Бисексуальность – норма жизни?’ [6]. Simultaneous [‘одновременно’] and sequential

¹⁵⁰ Oboin, 36–37.

¹⁵¹ ‘Vse nomera’, AiF.ru, n.d., <https://aif.ru/gazeta/archive/edition/23>.

¹⁵² These titles and brief excerpts were also published in the ‘Press-Panorama’ of Oboin’s informational bulletin *Zerkalo* [e.g. 1997, No.4(12) 5-6]. However, here they were not listed under the separate category of ‘Бисексуальность’ as in the catalogue, but rather under ‘Гендер и гендерные роли’.

[‘ПОСЛЕДОВАТЕЛЬНО’] relationships with same- and opposite-sex partners were equally respected as forms of bisexuality in neutral definitions provided by an exposé on ‘сексуальное раздвоение’ [6]. That term that appears twice across the list and seemingly emanates from the idea that bisexual people are split between “straight” and “gay” sides.¹⁵³ Various forms of bisexuality were exemplified through bisexual voices; that same issue printed a confession by a bisexual man explaining that superficial sexual encounters with men alongside his marriage to a woman were enough to satisfy him [7].

Readership

Beyond editorial enthusiasm and urgency, what Healey’s description of the MLGA as an ‘archive of freedom’ so aptly captures is the wealth of information about LGBTQ+ lives, desires, anxieties, and self-conceptualisations found in reader contributions. For the first time, Russians could engage with LGBTQ+ topics in a public forum, bringing their own experiences to the forefront of discussion. Bisexuals keenly took part.

Demographics

The first issue of *RISK* invited readers to return a survey reporting their sexual attractions and practices [1991, No.1, 13-4]. This was designed with (bi)sexual fluidity in mind. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they engaged in homosexual sex, and separately, heterosexual sex. An adapted Klein Orientation Grid was included with ratings requested in three categories: sexual contact; erotic attraction; and potential for romantic attraction. The scale spanned from 1 [‘абсол. натурал’] to 6 [‘абсол. голубой’],

¹⁵³ Chapter IV investigates how bisexual writers have approached the notion of being “split”, particularly in poetry.

with the mid-point 4, marked bisexual. Two years later, the editors expressed surprise at the high percentage of bi respondents [1993, No.1-2, 6]. 25% of readers had self-identified as bisexual; 34% as having switched from a straight to gay orientation; 9% as having a “natural” family; and 25% as divorced.

They speculated that more people likely identified as bisexual in Russia than other countries due to the specific history of persecution within its territories:

Эти цифры говорят о том, что область взаимовлияния сексуального меньшинства и гетеросексуального большинства в нашем обществе довольно велика; вероятно доля бисексуалов здесь больше, чем в странах, где сексуальные меньшинства не подвергались десятилетиями жестокому уголовному, психологическому и социальному преследованию.

This stipulation parallels the previously described scholarly arguments that more people identified as bisexual at this time in Russia due to social pressures and historical criminalisation. However, the report considered current bisexual identification and past bisexual life experience (including shifts from heterosexual to homosexual relationships) together, without providing a more detailed breakdown of overlapping data points. Later reader surveys suggested a different demographic breakdown, with bisexuals and lesbians in one case accounting for just 14% in total [*GayTimes*, 2004, No.8, 20].

Letters

Though we cannot access granular data about bi reader demographics, we can gauge conceptualisations of bisexuality from the snippets of information which bi readers and their partners chose to share. Submitted letters told tales of sexual escapades, periods of confusion concerning sexual orientation, and difficulties navigating relationships. Depending on the publication, these were published under different rubrics (such as *Pochta*) or spread across a given issue to echo or make counterpoints to an article exploring a related topic.

RISK ran an advice column which featured several bisexual submissions. In one, 18-year-old Misha struggled to make sense of his actions and attractions as he was dating a girl but sleeping with her brother; he acknowledged he was *biseksual* and questioned whether he might also be *goluboi* [1992, No.2-3, 24]. In another, a man wrote in because he could not comprehend why his partner of three years would still be attracted to women when the man in question had great sex with him and claimed to reciprocate his love [*RISK*, 1993, No.1-2, 23]. In response to this author's concern that his partner was returning to his old heterosexual ways ['он вернется к старому?'], the columnist incredulously points out that 'ты пишешь о своем друге почти как о рецидивисте, а он, может быть, всего лишь бисексуал'. The columnist goes on to ask if he sees in his partner's bisexual desire an 'измену не только себе, но и всему мужскому полу', underscoring that surely the fact he likes women is less important than the fact he likes *him*. Still, sympathetic to the impact that this was clearly having on their bond, the columnist suggests that it might perhaps be time to experiment with something new in the bedroom and reignite their sexual connection. This response rejects framing bisexuality as the issue and challenges misconceptions and mistrust of bisexuality instead.

Another trend among the letters was a kind of bisexual confession, often reminiscing over past sexual encounters (real or imagined). A short letter from 22-year-old Gena claims to have discovered enjoying giving vaginal oral sex as a pre-teen, when his then boyfriend Sergei (just a year older) proposed playing with the "colour wheel" ['сыграть в «ромашку»'] and invited three lesbians to join them [1/10, 1993, No.8, 4]. Gena was fascinated by Sergei's gentle motions and quickly found himself doing the same to another girl—he now hopes

that a ‘симпатичная девчонка’ will write to him to let him relive the experience.¹⁵⁴ While the authenticity of letters such as this (and in the following sections, personal ads and reportage) is questionable, I argue that this has little bearing on their significance. As stated by the editors of the lesbian journal *Probuždenie* when appealing for more readers to write in, this was an exciting chance for LGBTQ+ individuals to create content for and by themselves: ‘Можете рассказать всю правду, можете слегка приврать или выдумать всё от начала до конца. Лишь бы это было интересно.’ [1995, No.6, 30]. Regardless of verifiability, then, the importance of the ideas circulating, types of erotic fantasy created and shared, anxieties expressed, and “non-fiction” written were designed to be believable or at least understandable to those with similar experiences. Some were likely chosen for shock factor; others for their sense of genuine emotion; still more for their potential to arouse. All are valid reasons to study these fragments of LGBTQ+ voices today.

Contact Clubs

Though content varied considerably across the press, many publications ran a Contact Club for readers to submit personal ads and start new relationships as pen pals, friends, or partners. Ads were printed for a fee and assigned unique catalogue numbers, allowing responses to be sent via the editors while keeping exact contact details confidential. However, the advertiser’s city was normally listed, and because posts came from all over Russia and the former Soviet Union, readers could either selectively reply to local ads or correspond with someone farther away to feel more secure in anonymity. Not every journal offered this service—*V temu* in Arkhangelsk and *Spektral’* in Tver’ for instance did not—but those which did often drew interest from a significant geographical area. *Probuždenie* also sought to make their service

¹⁵⁴ I address several other instances of men seeking women, as well as fetishising lesbians and bisexual women, later in the chapter.

more accessible to certain regions by offering free connections for women in Central Asia [June 1994, 20] and the Caucasus [October 1994, 22].

Due to financial and word count constraints, authors adopted popular turns of phrase and conventionally specified their age, height, weight, and city.¹⁵⁵ Beyond that, their zodiac sign, a key interest, and the types of sex they desired might be mentioned. Of course, even the act of sending such an advertisement may have excited due to the public nature of a same-sex fantasy that, in many cases, would still need to be kept private in day-to-day life.¹⁵⁶ Before the decriminalisation of *muzhelozhstvo* in 1993, the dating service came with a warning not to use the service to organise anal sex (or if you were underage). Though it is unclear exactly how many readers responded to personals, certain Contact Clubs grew steadily in popularity. More than merely a key earner for a press that struggled to secure advertising revenue, dating services provided a platform bringing queer sexuality into public discourse.¹⁵⁷

Bi Personal Ads

Despite so clearly targeting a homosexual audience, early editors were surprised readers occasionally wrote in who were not looking to meet a same-sex partner. When a young man apparently submitted a request to help him find a woman to take away his virginity, *RISK* editors questioned why he had chosen their paper specifically, replying that they would help him find a “woman”—the drag queen pictured [1993, No.1-2, 24]. Regardless of this incredulity, the fact that that bisexual people used the press’s dating services to find male and female partners alike is extensively evidenced.

¹⁵⁵ So formulaic was the standard ad that one noteworthy advertisement appeared in the style of *stjoh*, satirically adopting these common formulas while also punning on sexological theories of bisexuality and queer slang [1/10 1994, No.15, 25].

¹⁵⁶ Stella, *Lesbian Lives*, 88–101 especially.

¹⁵⁷ Roldugina, ‘Dissidents of Love’, 245.

Bisexual personals in the Contact Clubs can be categorised into several main types. The first involves authors simply referring to themselves as bisexual, such as Aleksandr from Saint Petersburg: ‘Бисексуальный Александр 42/176/75 ждёт звонка’ [*Probuzhdenie*, men’s edition, July-August 1995, No.3, 40]. Some used the bi label to suggest heightened sexual openness and promiscuity: ‘Симпатичный бисексуал [...] исполнит любую сексуальную фантазию для дам, господ, юношей, девушек и семейных пар. С удовольствием снимусь в порно (фото, видео).’ [*Sib-10*, 1996., No.2, 8 and 1997, No.5, 5].¹⁵⁸ The second type specifies that the author is married and looking to have an affair, as in this ad posted by someone from Barnaul seeking a serious relationship with a “family man” like himself: ‘Женат, 28/175/65, познакомился бы для серьезных и продолжительных отношений с таким же как и я – семейным.’ [*Sib-10*, 1997, No.9, 5]. Occasionally, both bisexuality and marital status would be explicitly signalled, like this case from Krasnodar: ‘Небольшая деталь, бисексуал, женат.’ [*1/10*, 1993, No.8, 14].

Some bisexuals were interested only in other bisexuals. For instance, a bisexual-identifying man in Murmansk hoped to meet someone like himself, also from Murmansk: ‘образование высшее, бисексуал. Для постоянных отношений познакомлюсь с высоким, стройным, образованным, бисексуальным мурманчанином’ [*RISK*, 1993, No.3-4, 29]. More rarely, women like Yana from Ekaterinburg did the same: ‘стройная, симпатичная, хочет познакомиться с бисексуалкой’ [*Gei dialog*, 1994, No.2-3, 8]. The filtering process occurred in more euphemistic language too by appealing to the idea of “like-mindedness”; such as when Vitalii from Yaroslavl’ writes ‘бисексуал желает познакомиться с

¹⁵⁸ For more on how bisexuals are stereotypically cast as risky, problematic, or promiscuous partners, and how this affects bisexual intimacies, see Klesse, ‘Shady Characters’, 229–30; Maliepaard and Baumgartner, *Bisexuality in Europe*, 2.

единомышленниками для дружбы, переписки, возможно обмена визитами и фото’ [Golubok, 2000, No.12, 9].

Mutual understanding was essential given that bisexuals were still stigmatised by other advertisers: ‘Я: 18/165/62, ласковый, верный, честный. Студент. Москвич. Ты: не старше 25, искренний, верный, симпатичный, ласковый универсал, не бисексуал, может быть женоподобен, но не манерен.’ [1/10, 1994, No.15, 25]. Bisexual couples sought other bi couples for friendship and group sex, as did Vera and Vyacheslav from Kyiv: ‘Молодая бисексуальная пара ищет единомышленников’ [Shans, 1992, No.1, 15]. Finally, still others did not explicitly identify as bi, but nonetheless expressed interest in ‘партнеров обоего пола’ within a particular age range or with an interest in performing specific sex acts, such as those ‘предпочитающих петтинг, оральные секс’ [Shans, 1992, No.1, 15]. The various vectors of desire expressed across different types of bi personal ads capture the diversity and liveliness of the bisexual dating scene, as well as the wide-ranging motivations for bisexual identification.¹⁵⁹

Men Seeking Femininity

Camp men were not always desirable to bisexuals, as Valera from Moscow emphasises: ‘бисексуал, но без женских манер’ [Gei dialog, 1994, No.2-3, 8]. Yet at other times, bi men sought characteristics and behaviours associated with femininity. Sergei from Rostov-na-donu longed for a neat and tidy man, implying that cleanliness usually belonged to the realm of women: ‘Бисексуал. Я очень люблю чистоплотность. Это как с девчонкой.’ [Sib-10, 1997, No.9, 5]. Someone from Saint Petersburg hoped to connect with either a bi couple (a

¹⁵⁹ I discuss other types of self-identification further in Chapter II, such as attraction ‘regardless of gender’. See also Barker, Richards, and Bowes-Catton, ‘All the World Is Queer Save Thee and ME’, 376.

man and a woman, who would both be interested in him) or a ‘transvestite’ (whose appearance would look feminine but whose body would retain male primary sex characteristics): ‘Приятный, молодой мужчина возьмёт на содержание красивую, бисексуальную семейную пару или трансвестита с женской внешностью и фигурой.’ [*Probuždenie*, men’s edition, July-August 1995, No.3, 40]. Desiring the intersection of the masculine and feminine might be considered an analogue of ‘simultaneous’ bisexuality, which, as I outline later in the chapter, was more often theorised in the press as the ‘genuine’ form of bisexuality.

Furthermore, some male advertisers rejected interest from other men and seemingly fetishized bisexual and lesbian women: ‘Симпатичный молодой человек с удовольствием познакомится с бисексуалками и лесбиянками для интимного времяпрепровождения. Фото обязательно. Геев просьба не беспокоится.’ [*1/10*, 1992, No.5, 15]. Similarly, a Seattle-based matchmaking service apparently tried hiring mail-order brides through one Contact Club: ‘Могу предложить хороший контакт для женщин бисексуалок и лесбиянок – знакомство с супругами из США. Мужчины нас не интересуют.’ [*Shans*, 1992, No.2, p.14]. Still other men wanted to meet bisexual women to start a family in which they could have a meaningful relationship without needing to hide their own sexualities. For instance, one self-identifying bi man hoped to contact a ‘бисексуальной женщиной ... имеющей розовые интересы’ who would care for him, if only ‘душевно’ [*Gei dialog*, 1994, No.2-3, 6]. The term *dushevno* implies an emotional or romantic attraction but not necessarily a sexual one. This reflects a wider use of the bisexual label in the press to refer to someone able to live happily and intimately with an opposite-sex partner, without necessarily being sexually attracted to them.

Bi Dating Services?

Two Contact Clubs brought to light quite how many bisexual readers were seeking connections. *Shans* had a high concentration of bisexual advertisements, likely due to its stated aim of dissolving the dividing line between the heterosexual and homosexual “worlds”

[*Shans*, 1992, No.1, 1]:

Мы будем работать с любой категорией читателя. Стирать грани отчуждения и неприятия между теми, кто считает себя правым большинством, и теми, кто вынужден скрывать свое непривычное для окружающих поведение. [...] Через номер мы будем говорить как с одним, так и с другим миром.

The editorial strategy was to alternate the type of content. Though only two issues were ultimately printed, the first privileged men who have sex with men (MSM), while the second concentrated on marital intercourse and men who have sex with women (MSW). Taken together, its two issues therefore most closely resemble what might be called a bisexual newspaper.¹⁶⁰ Accordingly, the illustrated header image was adapted so the nude man adorning the first issue was subsequently paired with a naked woman, their legs intertwined.

Although some articles in the second issue were ostensibly written with a female reader in mind—such as those on how to prevent unwanted pregnancy, or how to gratify a man with oral sex when you don’t understand testicles yourself—there is little else to suggest a female readership. Furthermore, the photographs of women included suggest an intended male gaze. For instance, porn star Julia Parton—described as the ‘восторга всех мужчин мира’ [*Shans*, 1992, No.2, 11] is pictured sucking her finger and exposing her buttocks to the camera. The issue even concludes with a brief feature on the places to which men’s eyes gravitate on a woman’s body: ‘Что гладит взор мужчины?’ [16]. The dating service in *Shans*

¹⁶⁰ Perhaps apart from *xxBi*.

is consequently one of the most distinctly bisexual, yet still male-dominated, among the journals.¹⁶¹ The proportion of bisexual ads reflects shifting curatorial choices between issues: the first set of personals were primarily authored by MSM, whereas the core of the second issue's ads were posted by MSW. However, in both cases, self-identifying bisexuals expressed their openness to meeting 'партнеров обоого пола' and, again, simply 'ЕДИНОМЫШЛЕННИКОВ'.

Indeed, bisexuals wanted to be acknowledged in Contact Clubs. When the Nizhnii Tagil newspaper *Gei dialog* introduced its dating service in January 1994, the ads were all presented under the title 'Он ищет его' [No.1, 4]. By the February-March issue, 'Она ищет её' had been added [No.2-3, 8]. Then, in the April-May issue, a letter from a certain Yura in Volchansk was printed, requesting that sections be added for bisexuals hoping to start families with someone of a similar "non-traditional" orientation [No.4-5, 8]. He emphasized that the publication claimed to be for gays, lesbians, *and* bisexuals, yet bisexuals were not being catered for even though it was harder for them to find a soulmate ['ВЕДЬ ТАКИХ ЛЮДЕЙ МНОГО И ИМ НАМНОГО СЛОЖНЕЕ НАЙТИ СВОЮ ПОЛОВИНКУ']. The editors were responsive and shared a similar intuition to that articulated in the commentary to *RISK*'s survey: they suggested that trouble dating was strongly affecting the bisexual community because it was only very recently that bisexuals had attempted to look outside the sexual dogma and prejudices of communist ideology.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ The editors of *Shans*, among other publications, were accused of abusing their own Contact Club in allegations by Dmitrii Lychev [1/10, 1993'1, No.8, p.2].

¹⁶² In Chapter II, I show that this perception of bisexuals lagging behind lesbian and gay activism impacted the evolution of Gay.ru's website structure. Major contributions by bisexuals to LGBTQ+ activism have been overlooked globally. See Mark A. Gammon and Kirsten L. Isgro, 'Troubling the Canon: Bisexuality and Queer Theory', *Journal of Homosexuality* 52, no. 1-2 (2010): 162-64; and Shaw, *Bi*, 29-35.

Rebranding the service for the September issue, new sections were introduced with names referencing cultural touchpoints: *Mister Iks* for MSM, *Lotos* for WSM, *Madama Batterflyai* for transgender people, and *Maestro* for bisexuals [*Gei dialog*, 1994, No.9-11, 8]. In this initial *Maestro* rubric two ads were printed, one from a Valerii and one from an Anzhela, both looking for the same ideal relationship dynamic whereby they could look like the perfect couple in public and genuinely care for each other, while privately seeing same-sex partners too. As Anzhela explains: ‘Давно ищу парня до 25 лет, для которого связь со мной будет не в тягость: живем для себя (я люблю ее, иногда и тебя, а ты – его, но для окружающих мы – идеальная парочка, такая сладкая парочка!)’. This emphasis on wanting to be able to share a loving bond and construct a family life together without the relationship being the main source of sexual pleasure was echoed in other bisexual ads.

When *Gei dialog* published its subsidiary *Dialog physis* in 1995, the *Maestro* section returned full force. Fourteen bisexual couples aged 19 to 29—from places as disparate as Saint Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Chelyabinsk, Odesa, Rostov-na-Donu, Perm, and Krasnoyarsk—hoped to find singles and couples hoping for hook-ups [1995, No.1, 3]. Six used the label bisexual to describe either themselves, their ideal respondents, or both: ‘Бисексуальная пара медиков ищут друзей по ориентации’. Three others shared their marital status [e.g. ‘супружеская пара’], hoping to spice up the bedroom with ‘новых друзей и подруг’. Though bi couples used other Contact Clubs, *Maestro* is the sole instance where they were granted their own space. This normalised the desire to open a relationship, showing it to be commonplace—even a shared fantasy [‘каждый желают иметь отношения с бисексуальными парочками’].

Extra-Marital Affairs

Looking for partners outside of a long-term relationship, either as a couple or separately in secret, was not out of the ordinary. Cruising slang reflected this through terms such as ‘феномен’, which designated a ‘женатый пассивный гомосексуалист, имеющий детей.’ [Golubok, 2001, No.18, 7]. Confusion surrounded how a man could be the “active” partner in a heterosexual marriage but prefer being “passive” with other men.¹⁶³ The very term ‘phenomenon’ suggests this was considered equally remarkable and widespread.¹⁶⁴ In turn, given that a “genuine” bisexual was thought to necessarily be involved in multiple simultaneous heterosexual and homosexual relationships, the number of married people who identified or were perceived as bisexual was likely inflated.¹⁶⁵

Married Men

Some readers expressed gratitude to the press for helping them navigate marital and extra-marital sex. For instance, a letter thanks ARGO for printing such ‘красивые, разные члены’ as both the author and his long-term boyfriend have been used the photographs to masturbate and satisfy their wives without leading them to suspect an affair [ARGO, 1996, No.4, 63]. The editors’ choice of the title ‘Жены нами довольны’ capitalises on the irony that gay erotica provided an outlet for same-sex desire which ultimately improved their conjugal sex lives; thereby increasing comfort and capability in simultaneous “bisexual”

¹⁶³ This is a persistent point of confusion concerning bisexual men. See the attitudes reported on in Stas Solenyi, ‘Pochemu lyubimyi passiv sbezhал k devochke?’, Gay.ru, 20 April 2021, <http://www.xgay.ru/society/family/gay-family/pochemu-lyubimyy-passiv.html>, where a colleague apparently complains: ‘Мой ненасытнейший пассив, который в любое время дня и ночи был готов долбиться под хвост, требуя еще и еще, вдруг ушел к обладательнице вагины. Получается, я его совсем не знал. Он и не гей вовсе?’

¹⁶⁴ Relatedly, it has been argued that because many Russian men at this time lived “bisexual” lives, few might have considered themselves exclusively gay. See Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 118.

¹⁶⁵ This theory is supported by the early internet posts tagged as bi which I analyse in Chapter II.

relationships. Attempts to understand the dimensions of same-sex desire within and beyond marriage—particularly when these unions seemed based on unevenly reciprocated attraction—were relatively common across the press. Partially, the attractiveness of the topic was linked to the scandalous nature of cheating and polyamory, as there were also features interrogating how exclusively same-sex couples succeeded in separating love and sex enough to maintain stable open relationships [*Vremu*, 2006?, No.2, 1].

Interviewers tried to establish the psychological ramifications of same-sex desire within marriage. Homosexual men were surveyed about the impact their lack of attraction to women had on their wives [*RISK*, 1993, No. 3-4, 20]. The core question was which partner was in the sadder situation: on the one hand, some of the women had known about their husbands sexuality before their engagement, misguidedly believing that “homosexuality” was a hobby he would soon forget; on the other, the men were trapped in these relationships. Some distinction was made between married gay men and bisexuals, though not consistently. The clearest example is an expert consultation published in *RISK*. Nikolai Oleinikov, who had been working at the Moscow Centre for Medicine and Reproduction for two years providing psychological help to “sexual minorities”, psychoanalysed this segment of the centre’s clientele [1992, No.4-5, 8-9]. Oleinikov identified three types of relationships in which wives brought husbands of a ‘гомоэротической ориентации’ (a notably broad description) to them for support. These were where:

1. The wife knew about the husband’s orientation before marriage and believed she could change him. These marriages were pressured by the husband’s parents, and thus the relationship is a prison he seeks to escape through extra-marital same-sex contact.
2. The husband actively sought out marriage escape himself and try to fulfil the role society expected of him. However, it is not normally possible to reach this solution, and ultimately, leaves his wife for his male lover.

3. The man has not sufficiently reflected on where he belongs [‘Люди, которые не очень задумывались о своей принадлежности.’].

When prompted by the interviewer, Oleinikov clarifies that this third type is bisexual. His judgements shift to harsher tones, describing bisexual men as ‘легкомысленных геев, легкомысленно заводящих семьи’. Most surprising to him is that their “frivolity” usually had not caused problems, speculating that their wives felt less threatened by their affairs with men than they would have if they were sleeping with other women [‘жены их не очень ревновали к их любовникам’]. Instead, Oleinikov claims, the main issue in marriages with bisexual men is normally related to venereal diseases.

Bisexuality and HIV/AIDS

Compared to the demonisation which bisexual men were subjected to during the AIDS crisis in the U.S. for transmitting the virus across different communities—imagined to be having sex with men on the cruising circuit while still sleeping with wives who might otherwise not be impacted—Russia’s alternative press generally handled the risks of extra-marital “bisexual” sex in a matter-of-fact manner.¹⁶⁶ This can be partly explained by the fact that in post-Soviet Russia, AIDS may not have had such a close public association with MSM and was instead viewed as spread primarily via medical negligence and drug use.¹⁶⁷

Educational articles covering safe sex and HIV prevention featured information about which condom types were only suitable for pregnancy prevention and not for mitigating transmission risks, evidently aware of the need for their readers to access knowledge about both [1/10, 1992(1), No.2, 5]. Risk ratings were provided for sex acts ranging from fisting to

¹⁶⁶ For more on the representation of bisexual men as carriers into heterosexual communities see Garber, *Bisexuality*, 54; and Gammon and Isgro, ‘Troubling the Canon’, 162.

¹⁶⁷ Roldugina, ‘Dissidents of Love’, 243; However, there were also some cases where Russian media scapegoated “non-traditional” sexuality for the threat of HIV/AIDS. See Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 105.

vaginal sex, again recognizing the importance of covering penetrative and non-penetrative acts regardless of body types and combinations [*Gei Dialog*, 1993(1), No.2, 5].¹⁶⁸ Some members of the public even felt bisexual men were the least likely demographic to be HIV positive, with one reader writing in to say that because most of his sexual contact was with bi men, he felt less at risk: ‘У меня контакты чаще с бисексуалами. С ними лучше и возвышеннее, а главное, без страха венерических заболеваний и СПИДа’ [*1/10*, 1995, No.17, 13]. The assumption here is that bisexuals had sex with fewer partners overall in the cruising scene, perhaps due to being constrained by a long-term “heterosexual” relationship, and were therefore less likely to contract the virus.

Nonetheless, there were still notable examples of bisexuals being associated with promiscuity and resulting increased rates of transmission. As early as December 1990, the lead editor of *RISK*, Vladislav Ortanov, had written a feature for the initial test issue which stressed that the epicentre was not all that far away [1991, No.0, 7].¹⁶⁹ Ortanov pinpoints the arrival of HIV in Moscow to a ‘бисексуалист’ doctor and one of his partners, a bisexual sex worker who had himself provided services to a string of male tourists visiting the USSR:

Летом 1987 г. При анонимном обследовании был выявлен инфицированный ВИЧ пациент - главный врач медицинского учреждения, признавший себя бисексуалистом. Оказалось, что один из его партнеров, инфицированный ВИЧ бисексуалист, с 1983 г. Вступал из меркантильных соображений в половые связи с гомосексуалистами из США, Латинской Америки и стран Западной Европы, причем преимущественно с бизнесменами и дипломатами, приезжавшими в СССР на короткий срок.

This bisexual sex worker is singled out as a super spreader. Ortanov traces the transmission of HIV throughout the network of partners he had in Russia [‘партнерами-соотчественниками’] between 1985 and 1988. The group totalled thirteen ‘мужчинами

¹⁶⁸ However, most similar articles were limited to communicating risks pertaining to sex acts between men, such as the ratings from completely safe and most dangerous in *Sibirskii variant* [1992, No.5, 3] and *Sib-10* [1996, No.1, 2], or the restaurant-style menu of sexual “courses” in *1/10* [1995, No.17, 28].

¹⁶⁹ Although it was distributed in 1991, the front cover states that the issue was prepared for publication in December 1990. The final page clarifies this was a test run.

гомо- и бисексуалистами’ and one woman. Ortanov notes that in the summer of 1987, this man also took part in group sex ‘ещё двух зараженных бисексуалистов’, one of whom has previously been in sexual contact with a woman who sadly died of AIDS.

Ortanov’s consistent specification that those infected were *bisexualisty* is significant because such a clear distinction between gay and bisexual MSM was far from standard practice in the articles analysed for this thesis. Rather, his insistence on the men being *bisexualisty*, in addition to the international and gendered breakdown of their sexual histories, implies a belief that bisexuality (and especially bisexual sex work) involves a level of indiscriminate sexual behaviour which implicates these men in the spread of HIV/AIDS more than their monosexual counterparts. The same idea that bi male sex worker passed on STIs at a higher rate (and often without awareness of their actions) seemingly persisted into the early 2000s, where it was reflected in scientific studies outside the alternative gay and lesbian press. In 2001, an academic study of young Russian male sex workers with male clients emphasized that those involved in the study had ‘significant gaps in knowledge about HIV risk’ and a ‘very large proportion of the men reported bisexual behavior’—with 87% having had a female partner in their lifetime and 47% having had a female partner within the previous three months.¹⁷⁰ The impact on the women affected by the bi men’s sexual activity is similarly highlighted.¹⁷¹ An in-depth examination on risks related to sex between women also named bisexual women as more likely to be infected alongside women of colour, poor women, and drug users [*Prilozhenie k Adel’fe*, 1996, No.4, 5].

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey A. Kelley et al., ‘HIV Risk Behavior and Risk-Related Characteristics of Young Russian Men Who Exchange Sex for Money or Valuables from Other Men’, *AIDS Education and Prevention* 13, no. 2 (2001): 175–88 My thanks to the IHLIA.

¹⁷¹ The lack of research and resources for safer sex practices in the context of HIV/AIDS transmission in lesbian sex was lamented in *1/10* [1992, No.6-7, 18] as the authors pointed out that women were usually only considered at risk if they (also) had sex with men. Recommendations were made to mitigate risks by using latex to reduce contact with vaginal fluid and menstrual blood.

In a special bulletin of *1/10* (dated 01.12.1993) dedicated to AIDS awareness and safe sex, artist Viktor Putintsev takes this stigma surrounding bi men and transforms it into an educational illustration about the need for condom use [2]. In the image, a naked man smiles directly at the viewer, hugging a naked woman whose head is resting intimately on his shoulder. At the same time, he stands directly behind the grim reaper, whose skeletal body is bent before him—evidently symbolic of a HIV-positive “passive” partner threatening fatal infection. The reason the man can smile in this situation is the knowledge that he used appropriate protection with both partners: the reaper wears an oversized condom hat, with another condom pulled over his phallic scythe, while the woman holds up inflated condoms like celebratory balloons. The message is that to keep yourself, your wife, and your married life safe and happy, you must use protection in affairs as well as at home.

Married Women

Despite extensive evidence of extra-marital relationships printed throughout the press, there remained stigma attached for women too. Upon receiving a high volume of personals from married women, the editors of *Probuždenie* wrote a response questioning the acceptability of affairs [*Probuždenie*, June 1994, No.1, 21]. While most dating services printed the exact words of the advertiser, *Probuždenie* paraphrased the ads into the third person. One expression used consistently was ‘Замужняя дама ищет подругу с аналогичной судьбой’ (or ‘Замужняя дама мечтает о подруге с аналогичной судьбой’) [e.g. see June 1994, No.1, 9-16; and June 1994 No.2, 8-23]. The phrase “analogous fate” has pessimistic undertones, implying that after marriage a woman’s lot in life is decided and she would no longer be free to explore sapphic desire. Given that their words were summarized, it is generally unclear how these women would self-identify, or what type of relationship they were seeking. What we can surmise is that the phenomenon was widespread: within a single issue [1994, No.2],

personal ads of this description were posted from Novosibirsk, Tomsk, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Samara, Dmitrovograd, Novoanninskii, Rostov na Donu, Zheleznovodsk, Stavropol', and Zheleznodorozhny. This once again attests to the fact that both local and long-distance connections were possible for bisexual readers (both those who self-identified as bi, or who were living “bisexually”) through the Contact Clubs, and thus a range of relational geographies were created as readers wrote in from across Russian-speaking space.

When editors did convey the emotional tone of the original request in these early issues, the language chosen relates to a desire for hopefulness and mutual understanding. For instance, there are requests that the responder be ‘надёжную’ [June 1994, No.2, 10], have children ‘Замужняя дама 26 лет растит ребёнка и надеется встретить такую же подругу’ [13], or agree to a ‘встречу с пониманием’ [14; 15]. Over time, the editors seemingly increased the maximum word count of the personal ads and frequently made clearer the secretive nature of the connections the women were seeking: ‘Гатчина. Замужняя блондинка с голубыми глазами 21/160, творческой профессии, мечтает о свидании с таинственной незнакомкой.’ [September 1996, 10]. Indeed, a new stock phrase was introduced in which the advertiser “dreamed of secret meetings with a decent woman”, such as ‘Петрозаводск. Замужняя Анжелика 21/160/55, мечтает о тайных встречах с порядочной женщиной.’ [11]. Far rarer in *Probuždenie* than the ‘замужняя дама’ looking for illicit love was a woman evidently felt it important enough to explicitly label herself as bisexual, with this choice retained by the editors: one example from Saint Petersburg is ‘Биссексуальная [sic] Татьяна 26/168, ответит на письмо с фото’ [17]. Yet as the editors relaxed control over the exact wording and length, more of the author’s original voice was allowed to come through, allowing the two descriptions to appear together: ‘Замужняя бисексуалка 20/160/54 умурадской [sic] национальности с садомазохистским уклоном стветит [sic] на письма 18-30 летних [sic] женщин.’ [*Probuždenie*, July-August 1995, No.6, 25].

In the first issue, the editors noted the number of personals searching for extra-marital intimacy, reassuring ‘сердцу не прикажешь’ in a superficially sympathetic commentary [June 1994, No.1, 21]. Yet the analysis quickly turned to the responsibilities of motherhood. Their language shifted to that of necessity, judgement, and atonement: ‘каждая женщина (особенно мать) обязана очень ответственно подходить к этой проблеме’. Most of all, the editors lamented how the letters they received extensively detailed sex lives while neglecting to mention the impact on familial relationships:

Создаётся впечатление, что вся жизнь у лесбиянок проходит исключительно под одеялом. А ведь семью одним сексом не заменить. Кто заменит вашим детям отца и нужна ли им самым такая замена? Может порой стоит смириться с уже свершившейся судьбой?

Ultimately, mothers were told they must decide what is best not only for themselves but for their children, who will be the ones to judge or forgive—not for the affair *per se*, but for the kind of childhood they provided [‘они [ваши дети] вас будут судить или миловать’]. Given the somewhat accusatory tone of the rhetorical questions throughout this commentary, it appears that even if the editors believed that ‘почти все замужние женщины обращающиеся в нашу службу знакомств’ would prefer a female partner, they nonetheless advocated for accepting [‘смириться’] their situation. More important was responsibility to their families than seeking happiness outside a sexually and romantically unfulfilling marriage.

Reader submissions generally suggest that bisexual-identifying women were stigmatised within post-Soviet Russia’s newly forming lesbian community. Some authors specify that they did not want to be contacted by bisexuals: ‘Бисексуалки не интересуют.’ [*GayTimes*, 2004, No.6, 19]. On the flip side, a young woman decries a ‘лесбийский культ’ obsessed with dating ideal women, i.e. “чистых лесбиянок” untainted by sexual contact with men

[*Adel'fe*, 1995'7, No.5, 16]. Apparently, this group considered 'предательством даже поцелуй с ним'. Interestingly, however, she states that heterosexual women were not alienated in the same way ["натуралок" они не всегда чураются], implying that it was not simply sexual contact with men which "tainted". Instead, bi women were perceived as not 'чистых'—that is, somehow impure, unclean, or treacherous—for refusing to choose a side. This attitude was further reflected in a short story by Lena Lokteva, titled *Maloletki*, in which the protagonist pretends not to be interested in another girl because she is bisexual, a more acceptable reason than simple jealousy: '—Меня не интересуют бисексуалки. // Это было чудовищной ложью, и Подружка об этом знала.' [*Organicheskaya ledi*, 2000, No.5, 24-27].

Theorising (Bi)Sexuality

Alongside the wealth of reader-submitted bisexual content, the MLGA collection captures a microcosm of theories about bisexuality circulating in early post-Soviet Russia. Three major discourses emerge across the press: universalising theories of homosexuality relying on an externally-observable bisexual potential; an evolutionary theory of bisexuality conflated with "hermaphroditism"; and the non-existence of bisexuality as a stable orientation, with multiple desires explained as alternating periods of homosexual and heterosexual behaviour. These discourses are by no means unique to Russia, and articles drew on the same late nineteenth and twentieth century Euro-American science responsible for perceptions of bisexuality in Western contexts.¹⁷² Translated extracts of sex research were printed, such as William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny's work in the *GayTimes* feature 'Тайны человека: бисексуальность' [2003, No.2, 11-12].

¹⁷² These include the references to Sigmund Freud, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, and the Kinsey Scale mentioned above.

In this section, I investigate how these discourses intersected in the press along markedly gendered lines, with speculation about bi men dominating the debate rather than consideration of bi women. Theories spotlighted in the journals provide a window into those circulating more broadly among sexologists and in society in the early post-Soviet period, as well as how they were being received by the LGBTQ+ community. Bisexuality, I show, was central to how Russians were (de)constructing the heterosexual-homosexual binary in the wake of decades of silence on the topic of sex altogether.

A Matter of Evolution

The idea that bisexual potential was biologically inherent in everyone, a dormant state waiting to be awoken, cropped up over and over. For instance, features on new world cinema reflected on bi plot lines: ‘может ... что на каком-то жизненном повороте в нем не проснется дремлющая в каждом бисексуальность?’ [*RISK*, 1992, No.4-5, 4]. Elsewhere, the tendency to label someone according to their dating patterns was criticised due to the theory of bi potential, with readers reminded not to make assumptions and be open to self-identification fluctuating over the life course [*Sibirskii variant*, 1992, No.5, 1]:

Существует теория, что человек бисексуален, то есть он может любить партнера как противоположного, так и своего пола. Однако общество навязывает людям определенный тип поведения. [...] Если юноша несколько раз имел половые контакты с другим мужчиной или девушка—с девушкой, то называть их сразу гомосексуалистами—глупо. Не стоит навешивать ярлыки. Самосознание может меняться в течение жизни.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Reprinted from a regional komosomol newspaper in Tomsk [*Molodoi leninets*, 1990, No.4, 9]. The original was longer and took the form of an interview; *Sibirskii variant* only republished the response to this specific question on whether sex without love was possible. There is one discrepancy between two versions, which is that the word *lesbiyanka* was used alongside *gomoseksualist*.

In some cases, editorials speculated as to the reasons behind the apparent ubiquity of bisexuality in the human population. One of the most in-depth attempts at an explanation was written by Mark Zalk, an editor for *1/10* and *1/9*. His earliest piece expounds a narrative in which the three sexual orientations (homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual) are a direct result of the evolution of life on Earth [*1/10*, 1992, No.2-3, 11-13]. Zalk argues that because life originated with single-celled organisms which split to self-replicate, a genetic memory of homosexuality was retained. Organisms then developed which contained the genetic material to self-pollinate and self-fertilise—‘Отсюда бисексуальность, или андрогиния.’—and mixed male and female sex characteristics developed in stages. Lastly, heterosexuality came into existence; having developed latest, Zalk claims, it is the more active and dominant form of sexuality, while homosexuality and bisexuality lie in a dormant state.¹⁷⁴ Same-sex spaces such as army barracks, student halls, and the monastery, he believes, facilitate the awakening of these primitive genes; so readers should not be ashamed to consult a ‘врач-сексолог’. Certainly, some readers wrote in describing their experiences (or fantasies) of discovering their same-sex desire this way: one man describes how he “turned gay” in a communal bath in the army, washing with two other men as gentle scrubbing turned to massages and blowjobs [*Sib-10*, 1996, No.1, 3].

Rather than see this phenomenon as a testament to a rift between the fluidity of sexual behaviour and the rigidity of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, however, Zalk appears to conclude that many more men are ‘псевдогомосексуалов’ (i.e. heterosexual men with homosexual behaviour) than ‘настоящих, «природных» гомосексуалов’. Importantly, he clarifies that bisexuals are not exactly those who sleep with both men and women, despite

¹⁷⁴ Tracing the binary system of sexuality through prehistoric evidence, with bisexuality functioning as an intermediary state, was not unique: other public figures in the 1990s were promoting similar theories about the evolutionary sublimation of homo- and bisexuality. See Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 228–31 on the lecturer Yevgeny Anisov.

general societal understandings. Men sleeping with same and opposite-sex partners may simply be hypersexual heterosexuals whose promiscuity leads them to not distinguish between gender, species, or object: ‘сексуально «нормальным», но с такой повышенной половой возбудимостью или гиперованной потенцией, что не брезгает любой подвернувшейся возможностью «разрядиться» – с женщиной, с мужчиной, ребенком, животным, предметом’. The ‘Действительный бисексуал’ is a man or woman who feels that they belong to both sexes and acts accordingly with their sexual behaviour.

Zalk dismisses the idea of a scale of bisexual orientation or a stable mix of desires in an individual (namely, a 50-50 split in attraction), explaining that Weininger, Freud and Steinach proved the innate bisexuality of every individual long ago. Therefore, so-called “bisexuals” can only have one orientation at any time with episodes of the other—for if everyone is bisexual, no one is. Similar theory forms the basis of another article published in *1/10* by Z. Byutner, titled ‘Pust’ pobudit “bi” пока...’, which asserts that switching between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not evidence of stable bisexuality [*1/10*, 1995, No. 18, 28]. Byutner, like Zalk, instead argues that you can only be meaningfully (yet still doubtfully) bisexual when sleeping simultaneously with men and women:

Если вы сегодня с дамой, а завтра с мужчиной, - вы совсем не «би»! Просто в одном случае вы «гетеро», а в другом «гомо». Строго говоря, настоящий «би» спит с девчонкой и парнем о д н о в р е м е н н о. Поэтому бисексуальность кажется и желанным компромиссом с обиходной моралью, и вызывает особое недоверие своей неопределенностью.

Together, these theories prioritised externally verifiable behavioural evidence over internal self-reflection. They sought to explain away bisexuality as a neutral state, an essential Other in the production of the heterosexual/homosexual binary.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ For more on bisexuality’s role as an epistemological Other, see Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*.

Scientific Opinions

According to Zalk's theories, if a bisexual man was attracted to a woman, then he has 'более или менее нормальная потенция' and his feminine side, caused by an excess of oestrogen, could be corrected with a course of androgens. Hormone treatment would be complemented with psychological therapy ('Если бисексуальное поведение связано с психоэмоциональной установкой, то коррекция возможна с помощью сексопсихолога.'), although some parameters might limit treatment. For example, the ability for "correction" is supposedly conditional on not having behaved homosexually for longer than a year. His argumentation represents a distorted reflection of certain psychiatric practices at the time. Experts developed computerised tests to quantify the percentage of a subject's same-sex desire and determine whether reorientation was possible.¹⁷⁶ Specialists could similarly be seen diminishing romantic and sexual attraction to a series of sex acts that could be forced into a hierarchy of acceptability and pleasure, and unlearned with sexological guidance if it wasn't "too late".

As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, both the terminology of "pseudohomosexuality" compared to "genuine" homosexuality and the recommendation to seek therapy in Zalk's articles were present in contemporary Russian sexological discourse. This was true of notorious public figures like Dilya Enikeeva and her book *Gei i lesbiyanki* (2003), which has aptly been described as a "blueprint" for contemporary homophobic discourse in Russian politics, but also of more sympathetic practitioners at the time.¹⁷⁷ For

¹⁷⁶ See Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 232–35 on the practices of sexologists Georgii Vvedensky and Dmitrii Isaev; and Essig, *Queer in Russia*, 1999, 30–34.

¹⁷⁷ Healey, "Untraditional Sex" and the "Simple Russian". Enikeeva's earlier writings were certainly known in the press, but not always portrayed in a negative light. One issue of *Labris* featured a quote from her book *Seksual'naya zhizn' zhenshchin* (1998) on the cover, where Enikeeva asserted that lesbian women were sexually attracted to 'девички, девушки, женщины и старухи' regardless of age [*Labris*, 1998, No.4, front cover].

instance, contemporary sexologist Dmitri Isaev's work distinguished in more neutral language between "innate"/"primary" homosexuals, and men born with bisexual potential who "acquired" a "secondary" version of homosexuality in same-sex environments during puberty.¹⁷⁸

While content promoting "reorientation" and questioning the authenticity of homosexuality may retrospectively seem surprising in a publication created by and billed for a queer readership, it is far from unusual to find material mocking LGBT groups and individuals printed alongside celebrations of rediscovered Silver Age poetry, new lesbian and gay cinema, nightlife, or pornographic photography.¹⁷⁹ It seems that after over half a century of silence on the topic of (homo)sexuality, editorial teams sought to distribute as much content as possible about same-sex desire. Rather than promote a single agenda, any material on the topic of sexual and gender dissidence, produced by anyone, was perhaps newsworthy and instrumental in developing skills for talking about sex.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, many readers fought against their desire and sought ways to support each other in repressing their sexuality. This meant readers were interested in homoerotic content and theorising about homosexual sin alike. For example, one letter published in *1/10* from a man called Oleg in Tatarstan sought to create a Christian epistolary exchange network among 'верующих геев, лесбиянок, бисексуалов всех оттенков радуги' to support sexual self-

¹⁷⁸ Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 235.

¹⁷⁹ For instance, strikingly derisive cartoons illustrate a semi-autobiographical report on gender affirmative surgery by another contributor [*1/10*, 1995, No.18, 5-6], while a collection of *kbikan'ki* mocks prominent singer Boris Moiseev for being too effeminate and jokes about how *pediki* and *pidarasy* coerce young boys into sex [*Golubok*, 2001, No.17, 14-15]. The punchline of jokes, like the epigraph to this chapter, was often that someone's husband or wife was sleeping with the same sex. For instance, a man goes into the bar each night drinking away his sorrow when he finds out that his eldest, then middle, then youngest sons are all gay ['голубой'; 'педик']. The bartender asks if anyone in his family is sleeping with women, and he responds 'Да... жена!' [*Golubok*, 1997, No.2-3, 7]. The same joke was told in *Organicheskaya ledi* [1998, No.1, 8], next to an anecdote depicting two women who talk about feeling disgusted by their husbands' fish-like, open-mouthed appearance during sex, and wishing they were not married.

¹⁸⁰ Roldugina, 'Dissidents of Love', 244-45.

control and avoid behaviour they believed sinful [1995, No. 18, 3]. A similar submission to *RISK* explained that while the author felt a ‘небольшая тяга к бисексуальным контактам [...] вера запрещает такие контакты’ [1992, No.2-3, 25]. The journals thus document the multifaceted nature of the public debate on sexual identity that was only building in intensity against the backdrop of political and economic turmoil in 1990s Russia, and a resurgence of open Orthodox belief.¹⁸¹

Meanwhile, activists such as Masha Gessen, through their work with the Moscow branch of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, sought to spread the message that homosexuality was not a mental health condition and support those subjected to conversion therapy [*Probuždenie*, June 1994, 4]. Publications selected quotes from prominent experts, like Dmitrii Isaev, which attested to the fact that ‘направленная любовь к своему полу не может считаться патологией’ and compared the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality to being right- or left-handed [*Raduga*, 1996, No.1, 2]. In an interview for *Veselyi chelovek*, Igor’ Kon straightforwardly stipulated that ‘человек изначально по природе своей бисексуален’, but depending on how a person is raised and other factors, this solidifies into one of the three orientations, none of which should be considered a pathology [1994(2), 1]. When prompted by the interviewer’s confusion at how ‘бисексуальные возможности’ make sense from an evolutionary perspective, Kon further explained that sex fulfils more than one function in life, and so it is outdated to think that bisexual potential conflicts with a drive for securing posterity.

Almost a decade later, an edited section of Kon’s book *Ljubov’ nebesnogo tsveta* (2001) discussing Alfred Kinsey’s research into the sexual activity of men was printed as ‘ТОМО-,

¹⁸¹ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 111–13; Richard C. M. Mole, ‘Constructing Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities’, in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2019), 5–9; Miazhevich, *Queering Russian Media and Culture*, 2–5.

ГЕТЕРО-, ИЛИ БИ-?' in the first issue of *GayTimes* [2003, No.1, 10-11]. After establishing the groundwork, Kon explains that 'Самый сложный вопрос теории сексуальной ориентации – проблема бисексуальности.' [10]. For while it is hard to disagree with Freud's contention that bisexuality is universal, this poses plenty of complicated questions concerning when and why people choose or refuse to choose, and if any choice is final after all. Kon raises further concerns that the Kinsey Scale overemphasises the prominence of bisexuality in its continuum between hetero and homo poles, when in reality, 'большинство людей не только не считают себя бисексуалами [...] но и не экспериментируют в этом направлении, а люди, имеющие бисексуальный опыт, в большинстве случаев рано или поздно останавливаются на чем-то одном' [11]. Most who do maintain a bisexual lifestyle for several years, he states, are drawn to one gender over another.

Kon further suggests that bisexuality is an issue because it is nebulous, manifesting in multiple ways:

1. A heterosexual marriage affected by same-sex attractions and relationships.
2. An adolescent period of hypersexual experimentation.
3. Participation in group sex, where the biological sex of the other participants barely matters.
4. An emotional connection to different sexual positions, such as a man who must be on top with women but a bottom with men.¹⁸²

As I have demonstrated, these four definitions of bisexuality circulated in reader submissions and editorials. There was no single consensus of what it meant to be bisexual: was it real, was it a problem, was it a natural potential everyone possessed? If so, was this due to epigenetics or evolutionary history causing periods of pseudohomosexuality confused with bisexuality? Or were bisexuals only bisexual so long as they were dating multiple partners at the same

¹⁸² This is a recurrent belief. For example, Zalk likewise asserted that bisexual men exhibit a "switch" between orientations by changing between active and passive sexual roles depending on the sex of their partners. [1/10, 1992, No.2-3, 11-13].

time? It was often believed that bisexuals must secretly have at least a slight preference. It is through this complex argumentation across the press that bisexuality was both (de)constructed and made (in)visible, hidden in plain sight within the monosexual logics of lay and scientific thinking alike.

Gender Roles

Theories of bisexuality circulated by the alternative press were inextricable from understandings of gender performance.¹⁸³ Largely geared toward male readers, editors primarily pooled knowledge about the origins of same-sex desire in men which overlooked female homo-/bisexuality. Zalk's theories relied on dormant feminine genes being activated in the male genetic code, leaving open the contentious question of sexual fluidity in women. Zalk himself acknowledged that lesbianism was not accounted for in his evolutionary and gestational theories [*1/10*, 1996, No.20, 18]:

Большинство людей являются бисексуалами с выраженной гетеросексуальной ориентацией. Но у части из них, в силу причин, которые еще предстоит выяснить, происходит активизация более архаичных генов андрогинности, и они становятся гомосексуалами. При этом у гомосексуалов-мужчин «пробуждается» их женская, исконно первичная ипостась.

A response by editor-in-chief Dmitrii Lychev recognised that this logic framed women as less developed than men. However, Lychev hypothetically justified Zalk's omission with the assertion that women could not truly exhibit homosexual behaviour because their non-penetrative sex would more accurately be described as 'усложненную женскую мастурбацию' [*1/10*, 1997, No.21, 15]. At other times, sapphic love was tied to questions of mental health and relationship history, perceived as conditionally arising following a lack of heterosexual fulfilment [e.g. *1/10*, 1992, No.2-3, 10].

¹⁸³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Bi Women

Internationally, queer women's sexuality has often been delegitimised, contributing to tensions between lesbian and bisexual communities.¹⁸⁴ Societal definitions of bisexuality (as opposed to definitions generated via self-reporting or through scientific inquiry) have been confirmed to use different barometers for women compared to men.¹⁸⁵ Notably, 'a woman was not defined as bisexual until extremely intimate behavior, such as oral contact with a woman's genitals, had occurred on more than one occasion', and the fact of 'being in love with another woman did not define her as bisexual to the same degree that being in love with a man defined a woman as heterosexual'.¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile, men were 'allowed far less sexual latitude', as 'a historically heterosexual man was no longer defined as heterosexual if he engaged in any intimate behavior with, or felt any emotions toward, another man'.¹⁸⁷ In 1990s Russia, the issue of sapphic desire being judged as resulting from traumatic experiences with men or dismissed as youthful experimentation was further entwined with the legacy of Soviet policies. Female homosexuality had not been criminalised in the USSR in the same way as male homosexuality, and thus queer women were more likely to be subjected to psychiatric treatments.¹⁸⁸

While women's publications generally focused more on literature and culture, some rubrics still captured various viewpoints in the debates on the origins of same-sex love. The

¹⁸⁴ On the (in)visibility of lesbian lives since the Soviet period see Stella, *Lesbian Lives*; On the delegitimation and (in)visible nature of lesbians, see Adrienne Cecile Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)', *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003): 11–48; and Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁸⁵ Swan, 'Defining Bisexuality', 40–41.

¹⁸⁶ Swan, 40 referring to; D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi, 'Heterosexuals Do It with Feeling: Heterocentrism in Heterosexual College Students' Perceptions of Female Bisexuality and Heterosexuality', *Journal of Bisexuality* 15, no. 3 (2015): 304–18.

¹⁸⁷ Swan, 'Defining Bisexuality', 41 referring to; D. Joye Swan and Shani Habibi, 'When Is a Bisexual Really Bisexual? Testing the "One and Done" Rule of Male Same-Sex Behaviour', *Psychology of Sexualities Review* 8, no. 2 (2017): 41–54.

¹⁸⁸ Though recent research has shown that the divide was not always so clearcut Clech, 'Between the Labour Camp and the Clinic'.

supplement to *Adel'fe* published responses to informal surveys conducted with a random selection of Muscovites of different ages and backgrounds. One posed the inclusively worded question: 'В чем причина существования однополый любви?' [*Priložhenie k Adel'fe*, 1996, No.3, 7-8]. Only diverging answers were published, meaning that no consensus was reached; the interest lay in identifying the variety of reasons people provided (though most respondents ignored the question or hung up the phone). Several expressed offence at being asked and were concerned that the interviewer suspected they might have relevant personal experience. Only one respondent connected their ideas to biology or the gestational period, suggesting that the "energy" spiralling in utero was responsible. Others asserted that being a lesbian was related to psychological issues; disrespect for one's parents; desire not to get pregnant; 'разочарований в гетеросексуальных отношениях'; or otherwise being satiated with men ['только от пресыщенности, когда все уже с мужчиной перепробовали']. Some of these beliefs echoed scholarly perspectives. Dmitrii Isaev argued that while there were more homosexual men were "naturally" so than otherwise, for women the situation was reversed: women with acquired homosexuality far outnumbered "natural" lesbians due to domestic violence and lack of emotional, psychological and sexual fulfilment in relationships with men.¹⁸⁹

Elsewhere, men were cited as responsible for women realising their same-sex desire through pressured threesomes. In a piece by Yana Sergeeva republished from Russian *ELLE* (1998), three 'натуралками' were interviewed alongside two lesbians [*Organicheskaya ledi*, 1998, No.2, 15-16]. The aim was to establish how the rising "trend" of same-sex relationships might unlocking bisexual potential in the long term ['Мода, как известно, проходит.

¹⁸⁹ Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 235–36.

Бисексуальность, обнаруженная в себе, остается.].¹⁹⁰ Sergeeva claims the respondents all agreed that any woman at any age could ‘увидеть ЕЕ, свою единственную, влюбиться и, не задумываясь, перейти в категорию “сексуальные меньшинства”, thus marking bisexuality as a point of “slippage”.¹⁹¹ Exemplifying these opinions was the *naturalka* Lena, a 29-year-old manager who recalls that her first moment of intimacy [‘близости’] with another woman occurred under her husband’s influence. The couple had long been discussing inviting another woman for a threesome. Though Lena felt no conclusion had been reached, when her friend was staying over one night, her husband simply called her into the bedroom and it happened. Lena felt overwhelmed but the psychological pressure led her to go along with her husband’s wishes for the sake of her family. Still, she confesses, ‘честно говоря, я благодарна мужу, потому что это событие разбудило мою сексуальность’.¹⁹² For women, it seems, (bi)sexuality was framed as something largely outside their own control, dependent on the actions of men.

“Special Specimens”

As outlined above, gender norms were integral to theoretical approaches toward bisexuality. As well as being shaped by the expected gender performances of men and women, bisexuality historically been conflated with, or otherwise connected to, biological “hermaphroditism” and androgyny. This meant that bisexual intersections with trans identities exposed key weaknesses in the logical frameworks being explored. Trans bodies were sexualised,

¹⁹⁰ Chapter III demonstrates how prominently the idea of bisexuality as a “fashion” featured in Russian music videos and cinema exploring same-sex desire and its impact on society and pre-existing relationships.

¹⁹¹ Bisexuality as a “slippage” is an idea I return to particularly in Chapters III and IV as a driver of plots.

¹⁹² First-person accounts published online, which I detail in Chapter II, echo Lena’s story of discovering her bisexuality through a coerced threesome with a male partner. The fantasy of the threesome, so intertwined with depictions of bisexuality, was also satirized in the short film *Чем пахнут братья* (2013) by the activist group Kvir-spektr in Krasnodar. The video highlights the hypocrisy of the straight male fantasy of a threesome involving two women (bringing queerness into the bedroom) against the backdrop of the increasing levels of state homophobia and stigmatisation of queer men.

medicalised and pathologized by external observers who placed such importance on the individual's pre-transition bodies that it frequently overshadowed statements concerning their sense of self.¹⁹³ Given this perception of trans bodies as doubly gendered—i.e. retaining immutable characteristics of the sex assigned at birth, alongside superficial external changes—it is perhaps unsurprising that stories of trans individuals were sometimes reconfigured as narratives of bisexuality. For instance, a report by Vladimir Panychev, reprinted from *Yug* [1991, No.30, n.p.], spotlighted the ‘«особые экземпляры» – «жемчужины», «бриллианты», «агаты коллекции»’ in the world of *golubye i rozovye* [1/9, 1992?, No.1, 22-24].

These “special specimens” were two people Panychev read as bisexual upon meeting them on a trip to Rostov-na-Donu. One interviewee was a once-married man described as abandoning his wife and children to pursue ‘удовлетворение в гомосексуализме, хотя по натуре – бисексуал, готов сожительствовать с женщиной.’ Panychev’s criteria for being bisexual, it seems, was a behavioural readiness to have a relationship with an opposite-sex partner despite expression of same-sex desire. This definition caused significant confusion in the interactions with his other subject, Anna Krovavaya. Krovavaya was a pre-op trans woman described by Panychev as an unusually effeminate *goluboi* in a relationship with a woman. Irrespective of Krovavaya’s own use of feminine grammatical agreements in her speech, Panychev misgenders her with male pronouns, calling her ‘парень’, ‘транссексуал’, and ‘транссексуалист’, overtly medicalising her as worthy of study:

Ситуация особенно интересна для сексологов. Ведь Кровавая – молодой, высокий, привлекательный парень – родился с гинекомастией, при обследовании на тестостероиды выяснилось, что имеет почти 90 процентов женских гормонов. И вдруг... спит с женщиной.

¹⁹³ A cartoon by Yu. Kumkova, for instance, which mocked freedom of choice over one's body by depicting an alarmed doctor talking to a patient with three sets of breasts, three penises, and penis fingers—was selected to illustrate a first-person account of trans experience [1/10, 1995, No.18, p.4].

The hypothesis that hormonal imbalance is the root cause of non-normative gender expression again surfaces. Yet, as the shocked ellipsis conveys, Krovavaya's sexual relationship with her girlfriend confused the theory.¹⁹⁴ If the hormonal imbalance is so strong, surely Krovavaya would be exclusively homosexual and not interested in women?

Unable to fully contemplate their relationship, Panychev's sole question to her partner is 'Извините, почему вы живете вместе?'. Despite responding with feminine agreements that Krovavaya is 'смелая и добрая' and she feels comforted, protected, and satisfied with her, the partner implicitly reveals she continues to view Krovavaya partially as a man. She questions her own (bi)sexuality: 'Это очень необычно, ведь мужчины меня практически не интересуют.' Apparent incongruence of gender identity and body type perplexed even those closest to a trans individual, leaving them unsure how to define their own sexuality.¹⁹⁵ Contemporaneous interviews with those dating trans people at the time reveal similar points of confusion, such as Sonya Franeta's respondent Masha identifying as a *biseksualka* because, while she had never felt any attraction to women before, she was now dating a transgender man who had decided not to risk any gender-affirming surgeries.¹⁹⁶

Trans Voices on Bisexuality

While some content elucidating trans experiences and distinguishing them from lesbian, gay, and bisexual subjectivities was published, trans topics were the least discussed and

¹⁹⁴ Gender inversion as an explanation for homosexuality was a widely held belief that some publications tried to dispel [*GayTimes*, 2003, No.1, 12].

¹⁹⁵ Relatedly, people with non-binary gender identities (or cisgender people in a relationship with a non-binary person) may struggle to negotiate the language around sexual behaviour and romantic relationships, as sexual categories have emerged from binary understandings of gender. See Cordoba, 'Non-Binary Sexualities'.

¹⁹⁶ Sonya Franeta, *Rozgovoe flamingo: 10 sibirskikh interv'yu*, ed. Elena Gusyatsinskaya and Viktor Pis'mennyi (I'ver': Izdatel'stvo 'GANIMED', 2004), 25–34 and 38–45.

understood.¹⁹⁷ Transition, then perceived as a binary sex change [‘смена пола’; ‘перемена пола’; ‘изменение пола’] from male-to-female (MtF) or female-to-male (FtM), was thought to be a process which began with cross-dressing and necessitated hormonal treatments and surgeries to complete. Despite some examples of reporters explicitly confronting their biases through discussion with transgender people—such as the feature on Sasha and Serezha, two trans women from Krasnoyarsk, who the author realises are lesbian rather than gay and feel deeply uncomfortable as men [*Dialog phys*, 1996, No.2-4, 5]—trans experiences were poorly understood. Whether in articles, personal ads, or interviews, any trans women hoping to locate information and answers about themselves in the press, it seems, likely only found confusion. Their experiences were frequently conflated with homosexuality; self-identifying bisexuals found them attractive due to their mix of primary and secondary sex characteristics; and reporters usually refused to acknowledge the ramifications of their gender identification and instead viewed them as behaviourally bisexual men.

Even when trans identity was accepted as valid, transition and bisexuality proved to be intersecting focal points through which accepted binary conceptions of masculinity and femininity (and corresponding “active” and “passive” monosexual behaviours) were understood and challenged. Trans individuals were not exempt from this pattern. In an autobiographical article, the self-identified ‘транслесбиянка’ Daita recalls learning from a London-based trans organisation that people could have overlapping LGB and trans identities: ‘От них я узнала, что существуют и трансголубые, и транслесбиянки и, даже трансбисексуалы. То есть, представьте, что человек может иметь секс с мужчиной и женщиной, но только сменив свой собственный пол!’ [*Labris*, 1998, No.4, 7]. Her surprise at the existence of *transbiseksualy* can be attributed to the widely held notion that a

¹⁹⁷ For an example case where a distinction was made, see the feature on trans activist Phaedra Kelly from the Isle of Wight, which explained that most trans people are *geteroseksualy* who ‘кто переодевается с желанием быть женщиной, а не от сексуальных причин (голубых или розовых)’ [*Gei dialog*, 1995, No.2-4, 5].

binary transition from male to female or female to male necessitates a binary change to the “opposite” monosexual attraction.¹⁹⁸

Reportage

If all these bisexual readers and all these straight-seeming same-sex desiring people existed in real life and not just on the page... where were they? As Kon questioned, if the majority supposedly fell in the grey areas of the Kinsey Scale, why was this not acted and visible in public? Brian James Baer has shown how in Russia, belief in ‘gay (in)visibility’ fuels paranoia that ‘construes homosexuality as a threat to established values and identities both because it is too visible and because it is potentially invisible’.¹⁹⁹ This concept of gay (in)visibility paradoxically relies on a contradictory belief in the confluence of seemingly mutually exclusive *universalising* and *minoritising* views of homosexuality.²⁰⁰

The paradox, it has been argued, is distinctly post-Soviet in that it is born out of beliefs in a crisis of masculinity symptomatic of the fall of the USSR and a loss of state power on the one hand, and the incompatibility of homosexuality and Russianness on the other.²⁰¹ That sense of separation between the LGBTQ+ population and national identity was perhaps inadvertently reinforced by early gay rights advocates who capitalised on the Soviet Union’s experience of dealing with *natsmen’sbinstva* by adopting the term *seksmen’sbinstva*.²⁰² The linguistic choice, while a potentially useful strategy mirroring successful “born this way”

¹⁹⁸ On how the logic of binarisms like heterosexuality/homosexuality and male/female are incompatible with trans bodies, sexualities, and lived experiences, see Jason Cromwell, ‘Queering the Binaries: Transsituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 509–20.

¹⁹⁹ Brian James Baer, ‘Now You See It: Gay (In)Visibility and the Performance of Post-Soviet Identity’, in *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Cultures*, ed. Andrea P. Balogh and Narcisz Fejes (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2013), 39.

²⁰⁰ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

²⁰¹ Baer, ‘Now You See It’, 40.

²⁰² Moss, ‘Russia’s Queer Science, or How Anti-LGBT Scholarship Is Made’, 18–19; Healey, “‘Untraditional Sex’ and the ‘Simple Russian’”, 176–77.

arguments elsewhere in the world, implied a juxtaposition between MSM and WSW versus the majority of Russian citizens. Yet ideas of (in)visibility also fuelled erotic fantasy in the press as writers took them up and ran with them, searching for signs of bisexuality observable during their morning commutes if only readers refined their gaydar and paid closer attention to moments of gender incongruence.

Bi-Coded Fantasies

Predicated on the idea that visual clues to sexual identity can equally be obscured and observed, a string of “reports” featured throughout the press investigating whether the well-known statistic that 10% of the population is homosexual may in fact be an underestimation.²⁰³ To make this case, reporters recall public situations where they witnessed *naturally* exhibiting homoerotic behaviour, a flirtatious gaze, or another visual or verbal suggestion of queer sensibility. Many of these “hints” relate to non-normative gender performance. The argot had codified this into the term ‘гееватый’, defined in *Gei dialog* as someone whose ‘внешность, манера разговора и поведение дают геям некоторые основания предполагать, что он тоже «наш»’ [1995, No.2-4, 2].

Conceptions of gay (in)visibility and universal bisexuality were thus harnessed to gratify readers with humorous and titillating tales framed as reports with fluctuating levels of truth behind them. One report from Rome, written in the first-person, graphically details how the apparent author ‘стал бисексуалом’: first, he felt shame at enjoying being pegged by a young widow; then he overcompensated by insisting on having anal sex with his girlfriend; and finally, returning to the widow, found that she had invited another man so she could watch

²⁰³ See ‘Reportazh ni o chem, ili obo vsem ponemnogu’ [1/10, 1995, No.17, 28], a tongue-in-cheek, and ‘S kem spyat muzhchiny?’ for jokes about the “true” meaning of imbalance in sexual activity between men and women’s self-reporting in Western academic surveys [1/10, 1994, Bulletin No.3, 3].

him enjoy receiving a real penis [1/10, 1992, No.2-3, 8]. Another, in *RISK*'s "V shutku i vserez" section, rumours that a social experiment took place where a reporter stood on the street offering blowjobs to straight-seeming strangers and noted down responses [1992, No.4-5, 26]. The author hypothesised that calmer reactions took place from more tolerant men who perhaps had enough inner freedom to explore new avenues of intimacy.

Macho Men and Metrosexuals

Perhaps the clearest example of this trend and its relationship to understandings of bisexual fluidity was the exposé on 'метросексуалы' in Arkhangelsk's *V temu* [2007, No.5, 2]. The italicised introduction builds suspense for how the Observer ['Наблюдатель'] will reveal untold stories ['сюжеты'] from the street, public transport, and 'даже в постели'. Like the *RISK* piece, the four stories he tells all centred around men who look heterosexual, but whose actions potentially betrayed an ability to be attracted to other men. In one case, the Observer analyses the body language of two young students on the metro and concludes that there is a mutual sexual attraction at play: 'Натуралы. Но. Мачо обнимает своего товарища. В глазах – искры. Воодушевленная беседа. Длинноволосому очень даже нравится такое внимание. Шутки шутит. Тоже возбужден.' Notably, the Observer's descriptions focus on physical appearance in binary gendered terms and indicates that the macho initiated the embrace with his more effeminate friend.

The next story similarly toys with how physical appearance and first impressions do not necessarily accurately reflect all the (bi)sexual dimensions of a man. Waiting on a platform in Kursk, the Observer takes a chance introducing himself to a stranger glancing in his direction ['Нет, кажется натурал.'] and discovers throughout their conversation on the *elektrichka* that his hometown is Podpol'sk. The chosen name of this non-existent town refers to closeted

underground life, and is, moreover, semantically linked to the cruising scene slang term ‘ПОДПОЛЬЩИК’—a homosexual man who keeps his sexual orientation secret.²⁰⁴ The wordplay continues as the two converse about the good-looking [‘СИМПАТИЧНЫЙ’] park where the fence has been graffitied by hypersexual teenagers.²⁰⁵ Importantly, some of the graffiti is called ‘ОКОЛОТЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ’, which means ‘pertinent’ but also conjures the association of being adjacent to the *tema*—i.e. indicating a metrosexual/bisexual who is not quite *goluboi* but almost. The description of the town thus not only implies a silent majority keeping (part of) their orientation closeted, but that heightened sex drive leads to indiscriminate (“bisexual”) sex-object choice in adolescence.

The author’s choice of *metrosexualny* is critical here: the key distinction is that a metrosexual is an urban, heterosexual man suspected of being gay because he pays a suspicious amount of attention to his looks or otherwise has “feminine” interests such as shopping and fashion.²⁰⁶ The term *metrosexual* also includes a coy reference to the *metro*, implicating the setting of the stories (which predominantly take place on trains). The clattering of the wheels partially drowns out the Observer’s comment that the park is beautiful and the young man mishears, agreeing that there are a lot of beautiful guys in Russia. The Observer’s jaw drops. The train stops. He wonders if the wheels are to blame for the straight man’s attraction [‘КОЛЕСА ЛИ ВИНОВАТЫ?’], metaphorically linking the circular motion with the oscillation between heterosexual and homosexual states and behaviours. Once again, the comment parallels cruising slang: namely, the term ‘КРУГЛЯК - БИСЕКСУАЛЬНЫЙ МУЖЧИНА.’ [Golubok, 2001, No.17, 11]. This label of course suggests that while bisexual men also formed a part of the cruising community, they were seen as doing so in a “circular” or “round” fashion,

²⁰⁴ Fiks, *Rodnaya rech’ / Mother Tongue*, 20.

²⁰⁵ Cf. ‘Гинейджеры – бисексуальны?’ [GayTimes, 2004, No.10, 5].

²⁰⁶ I explore the association of commerce, globalisation and fashion with imported Western homosexuality further in relation to bisexual themes in music in Chapter 3.

moving between differently sexualized spaces and relationships. Bisexuality and the related concept of metrosexuality is consequently understood as unstable, intangible, and forever in motion.

Capturing the Look

Vitalii Lazarenko, a Moscow-based photographer and openly gay journalist who contributed to *Tema*, *Treugol'nik*, *Impuls*, 1/10, and *Hot Russian Soldiers*, capitalised on related ideas of (bi)sexual fluidity in his work. In a feature titled 'Натуралы словно снегурочки', Lazarenko addresses the frequently asked question of how he manages to photograph so many men if they are truly *naturally* [*Impuls* 1997, No.1, 10]. Lazarenko explains that it does not take much to convince them and readers can thank Freud: 'Как вы помните, все люди по своей природе - бисексуальны. И если кто-то из мужчин не успел открыть в себе нежность, значит, не пришло время, значит не встретил он "его, того в толпе"...'. Accordingly, anyone is potentially interested in sexually experimenting or even modelling for gay porn, if only they find the right man to unlock their gentler side. Going further, Lazarenko advises readers that when your feelings are burning with passion, a man will reciprocate regardless of his supposed heterosexuality. The 'костер любви' is sure to melt his frozen heart, as in the tale of Snegurochka.

The straight status of these men, despite the emphasis on their bi potential, was crucial to Lazarenko's project as well as other reportage in the press. Framing the models as sexually inaccessible 'настоящих' мужчин' is stated to be more arousing than if the models were *goluboi* ['Это же возбуждает! Голубые развлекают голубых - уже скучнее. Может быть, даже – пошло.']. The emphasis on real masculinity ('настоящих') opposed to the vulgarity ('пошло') of those who "look" gay speaks to misogyny and anti-camp rhetoric among MSM,

as was further evidenced in the prominence of personal ads stipulating that feminine men need not respond. Yet I posit that these are two sides of the same coin: while the Observer and other reporters sought out feminine hints in *naturally* to prove their bisexual potential and make them appear attainable, Lazarenko relies on conventional masculine gender performance and body types to tease his viewers and allow them to question the model's sexual interests and availability. The former type of content seeks *proof* of bisexuality—the latter aspires to *fantasy*.

Therefore, while Lazarenko's main project was visual, the narrative he constructed around his models was crucial to the impact of his photography. Here, I argue, we can see the bisexual mechanics of gay (in)visibility operating most clearly. Lazarenko's photos were routinely captioned with snippets detailing the personalities, interests, and backstories of his models [esp. *Hot Russian Soldiers*, 1996, No.1]. Take the (bisexual) misfit backstory he writes for Vitya: once a young hooligan, army man, convict, and divorcé, he is now debuting for other men's pleasure [*1/10*, 1996, No.19, 27]. The unattainable "bad boy" trope is designed to heighten arousal through a sense of exclusivity—normally, the man's body would be off limits, confined to the sexual realm of women, but here he bares all.

Conclusions

Russia's independent gay and lesbian activist press captured a moment where the queer community was self-organising and individuals were figuring out their sense of self and sexuality (semi-)openly for the first time. An influx of information in the early post-Soviet years about LGBTQ+ people, history and culture—including queer theory and sexuality studies—led to multiple, contradictory theories of (bi)sexuality suddenly circulating and being generated in Russia. The relaxation of censorship put theories which had grown and

waned in popularity during the twentieth century into conversation as readers and writers were exposed to them all at once. Multiple major discourses of bisexuality—as primordial hermaphroditism, universal potential, and simultaneous or stable attraction to men and women—vied for attention when in many Anglo-European spaces bisexuality was already felt to have solidified into an authentic sexual identity.²⁰⁷

In the early post-Soviet years, these discussions were conducted without necessarily having the language or framework to articulate ideas about sexual and gender fluidity. In trying to better understand the root causes of homosexuality, Russians were rapidly seeking to catch up with the Western discourses deconstructing the heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binary in addition to challenging these ideas and conceptualising a spectrum of sexuality for themselves. Theories of homosexuality’s origins circulated in the press frequently relied on universal bisexual potential. This innate potential was considered rooted in both evolutionary history and specific elements of embryonic development that left female genetic traces dormant in outwardly heterosexual men. Following this logic, men were sometimes labelled or portrayed as (potentially) bisexual because their behaviour did not conform to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Reporters tried to prove bisexual potential in heterosexual men by singling out such instances of homoeroticism and effeminate behaviour. Illustrators drew on these same moments to comic effect. Photographers captured tropes of “real masculinity” in pornographic images, contextualising their models’ bodies in narratives that created a sense of exclusivity and bisexual erotic fantasy.

²⁰⁷ Maliepaard and Baumgartner, *Bisexuality in Europe*, 2.

Meanwhile, the validity of lesbianism was called into question, filtered through the bisexual narrative of failed heterosexuality and psychological issues. This scepticism toward exclusive female homosexuality likely played into the fetishization of lesbian and bisexual women that can be observed in certain content submitted by male readers. It also apparently caused tension between a radical feminist contingent of lesbian women who sought to distance themselves from men—and the perception that their sexuality was *caused* by men—and women who identified as bisexual or had a bisexual relationship history. Transgender identities and their intersection with homo-/bisexuality further confused the debate, though the distinction between sexuality and gender identity was beginning to be worked through as well.

Alongside the journals' pages of theoretical speculation dismissing the possibility of a "real" bisexual orientation, bi voices are still especially noticeable in reader contributions like the dating services. Self-identifying bisexuals, as well as people maintaining "bisexual" relationship constellations, certainly made use of the chance to publish in an anonymised capacity. The prevalence of personal ads which state that the author is, or is seeking, a bisexual demonstrates that the label had rapidly gained currency post-1991. Early survey results on demographics confirm the high rates of bisexual identification and behaviours among readers. There were a multitude of reasons people chose to adopt or use the label, such as to designate: someone attracted to "both genders"; someone who is married but has (or is interested in) same-sex affairs; someone prepared to live intimately with an opposite-sex partner even if there is not mutual sexual or romantic attraction. The key determiner was not necessarily "both-and" desire but specific sexual behaviours and personal circumstances, such as marital status.

Yet while the label held a multiplicity of meanings, character limits and associated costs not only encouraged brevity but necessitated careful prioritisation from the author. The chosen language of self-identification was therefore not trivial. Rather, the label *biseksual/biseksualka* was likely selected because it was felt to communicate something significant about the writer's experience or identity which they wanted potential suitors to know. Such authors were maybe even uncomfortable with others assuming they were simply *goluboi/gei* or *rozavaya/lesbiyanka*. From these ads, we can glean insights into the lives of early post-Soviet LGBTQ+ people, their relational geographies, and their perceptions of each other on the dating scene. Some hoped to meet bisexuals; some refused to. Some hoped to start families in an open marriage. The trend of self-identifying bisexual advertisers overlapped heavily with those seeking extra-marital affairs, and in one case, bi couples enjoyed their own short-lived Contact Club. There is, however, conflicting evidence over the extent to which married advertisers were stigmatised (or not) in the press, particularly in relation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Overall, bisexuality was a prominent (if sometimes ambiguous or evasive) feature in the journals that has long gone unnoticed. These voices offer an exciting opportunity to understand bisexual experiences before the widespread availability of the internet in Russia revolutionised possibilities for LGBTQ+ culture, activism, and community-building—to which I turn in the following chapter.

Chapter II

Bi-Bi Print, Hello World: Queering the History of the RuNet

The previous chapter unearthed traces of bisexuality buried within the understudied archive of queer journals published in Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet the information environment also underwent rapid changes at this time. The shift that began from underground print culture to online discussion boards and dedicated websites provided a platform for more immediate conversations about queer life between strangers, regardless of their respective locations. It enabled dating, greater access to information about LGBTQ+ life and history, and the formation of new LGBTQ+ networks. This chapter charts this underexplored history of LGBTQ+ content on the RuNet and locates bisexuality's place within that digital culture.

Given the difficulties with conducting research into digital history—expired URLs, evolutions in software and hardware, and the sheer volume of content uploaded every day—this limitation in the literature is perhaps unsurprising. Yet considering the huge impact of the internet not only on practically every aspect of day-to-day life, and on LGBTQ+ people and their possibilities for self-expression in particular, the history of LGBTQ+ voices on the RuNet remains an incredibly important avenue for research. Globally, studies have suggested that there are statistically significant distinctions between the motivations held by bisexuals, homosexuals, and heterosexuals for internet use.²⁰⁸

Bisexual voices on the RuNet have so far only been directly studied in two articles of very limited scope: the first about how one bisexual activist in Russia uses social media in her

²⁰⁸ Kristian Daneback, Michael W. Ross, and Sven-Axel Månsson, 'Bisexuality and Sexually Related Activities on the Internet', *Journal of Bisexuality* 8, no.1–2 (October 2008): 125–27.

activism; the second about how bi activists used confessional narratives in two livestreams.²⁰⁹ Indeed, most academic focus on queer web users in Russia more broadly has fallen on present day activism in fields such as sociology and anthropology, such as tracing the origins and impact of hashtag protest movements or LGBT-rights blogging communities.²¹⁰ Recent years have seen increased interest in queer subjectivities online such as in lesbian web series, gay coming out videos; or, for instance, how the meme of Putin as a gay clown has been used to different ends across its lifespan.²¹¹

The question remains: how can we accurately capture and characterise an ever-changing digital culture, when even given the focus on a specific identity (bisexual) in a specific language (Russian), the content remains so voluminous and scattered across digital and geographic space alike? The approach I take in this chapter is far from exhaustive. I aim to strike a difficult balance between breadth and depth of analysis through case studies of landmark LGBTQ+ websites and broad summaries of observable trends in bisexual online media. The structure of the chapter provides both a sense of chronological developments and emphasises shifts in the prominence and popularity of various types of online spaces.

I begin this analysis by introducing competing definitions of the RuNet. In so doing, I consider how cyberspace interacts with the physical world. Web interactions and digital selves are forever shaped by users' bodies and the geographical borders they move within: 'the political dynamics of how human bodies are bound up in systems that pathologise,

²⁰⁹ Respectively: Andreevskikh, 'Social Networking'; Andreevskikh, 'Confessional Narratives'.

²¹⁰ For hashtag-based gender activism, see Elena Pronkina, 'Gender Activism in the Russian Segment of the Internet', in *Internet in Russia: A Study of the Runet and Its Impact on Social Life*, ed. Sergey Davydov (Cham: Springer, 2020), 251–61. For LGBT-rights blogging on *Zhivoi zhurnal*, see Evgeniya Blokage, 'Blogging in the (Counter) Public Sphere: The Case of Russian LGBT Blogging Community' (Dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2018).

²¹¹ Respectively: Saara Ratilainen, 'Lesbian Love Stories and Online Popular Culture'; Clinton Glenn, "'YA–GEI! (I Am Gay!)": Russian Coming Out Video Narratives on YouTube', *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media (Digitalicons.Org)* 21 (2021): 131–47; James E. Baker, Kelly A. Clancy, and Benjamin Clancy, 'Putin as Gay Icon? Memes as Tactic in Russian LGBT+ Activism', in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 209–33.

disable, gender and racialise some bodies and not others'.²¹² The following section focuses further on embodiment and user intention, questioning how we can adopt more ethical practices in digital research. I argue after Markham (2012) that because the distinction between public and private domain is often insufficient on the internet, our primary priority in developing ethical practices should be preserving the intended flow of information, even if this means obfuscating some bibliographical information or quotations to protect vulnerable users.²¹³

After outlining this theoretical and methodological framework, I move on to my initial case study, Gay.ru. I selected this website for analysis for three key reasons. First and foremost, Gay.ru is the largest and longest-running LGBTQ+ website in Russia to date, receiving approximately three million visits per annum.²¹⁴ Identifying how bisexuality fits into Russia's most prominent LGBTQ+ website is essential to mapping bisexuality's place on the RuNet. Second, the life span of the website aligns closely with the timeframe of my overall project. Its creator, Ed Mishin, set up the site in 1997 and Gay.ru has continued to expand since this time despite pressures from Russian government censors. Finally, Gay.ru has included a section dedicated to bisexuality since its inception, although that section's name and place in the site structure has shifted over time. Using the Internet Archive's WayBack Machine tool, I start my analysis from the earliest capture of Gay.ru's bisexual section in 1998 to establish how bisexuality fit into Mishin's original aims. I then move on to explore the bisexual discussion boards and dating services that had gone live by 1999/2000, modernising the personal ad format from Chapter I and allowing far more immediate forms of interpersonal

²¹² Cassandra Hartblay and Tatiana Klepikova, 'Bodyminds Online: Digitally Mediated Selves in Regional Cultural Context', *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media (Digitalcons.Org)* 21 (2021): 2.

²¹³ Annette Markham, 'Fabrication as Ethical Practice', *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no.3 (2012): 334–53.

²¹⁴ Thomas Edward Saunders, 'Gay.Ru: Imagining Russian Sexualities in a Queer World' (MPhil Thesis, University of Bristol, 2019), 7.

connection. I end the analysis in 2006, when the site was updated with a refreshed look and the meta description of the bisexual section was altered to reflect the increasing politicisation of LGBT identities in Russia.

Finding that the rate at which original Russian-language content was added to Gay.ru's bisexual pages declined in the mid-2000s, I go on to characterize the period from roughly 2006 to the mid-2010s as the era when LGBTQ+ communities began to move away from dedicated LGBTQ+ sites like Gay.ru and Lesbi.ru. Instead, I argue, users gravitated to blogging, dating sites, web chats, and social media; platforms which are in most cases inherently self-referential and autobiographical. The internet was increasingly understood as a conduit for expressing, enacting, hiding and projecting identities—rather than being a post-modern space of disembodied, de-gendered, or deracinated identities.²¹⁵ For example, despite opening up some borders and boundaries (such as sexuality and ethnicity), the Russophone queer cyber community retains other divisions—especially those of class and nation—'showing that the idea of a queer *home* in cyberspace is fragile and exclusionary'.²¹⁶

To track this nebulous transition towards social media and forming other online communities, I draw on first-person accounts which recall running a bisexual blog, figuring out bisexual desires through discussions with strangers online, or otherwise theorise how attitudes towards bisexuality have been influenced by the RuNet. I also highlight bi elements included in other research on queer Russian blogging or social media, particularly from Tatiana Barchunova's (2010) work on 'female-to-female intimacy' online in Siberia.²¹⁷ Of course, the popularity of social media has only escalated since the mid-2000s and 2010s. To provide an impression of the landscape today, I end the section with a brief characterisation

²¹⁵ Adi Kuntsman, 'Cyberethnography as Home-Work', *Anthropology Matters Journal* 6, no.2 (2004): 7.

²¹⁶ Kuntsman, 6.

²¹⁷ Tatiana Barchunova, 'Shift-F2: Female-to-Female Intimacy Offline and Online (Krasnoiarsk and Novosibirsk Cases)', *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 28, no.2 (2010): 242–70.

of trends in YouTube’s top Russian-language results for the keywords ‘бисексуальность’, ‘бисексуал’, and ‘бисексуалка’. I contrast my findings with Clinton Glenn’s work on gay coming-out videos on YouTube, highlighting overall differences in the genre, motivation, and tone of bisexual videos.²¹⁸

I then rewind the clock to return to 2013, examining how the gay propaganda laws reshaped the possibilities for queer projects on the RuNet. I draw on statements from the creator of the digital archive *Biblioteka LGBTIK* to highlight how LGBTQ+ content and communities were driven out of certain social media and pushed into (creating) other digital spaces. I outline how the legislation therefore ironically incited more discourse on LGBTQ+ topics online.²¹⁹ I present the case study of We-Accept.online, launched in 2019, as a bi-inclusive example of archival web projects capturing voices from across sexual and gender spectrums in Russian-speaking space. I note the prominence of the identity label ‘pansexual’ among the speakers, as well as the entanglement of these stories with transgender and non-binary experiences.

I end the chapter with a major milestone in the history of bisexuality on the RuNet—that is, the first expressly bisexual Russian-language website. BiPanRussia.com was launched in 2021 by the small activist collective Byt' Bi* [Be Bi*]. The took obvious inspiration from ‘Western’ bisexual and pansexual activisms to create a resource sharing information and terminology about non-monosexual identities with Russian speakers. I show how this borrowing plays out in the visuals and contents of the site, from its colour scheme to its recommendations and resources. At the same time, I underscore the ways in which BiPanRussia.com distinguishes itself as a site for bisexuals in Russia specifically.

²¹⁸ Glenn, ‘YA–GEI!’

²¹⁹ Dan Healey, ‘Afterword’.

Regulating the RuNet

The RuNet has variously been conceived as a *kommunalka*, a digital restoration of the Former Soviet Union, and a dislocated public sphere.²²⁰ Fundamentally, there is an important distinction between understanding the RuNet as ‘the Russian-language internet’ and ‘the internet in Russia’ which has not always been acknowledged by companies, regulators, or academics.²²¹ As I discuss bisexual voices on the RuNet in this chapter, I signal when I know these voices belong to Russian-speakers living outside of Russia. However, I draw on social, historical, and political contexts in Russia because most of the digital spaces under discussion were created by/operated from there. The sites were consequently impacted by legislation and censorship imposed by the Russian government.

The ‘foreign agents’ laws, for instance, impacted LGBTQ+ online activity and forced creators to explicitly state on every post that they were a group deemed to be working with foreign funding to achieve foreign goals.²²² Almost every LGBTQ+ initiative based in Russia was declared a foreign agent. While for some users, the disclaimer perhaps became a sign that the source could be better trusted than state-controlled media, the requirement to post it is of course predicated on (and perpetuates) the idea that LGBTQ+ rights and identities are being imported into Russia by ‘Western’ actors. Perhaps this is one reason why many initiatives have adopted the strategy of posting autobiographical micro-narratives written by members of the LGBTQ+ community in Russia across their social media. Giving LGBTQ+ people the platform to discuss their experiences in the context of Russian social realities

²²⁰ Tatiana Klepikova, ‘Digital Russians’ Home and Agora: The Runet between the Private and Public Spheres’, in *Privatheit in Der Digitalen Gesellschaft [Privacy in a Digital Society]*, ed. Steffen Burk et al. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2018), 243–46.

²²¹ Karina Alexanyan and Olessia Koltsova, ‘Blogging in Russia Is Not Russian Blogging’, in *International Blogging: Identity, Politics, and Networked Publics*, ed. Adrienne Russell and Nabil Echchaibi (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 65–84.

²²² For more on the impact of the foreign agents law on LGBTQ+ activism, see Pakhnyuk, ‘Foreign Agents and Gay Propaganda’.

serves the double purpose of, on the one hand, potentially rehumanizing public perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community through personal digital engagements, and, on the other, providing a virtual support network in which users can see their experiences reflected in the life stories of others and therefore feel less alone in their society.²²³

According to the the ‘gay propaganda’ law of 2013, fines would be higher if infractions were conducted online or shared via media outlets.²²⁴ As a result, individuals such as Elena Klimova, who founded the Deti-404 web project for LGBTQ+ youth, have been convicted and fined higher amounts.²²⁵ Others have been criminally charged for posting LGBTQ+ information on their personal social media pages or in private groups.²²⁶ The popular social media network VKontakte works with the authorities and submits users’ personal information on request without a court order; there are frequent attempts to block LGBTQ+ group pages on the platform.²²⁷ As Tetyana Lokot concludes:

Coupled with arbitrary application of censorship in the online sphere and impunity for harassment and violence, these norms and measures turn the Russian internet into an increasingly uncomfortable space for vulnerable voices and limit free expressions for marginalized groups, while normalizing expressions of homophobia and misogyny.²²⁸

In the example of Gay.ru, one of the most prolific LGBTQ+ websites on the RuNet, no guidance was given as to which content had been deemed in violation of the law when it was ordered to remove all such information in early 2018.²²⁹ Between 2016 and 2020, 32

²²³ Dowling, ‘Russian Trans* Stories’; Tetyana Lokot, ‘Affective Resistance Against Online Misogyny and Homophobia on the RuNet’, in *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, ed. Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 220.

²²⁴ Lokot, ‘Affective Resistance Against Online Misogyny and Homophobia on the RuNet’, 216.

²²⁵ Lokot, 216.

²²⁶ Outright Action International, OONI, and The Citizen Lab, ‘No Access: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries’, 2021, 34, <https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/no-access-lgbtqi-website-censorship-six-countries>.

²²⁷ Radzhana Buyantueva, *LGBT Protest Activity in Russia*, 119; Andreevskikh, ‘Social Networking’, 20–21.

²²⁸ Lokot, ‘Affective Resistance Against Online Misogyny and Homophobia on the RuNet’, 218.

²²⁹ Saunders, ‘Gay.Ru’, 8.

LGBTQ+ websites were blocked at least once on Russian internet providers.²³⁰ Seemingly to evade or pre-empt such restrictions, Gay.ru has changed its domain name multiple times over the years. After being blocked by Roskomnadzor in 2018, it switched address to xGay.ru. In March 2023, following the invasion of Ukraine and the intensification of anti-LGBTQ+ state rhetoric, xGay.ru became GayRu.info (and now, xGayRu.info). Sister site Lesbi.ru, founded in 1999 but not live until 2001, became LesbiRu.info on the same date.

Other LGBTQ+ Russian-language websites share a similar history of switching domain names: in 2010, GayRussia, the organiser of Moscow Gay Pride, moved from GayRussia.ru to GayRussia.eu due to unspecified provider issues.²³¹ Many LGBTQ(-friendly) websites have avoided acquiring Russian domain names: WeAccept.online; Wonderzine.com; LgbtNet.org; GoodMagazine.online; ParniPlus.com; LgbtPropaganda.media; BiPanRussia.com; and so on. In that sense, the LGBTQ+ RuNet has been coerced into not being part of ‘the Russian internet’ at all; few websites use ‘.ru’, after which the RuNet is named. Those that do may be short-lived despite their popularity, such as *Otkrytie*, i.e. O-Zine.ru. For LGBTQ+ Russians, then, while the internet can be considered a space of emancipatory potential, it also contributes to the spread of violence and surveillance.²³² State homophobic policies are aimed toward creating a climate of fear in which self-censorship is the norm. Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric continues to be weaponised in propaganda against Ukraine and the West both online and in traditional media.²³³ Indeed, the presidential decree

²³⁰ Hugh Greenhalgh, ‘Banned and Blocked: LGBT+ Websites Censored from Russia to Indonesia’, Thomson Reuters Foundation, 31 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lgbt-rights-internet-idUSL8N2Q23D4>; Outright Action International, OONI, and The Citizen Lab, ‘No Access’, 37.

²³¹ Buyantueva, *LGBT Protest Activity in Russia*, 92.

²³² Pronkina, ‘Gender Activism in the Russian Segment of the Internet’, 252–53.

²³³ Feminization and homophobic tropes are consistently employed in anti-Ukrainian rhetoric online, see Gaufman, ‘Damsels in Distress’. To give just one example of homophobic fearmongering from traditional media, a former advisor for Putin claimed that a British-American alliance of political theorists were turning the Ukrainian army into a zombified cult of homosexuals so they could replicate the unity of the greatest army in history, the Spartans, whose strength was bound by homosexual brotherhood. See *Putin’s Former Advisor Claims to Know US Plans for Ukraine* (Rossiya 1, 2023), https://youtu.be/17_970NK5PY?si=LkQ0Qt0nADhVa6K.

from 9 November 2022 essentially defined LGBTQ+ information and identities as a national security threat from the West/the U.S., instructing all state branches to combat it to protect “traditional values”.²³⁴ The document was a blueprint for further persecution of LGBTQ+ people in Russia online and offline.

Digital Footprints and Anonymisation

Since starting the research for this thesis in 2021, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, extended the “gay propaganda” law, banned all gender-affirming care, declared LGBTQ+ people and topics extremists, and saw mass emigration and a failed military coup. Censorship laws have been tightened; individuals and organisations continue to face repression or persecution for their online activities. Over the course of my project, LGBTQ+ websites have come and gone. Popular bisexual YouTube videos (and entire channels) have been deleted or delisted. Initiatives have scrubbed their social media presence. Though this phenomenon has certainly accelerated, it is not new. In his study of YouTube coming out videos, Clinton Glenn encountered information and videos being taken down.²³⁵ He consequently correctly viewed his project as an ‘archive of material that might not be available in the coming months or years’.²³⁶

The importance of archiving LGBTQ+ online materials is paramount, yet there are potential ramifications for the individuals linked to this digital content. In this chapter, I follow digital ethnographer Anette Markham’s view that researchers ‘must operate flexibly to adapt to continual shifts in perceptions, unstable terms of service, radically distinctive national and

²³⁴ ‘Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 09.11.2022 № 809 “Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoi politiki po sokhraneniyu i ukrepleniyu traditsionnykh rossiiskikh dukhovno-nravstvennykh tsennostei”’, 9 November 2022, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211090019>.

²³⁵ Glenn, ‘YA–GEI!’, 144.

²³⁶ Glenn, 144.

cultural expectations for privacy, and still steady growth of Internet use'.²³⁷ Markham's ethical framework stipulates that when deciding which digital content is viable for inclusion in research, the main concern is not whether the information is located in the public or private domain, but whether information will be flowing in the intended way. In the example of her Twitter activity, though she may broadcast all her tweets to the public and would not mind her tweets being included in the visual mapping of larger trends, she would feel violated if she found 'all [her] tweets—sent out in a sporadic fashion, in an ephemeral sense, or over a long period of time—combined together and analysed'.²³⁸ Essentially, users often work on the assumption that their digital outputs are just another voice in a cacophony, and do not expect to be given a solo.

Crucially, scholars should work against the assumption that in this digital day and age, users are aware of the risks that anything you post online may leave a digital footprint even long after the original post has been deleted. While the content users produce quickly becomes part of the public domain, posting to an online platform remains substantially different to participating in a publication (print or e-book) where you hand over the rights to distribution and there may be multiple editions over the years. Despite agreeing to lengthy terms and conditions about data protection and risk, Internet users continue to conceptualize their interactions with online spaces differently. Often, users do not realize quite how traceable their personal data profile is, where else it may be stored, and who can access it. Moreover, the ability to toggle between public and private settings for your posts and accounts is built into the user interface of most major global online platforms. The mere existence of this privacy toggle shapes the expectations that users have when making their posts. While they may initially share posts publicly, they do so with the expectation that they will be able to

²³⁷ Markham, 'Fabrication as Ethical Practice', 337.

²³⁸ Markham, 337.

continue to exert some control over the flow of their personal data with the click of a button. Essentially, they (misguidedly or not) believe that they can later withdraw consent to their information being shared and stored publicly.

We may also be tempted to assume some threshold at which it would be unreasonable not to consider a post part of the public domain. Yet any number we select would be arbitrary. Take the example of YouTube, which blurs the public-private boundary. According to data from 2019, an average 500 hours of footage is uploaded to YouTube every minute worldwide – up from 100 hours a minute in 2013.²³⁹ Within this enormous volume of content, subcommunities are driven to form by shared interests and the algorithm. In the platform's early days, such a massive amount of content was inconceivable—most users posted short skits or videos about their life to catch up with long-distance friends. Today's average view count is higher too: videos required far fewer views to be considered 'viral' in the mid-2000s or 2010s compared to now. Therefore, not only has the amount and range of content being uploaded drastically changed over the last decades, but the expected audience has too. How can we outline a meaningful cut off point in these circumstances? Having created a private playlist of bisexual videos on YouTube at the beginning of my project, I observed that even some videos with more than 100,000 views have been made private or delisted.

I therefore follow Markham in operating contextually on a case-by-case basis. Attempting to develop and adopt blanket rules for an entire platform—or even internet studies more broadly—is counterproductive in an ever-evolving digital space so easily shaped by specific yet shifting circumstances both on individual platforms (e.g. updated terms of service) and offline (e.g. new national censorship laws). Given that the WayBack Machine captures

²³⁹ 'Hours of Video Uploaded to YouTube Every Minute 2007-2022', Statista, September 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/259477/hours-of-video-uploaded-to-youtube-every-minute/#:~:text=As%20of%20June%202022%2C%20more,newly%20uploaded%20content%20per%20hour.>

analysed in this chapter are taken from the early internet, they are more anonymised and further removed from individuals today. They include broken hyperlinks and less traceable data, meaning that I provide URLs and direct quotes from these archived pages. Detailed information and screen captures of the final case study BiPanRussia.com have also already appeared in an academic article by Olga Andreevskikh, as well as in a feature written by one of the website creators in *Bi Women Quarterly*.²⁴⁰ I therefore cite and quote this website as normal. This approach is additionally motivated by that fact that the article content reposted to BiPanRussia.com continues to be live and accessible elsewhere online. In cases where videos or websites have been delisted or made private, I do not provide URL citations or direct quotations related to personal stories containing potentially identifiable descriptions.²⁴¹ Instead, I pseudonymize the creators, the people being interviewed, or those sharing life writing (in the broad sense) and instead provide summaries. Finally, rather than investigating forums, blogging sites or social media groups directly, I supplement my analysis of key case studies in bisexual RuNet history with published literary sources in which authors recall their discovery of social media, blogging, and online dating, and consider how this affected their sense of identity and community.

Russia's Longest-Running Queer Website: Gay.ru

As publishers of lesbian and gay print journals began leaving an often-difficult market in the late 1990s, websites took their place.²⁴² Successful websites were self-sustaining, converting

²⁴⁰ Andreevskikh, 'Confessional Narratives'; Nadja Arontschik, 'Around the World: Nadja Arontschik, Moscow, Russia', *Bi Women Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2022): 3–4.

²⁴¹ This decision mirrors a somewhat established convention not to publish URLs among academics researching discussion forums, who prioritise safeguarding semi-anonymous userbases. See: Kuntsman, 'Cyberethnography as Home-Work'; Emiel Maliepaard, 'Bisexual Safe Space(s) on the Internet: Analysis of an Online Forum for Bisexuals', *Geographies of Sexualities: Bodies, Spatial Encounters, and Emotions* 108, no.3 (2017): 318–30; Yuliya Tarasyuk, 'Queer Roleplaying Practices in Russian Female BL Fandom', *Mechademia* 13, no.1 (Fall 2020): 163–66.

²⁴² Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 121.

proceeds from e-commerce and mail order sales into expanded teams and communities.²⁴³ In 1997, Ed Mishin launched Gay.ru, a site he developed from the Ru.Sex.Gay “conference” (i.e. message board) which he had created in 1995 on FIDONET. Until this point, there had been no other digital venture of its kind for LGBTQ+ users on the RuNet. This goes some way to explaining why Gay.ru has remained Russia’s largest and longest-running queer site. It rapidly grew in size and popularity, defining an era for queer RuNet users and laying the foundation for future LGBTQ+ websites.

Bi on the New, Blue Web

In 1997, Ed Mishin contributed a guest article to *ARGO* introducing readers to his new website and addressing potential hopes and concerns about discussing sexuality online [No.5, 7]. Mishin focuses extensively on bisexuality in the article. First, he recalls a time when a chain of homophobic letters appeared on Ru.Sex.Gay. Among these letters appeared the confessional narrative of a self-identifying bisexual ‘ex-homophobe’. Mishin cites this letter at length, attempting to provide insight into the psychology of homophobic internet trolls. The letter muses that when people target others online, this may reflect difficulties accepting their own bi potential [“Так, что я нисколько не сомневаюсь, что все гомофобные вонючки в нашей эхе ru.sex.gay - это жалкое подобие бывшего меня. // Гомофобы, мне вас жаль.”].

Describing the type of content with which he is populating his new website (comedy columns, gay news, announcement boards, and other interesting re-posted letters from Ru.Sex.Gay), Mishin thanks the editors of print journals for their support in creating a small electronic library of gay journals. Crucially, he explains that his choice of material to prioritise

²⁴³ Nikita A. Ivanov, ‘Lesbians and Gays in Post-Soviet Russia’, *ILGA Bulletin*, no.4 (2000), 4-6. Thanks to the IHLLA.

was guided by what he felt was missing (or at least hard to find) in most of the print press: bisexual content.

В обычной прессе трудно найти и материалы про бисексуалов. Помните анекдот:

- Хорошо-то как, Маша...

- Я не Маша, я - Миша.

- Все равно хорошо...

Маша или Миша - бисексуалам все равно хорошо. Хорошо, да не очень. Геи их за "своих" не считают, не одобряют политику "и нашим, и вашим". Поэтому мы и собираем в рубрике "Хорошо-то как, Маша..." письма и заметки по бисексуальности.

The above joke became the basis of Gay.ru's bisexual section for years to come. Originally named *Khorosho-to kak, Masha...*, its creation afforded bisexuality the dedicated space on the website which Mishin had clearly desired. Yet the title only signalled to users that the hyperlink led to bisexual content if they were already familiar with the punchline—viewable only after clicking through. Gay, lesbian, and trans content, meanwhile, was signposted from the homepage with a clearer use of labels: '100 биографий геев и лесбиянок'; 'голубые приколы'; 'ТРАНС-вести' [see Figure 1]. Bisexuality was thus (in)visibilised, simultaneously masked behind an elusive title and afforded a platform and concentration of content which it had not previously enjoyed in the print press or elsewhere on the RuNet.

The Earliest Capture

The ten links included in the Internet Archive's earliest capture of *Khorosho-to kak Masha...* on 14 June 1998 are an eclectic mix of content sourced from disparate newspapers, early Russian-language websites, and transcripts of the infamous TV show *Pro ETO*.²⁴⁴ Gay.ru's original body of bi content was therefore not in fact 'original'—rather, it gestured towards instances of bisexual culture in other mediated spaces and brought these isolated discussions

²⁴⁴ The sources Gay.ru is copying from are not referenced in full and are sometimes near impossible to corroborate. While locating bibliographical information is an important task, this project prioritises analysing the presentation and circulation of bi-themed content online as it appears on key LGBTQ+ sites.

together. The sources collated illustrate that bisexuality was associated in contemporary digital and print media with marital problems, infidelity, sexual discovery, fantasy, and manipulative sexual practices.

As demonstrated in Chapter I, the label ‘bisexual’ was used by and about married people with same-sex attractions. That trend continues here, albeit with the discussion rather more focused on the wives of bisexual men and their ability to influence their husband’s sexual behaviour. For instance, one link redirects the user to an external site where sexologist V. V. Shakhidzhanyan answers the 635th question of his *1001 vopros pro ETO* [‘Кто такие бисексуалисты? Не опасно ли это явление для самого человека и для общества?’].²⁴⁵ Shakhidzhanyan quotes letters from bisexuals, explaining that some women are specifically and strangely attracted to bisexual men; he argues that wives should ultimately stand by their husbands, helping them correct their sexualities: ‘Многое зависит и от жены - какая она в интимном плане, насколько способна душевно понять (и принять!) особенность своего избранника.’²⁴⁶ Similarly, a short extract apparently copied from *Moskovskii Komsomolets* advises men to make their wives feel responsible for their arousal.²⁴⁷ If they cannot get or maintain an erection, they should tell her to try harder next time so that she becomes all the more eager to please. While this article doesn’t mention same-sex desire, Mishin’s meta-text re-frames the article (perhaps sarcastically) as guidance for turning a gay man bi [‘как стать

²⁴⁵ Vladimir Shakhidzhanyan, ‘635. Kto takie biseksualisty?’, 1001.vdv.ru, Internet Archive, 13 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991013203833/http://1001.vdv.ru/books/1001/0635.htm>. The article was later reposted to its own Gay.ru page at an unspecified date: *Dva Fronta*, <<https://www.xgayru.info/bi/life/2fronts.html>> [accessed 28 September 2023].

²⁴⁶ Shakhidzhanyan’s views are discussed in more detail in a conversation reposted from FIDONET between two users about his article *Schast’e ili neschast’e*. They debate the contradiction between religious beliefs about the sin of same-sex relationships with the idea that “bisexualism”, or the ability to love anyone regardless of their biological sex, is a gift from God. The need for a bisexual to suffer, lament, and repress their homosexual side is up for debate. See Leonid Broukhis and Konstantin, ‘Pravil’no li stavit’ vopros o biseksual’nosti: “Schast’e ili neschast’e?”’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083556/http://www.gay.ru/bisex6a.htm>. Reposted from FIDONET.

²⁴⁷ ‘Stanovimsya biseksualami’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083452/http://www.gay.ru/bisex2.htm>.

из гая бисексуалом’]. The opinion that this was possible appears relatively widespread.²⁴⁸ For instance, in a later article named after Nikolai Karamzin’s sentimental tragedy *Bednaya Liza* (1792), a woman reports on her heterosexual friend Liza’s infatuation with a gay man.²⁴⁹ Liza spent hours manipulating him into becoming aroused, feeling special that no other woman got to be with him like she did because his body was usually reserved for men.

These posts are reminiscent of the techniques used to create bisexual erotic fantasies in the photography and reportage explored in Chapter I. Indeed, a similar brand of investigative journalism was also featured in the capture. Artemii Troitskii’s piece from *Obshchaya gazeta* sought to understand the ‘epidemic’ of bisexuality by interviewing two bisexual men, Vladislav and Aleksandr, about their relationships.²⁵⁰ He finds that women are not doing enough to connect with men. Once-married Vladislav had the reputation of an insatiable womaniser until his friend Ivan soaped him up at the banya and he realised how much he enjoyed those strong hands on his body. Women, he claims, are exhausting because they always want something from him, whether it be dollars, diamond rings, or marriage, making him a ‘медведь, загнанный моськами’. By contrast, Ivan is on his level, and the fact that they can fish and hunt together makes him feel like a real man.²⁵¹ While he continues to sleep with women occasionally, he doesn’t want a serious relationship with one.

²⁴⁸ Cf. the interview with Nikolai Ivanovich Oleinikov from the Moscow Centre for Medicine and Reproduction [*RISK*, 1992, No.4-5, 8-9] described in Chapter I.

²⁴⁹ Alla Tyukova, ‘Golubaya mechta bednoi Lizy’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 9 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991009021825/http://gay.ru/bi/liza.htm>. Republished from *Tsentr Plyus – Zapad*.

²⁵⁰ Artemii Troitskii, ‘Dve zhiznennye istorii Artema Troitskogo’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083638/http://www.gay.ru/bisex8.htm>. Republished from *Obshchaya gazeta*.

²⁵¹ For an interview work showing how hegemonic masculinity can affect bi- and homosexual men’s self-perception in Russia, see Cai Weaver, ‘“I’m Gay, but I’m Not Like Those Perverts”: Perceptions of Self, the LGBT Community, and LGBT Activists Among Gay and Bisexual Russian Men’, in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity*, ed. Radzhana Buyantueva and Shevtsova Maryna (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 101–24.

Aleksandr's story likewise centres around being better understood by another man than a woman. Recently divorced, he admits that his romantic relationships had always been stormy, but since his family life with two children was mostly fine, he had not noticed his 'склонности к «голубизне»'. Being a notorious workaholic put pressure on his marriage, and it was only when he met Sergei, another workaholic, that he believed in kindred spirits. A sexual relationship is implied, but Aleksandr stresses that psychological comfort meant more to him than anything physiological, and that their spiritual connection was a far better basis for a relationship than 'традиционные семейные ценности'. While Troitskii calls these men his friends and shares their first-person accounts with the reader, the stories are filtered through his voice—or perhaps fabricated entirely—to support his theory of bisexuality. Namely, that “perversion” like theirs occurs when a man does not feel understood by the women in his life and consequently seeks the “wrong” kind of male companionship. At the same time, these ideas about bisexuality and the root cause of extra-marital affairs were satirised in the capture in a humorous short story titled *Serezhka*, allegedly translated from *Time Out* magazine.²⁵²

Two unfiltered bisexual voices were included in *Khorosho-to kak Masha...* in the form of rather more light-hearted confessional narratives. One was written by a 38-year-old man who had suffered from 'страсть к красивым мальчишкам' throughout the first six years of his second

²⁵²Anastasia Seglia, trans., 'Serezhka', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083534/http://www.gay.ru/bisex5.htm>. Republished from *Time Out "Vek"*. A single phone call in the middle of the night quickly leads to a tangled mess of relationships being unravelled. We begin with Kolya, a straight man unaware of the bisexual world around him. Kolya believes that his wife Masha is sleeping with his friend Misha because he saw her wearing an earring that Misha purchased. Masha is not home, so Kolya calls Misha and warns him that he is coming over with his revolver. Misha, however, is busy sleeping with Robert. Misha had given him the earring, but Robert had regifted it to his wife Liza. Evidently, Liza also regifted the earring—to Masha. It dawns on Robert and Misha that the two women must be lovers. Robert is not bothered, and Misha is more interested in asking whether this means Robert did not like the earring, which is where the story ends. Everyone is sleeping with everyone, their heterosexual relationships and personas no more than a sham.

marriage.²⁵³ Three years before writing, he had finally decided to date men again. Now, he claims, he has had ten times more male lovers than he ever had female ones, all unbeknownst to his wife.²⁵⁴ Currently juggling three men, the only thing keeping him in his difficult marriage was his son. He explicitly avoids using identity labels, stating he wanted to speak ‘по-человечески’ and not with ‘психологические термины’. Nonetheless, his story was classified as bisexual on the site. This speaks both to the then popular understanding of bisexuality as a behaviour, and to the way in which urges to categorise people, stories, and experiences under distinct labels became reified by the metadata and tagging involved in website design.

The other “confession” reads like erotica.²⁵⁵ The author, Roman, was ostensibly once an androgynous boy in the Pioneers whom girls loved to cross-dress. He grew into a seventeen-year-old metal fan rough enough for the Komsomol to turn him away, and it was at that age that he was stood up by a girl at a coffee shop in Donetsk. Although he believes bisexuals are born, not made, he jokes that this moment turned him. Roman had already ordered drinks before it dawned on him that she was not going to turn up, so when a tall, blonde, muscular guy joins him at his table, two hot chocolates are brought over. Their meet-cute quickly escalates into a date. He describes the guy’s eyes as not quite ‘голубые’, but ‘синющие’, perhaps toying with this darker shade of blue as the bisexual equivalent of *goluboi*.²⁵⁶ The two walk around town and end up watching an erotic movie in an underground cinema, sharing a packet of nuts, holding hands and making out in the dark. Later in their relationship, Roman

²⁵³ ‘Moya zhena nichego ne znaet’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083513/http://www.gay.ru/bisex3.htm>.

²⁵⁴ The opposite perspective can be found elsewhere on the site, as Ed Mishin posts an anonymous letter he received in the post from a wife who had been struggling for the past five years after discovering her husband is bisexual: ‘Pis'ma i otkliki’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614082409/http://www.gay.ru/mail01.htm>.

²⁵⁵ Roman, ‘Kak ya stal biseksualom’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083430/http://www.gay.ru/bisex1.htm>. Reposted from FIDONET.

²⁵⁶ As outlined in the Introduction, the writer Vadim Kalinin does the same in a later interview. Mishin and Bulavin, ‘Vadim Kalinin’.

discovers that his partner's mother accepts her son's bisexuality, which not only amazes him but allows them to share a bed. Even if this story (like the others) is impossible to verify and is likely fabricated, its existence demonstrates that specifically bisexual fantasies were being written in the earliest era of the LGBTQ+ RuNet. Not only that, but the author intentionally incorporates details to make the story more sensational while grounding it in reality: the nostalgic Soviet flavour; the multiple understandings of bisexuality as related to androgyny, caused by a woman, or something you are born with; plus the excited use of emoticons, all caps, and exclamation marks, as if he cannot wait to share his most treasured memories.

Aside from the transcript of the bisexual episode of *Pro ETO*, which I return to in the next chapter, there is one final and curious link. There is no mention of bisexuality or same-sex desire in the external article to which it leads the user.²⁵⁷ The alleged interview (transcribed by the seedy-sounding “Дядя Джон”) takes place between a woman and a man she is questioning about a relationship he orchestrated with a virgin girl whom he estimated to be around fifteen years old and seemingly sexually assaulted. The reasons for its inclusion in *Khorosho-to kak Masha...* remain unclear, yet the way this link was later re-categorised provides some clues. By 08 May 1999, ‘Наблюдение, полезное для начинающих бисексуалов.’ had been added to the preview text, suggesting that the premise of manipulating a girl to invite you into her home, which is said to signify that she is “ready” to put out, could be useful to men who are not sure how to begin a relationship with a woman.²⁵⁸

For Men, For Women, For Both

²⁵⁷ Dyadya Dzhon, ‘...I kak u vas vse eto nachalos??’, Express.irk.ru, Internet Archive, 5 December 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981205191027/http://express.irk.ru/smi/kadet/2/inter.htm>.

²⁵⁸ ‘Biseksual’nost’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 8 May 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990508162656/http://gay.ru/bi/index.htm>.

Over time, the bisexual section grew and conceptions around the label changed. Eventually, more translated materials about biphobia and bi erasure began to be added.²⁵⁹ Occasionally, bi women's stories were featured.²⁶⁰ The implicit question of whether bisexuality was a practice or an identity became more explicit as Gay.ru continued to source articles and added quizzes for users to pinpoint themselves on the straight-bi-gay scale.²⁶¹ Writers disagreed over the so-called "percentage distribution" of bisexual attraction [‘Другой вопрос - пресловутые проценты. В смысле, настолько я гетеро, и насколько гомо?’].²⁶² Yet perhaps unsurprisingly given the name of the website, bi men's articles leaned overwhelmingly toward preferring same-sex romantic and sexual partners. Like Vladislav above, speakers often claimed that women were too frivolous, hysterical, demanding, or materialistic. Ultimately, persuading a girl to have sex with you was deemed so much easier it was almost boring:

Не забывал добавлять в любовную палитру простых и более доступных женских красок. Характеризую этот цвет как желтый с оттенком зеленой плесени: встречается повсеместно, распространен чрезвычайно, надоел жутко, но без него не появится изюминка в холсте даже самого опытного художника. В основном влюблялись в меня, а я этим пользовался.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ One of the earliest examples is Lani Ka'ahumanu, Rob Yaeger, and Albert Lunde, 'Bi-fobiya', trans. Nikita Ivanov, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 11 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991011205310/http://www.gay.ru/bi/biphobia.htm>. Reposted from Albert Lunde (1992) and the Bisexual Resource Centre (1998). Translated in 1999.

²⁶⁰ Natal'ya Chern'yavskaya, 'Ispoved' Biseksualki: "Ya polyubila svoju podругu'", Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 4 March 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000304203326/http://gay.ru/bi/ispoved.htm>. Republished from *Cosmopolitan*, February 1996.

²⁶¹ Test na "natural'nost'", Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 9 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991009033335/http://gay.ru/society/psycholg/str8test.htm>. The overall level of homosexuality on Gay.ru according to the capture's aggregated results of the 49,236 responses is 40%, a decidedly bisexual figure.

²⁶² Sisita, 'Odin raz - ne biseksual?', Gay.ru, 26 September 2012, <https://www.xgayru.info/bi/odin-raz-ne-biseksual.html>. Republished from *Odin iz nas* (No.63). This same bi-questioning speaker called into question which sexual acts or level of experience makes someone bisexual, giving the example of Shakespeare's speculated bisexuality and riffing on his famous line: "Ты "би" ор нот ту "би".

²⁶³ Vlad, 'Spasibo', Gay.ru, October 2003, <https://www.xgayru.info/bi/life/spasibo.html>.

Female speakers also largely stated that they found same-sex relationships far more satisfying, framing this as a natural response to the infantile, aggressive, or toxic nature of men and masculinity:

В глубине души я знаю, что с женщинами я расслабляюсь на 99%, с мужчинами - на 80%. Мне слишком везло в жизни с инфантильными мужчинами. Я пытаюсь найти в мужчине отца, а нахожу сына. В женщине я не ищу ни маму, ни дочку, здесь полное равноправное партнерство. С мужчинами такое случается крайне редко.²⁶⁴

This animosity, coupled with the perception of such stark differences between hetero- and homosexual relationship dynamics, led to debates over what counts as cheating when in a relationship with/as a bisexual person. Did it depend on the gender of the person the bisexual was sleeping with on the side? A range of opinions were voiced within a single article about dating bisexual women.²⁶⁵ For some of the lesbian interviewees, men could not be considered meaningful or worthy rivals, especially given beliefs that women occasionally needed to have sex with men for health reasons [‘Если с мужчиной - это для здоровья тоже надо’].

As content about bi women started being uploaded with greater frequency, a recurrent theme was the threesome. Written mostly by and for women in relationships with men, articles told of pressure to agree to allowing another woman into the bedroom. One account, apparently republished from Russian *Cosmopolitan*, describes not liking the idea at first, but later experiencing a sexual awakening.²⁶⁶ The author realised she was attracted to women too, although not the specific women her partner invited over. After a dramatic incident with a drug addict, she raised the issue of having no say in who he brings home and was shouted

²⁶⁴Yana Sergeeva, ‘Vyiti zamuzh za podругu’, Gay.ru, accessed 31 October 2021, <https://www.xgayru.info/bi/life/podругa.html>. Republished from *ELLE*, February 1998.

²⁶⁵ Sergeeva.

²⁶⁶ Ekaterina Militskaya, ‘Tret’ei budesh?’, Gay.ru, accessed 22 October 2021, https://www.xgayru.info/bi/life/sex_v_3.html. Republished from *Cosmopolitan*, January 2000. The previous article (Sergeeva) also featured one speaker, Lena, who explains that while she agreed to a threesome ‘под психологическим давлением’, she is ultimately grateful to her husband ‘потому что это событие разбудило мою сексуальность’.

down. She packed up and left, but reflecting on the experience now, she confesses that she enjoyed exploring the female body and hopes to orchestrate threesomes with her next boyfriend too. The apparent authenticity of this confession contrasts the interviewer's sensationalising tone, which mediates her account and uses her tale as evidence that because men are hunters counting conquests, threesomes are an inevitable and universal male fantasy:

[С]екс с двумя женщинами одновременно - одна из любимых мужских фантазий. По природе мужчина - охотник и завоеватель, и собственный престиж любовника он оценивает прежде всего по количеству одержанных побед Вопрос лишь в том, случится это через пару месяцев после вашего знакомства или через десяток лет в целом безоблачной супружеской жизни.

The author continues to argue that for a man, lying is tiring. Threesomes are a logical compromise between, on the one hand, not wanting to put in the effort to cheat, and on the other, meeting his natural manly urges. Threesomes are therefore given the author's support, and she recommends staying open to experimenting; albeit it with the caveat that you should avoid inviting a second woman into the bedroom if your partner finds her very attractive, or if she is a close friend. These stories align with research into bisexual dating sites in post-socialist Hungary: women 'who are not embedded in lesbian communities [...] rely on threesomes [...] to reach other women sexually', while for men, most profiles characterised as 'bisexual' were seeking secret same-sex encounters.²⁶⁷

Bi Discussion Boards

A few years after its launch, Gay.ru succeeded in creating virtual spaces where bi users could post in their own voice and interact directly, rather than always being mediated through

²⁶⁷ Ráhel Katalin Turai, 'Gender and Class Tension in Hungarian LGBTQ Activism: The Case of Ambiguous Bisexual Representation', in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity*, ed. Radzhana Buyantueva and Shevtsova Maryna (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 349.

interviewers or editors. No longer was the website simply collating and generating bisexual articles and erotica, but it was enabling specifically bisexual dating and discussions. By 08 May 1999, a bi discussion board had been launched, billed as both 'BBS: Доска общения для бисексуалов' and 'БИ-ДОСКА ДИСКУСИЙ'.²⁶⁸ The first capture of the page on 10 November 2000 shows it had quickly become popular, with 285 posts displayed since late September.²⁶⁹ All required a title, which would be displayed on this main page for users to click through if they were interested in the topic. The titles were predominantly in Russian, but occasionally in English (the lingua franca of the World Wide Web) and sometimes in a mix of the two, with some words transliterated and others left in Cyrillic. Users posted to the Bi-Doska from across the transnational Russian-speaking community. Advertised locations include Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Kazan', Nizhnii Novgorod, Arkhangel'sk, Tomsk, Kaliningrad, Kyiv, Minsk, and the United States. As replies came in, a chain of 'Re:' titles appeared under the corresponding title.

The popularity of the board is perhaps to be expected. A survey conducted by Monitoring.ru found that in 1999, 22% of Russian internet users self-reported that they were interested in chat rooms, and 12% in erotic or pornographic sites.²⁷⁰ Yet at this time, only around 7% of Russia's population were internet users, and the majority were located in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Residents of apartment blocks would pool their money together to obtain dedicated lines and radio modems for internet access; others relied on internet cafes catering to different clienteles, taking advantage of all-night offers at cheap prices.²⁷¹ The time each post was uploaded to the Bi-Doska is displayed next to the author's username. While these

²⁶⁸'Biseksual'nost'.

²⁶⁹'Bi-Doska Diskussii', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 10 November 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20001110012800/http://www.gay.ru/cgi-bin/bbsb.pl>.

²⁷⁰ Anna Bowles, 'The Changing Face of the RuNet', in *Control + Shift: Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, ed. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Natalia Kondarova (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006), 25.

²⁷¹ Bowles, 23.

range considerably, the majority fell between late evening and the early hours, perhaps marking a trend of clandestine online nightlife, or simply reflecting an increased sense of loneliness and sexual arousal when alone at night. It is not difficult to imagine that users would secretly make use of these means of connecting to the internet to explore their (bi)sexuality when they felt a greater sense of privacy.

The number of replies under each topic in the capture remains an approximate marker of a post's interesting or controversial nature, even though the full discussions were unfortunately not archived. Still, the titles reveal that the Bi-Doska was primarily used for organising hook-ups and/or fantasising about different types of 'bisexual' sex, once again signifying an understanding of bisexuality as practice, not identity. Many hoped someone living close to them would perform a specific sexual act: 'Оральный секс, очень хочется. Ищу парня в Москве!'; 'ИЩУ КОМПАНИЮ ДЛЯ СЛЕДУЮЩЕЙ СЕКС-ИГРЫ'; 'УСКОРЕННАЯ ОРАЛЬНО-АНАЛЬНАЯ ПОМОЩЬ'. Couples and individuals proposed threesomes: 'ПОТРАХ ВТРОЕМ С РЕБЯТАМИ'; '2+1москва'; 'М+М+Ж, бисекс ФОТО, знакомства'; 'КАЗАНЬ.Семейная [sic] пара ищет бисексуала===ФОТО==='; 'Две парня -би ищут девушку!'. Individuals interested in meeting couples would often specify a particular composition, such as a married couple including either an active or passive man ('ищу би пару где есть актив'; Бисексуальноу [sic] паре ,где [sic] мужчина пассивен.....'). Married men equally sought other married men for hook-ups: 'Женатый хочет ебать женатого до 27 лет'; 'Только женатому от женатого из Москвы'. Finally, others promoted a fantasy where they would have sex with anyone, without any conditions: 'Секс без обязательств'; 'Любые виды секса,с [sic] кем угодно'; 'А мне все равно кого!'.

Gay.ru's main dating service, *Ishchu druga*, permitted users to search for someone to date using a drop-down list of different identities and regions.²⁷² Mishin explained that the service operated in two ways: you could complete a form and then return monthly letters confirming you still want the advertisement online, or you could post “без цензуры” on announcement boards which would automatically be erased every two weeks.²⁷³ These bisexual dating services took off, and by 09 October 1999, *Ishchu druga* was further subdivided into two new boards.²⁷⁴ The first, ‘Знакомства для бисексуалов’, was billed a space where couples could find a third, or a singleton [‘одиночка’] could find a couple for sex, starting a family, friendship, or conversation.²⁷⁵ The second, dubbed ‘Объявления Гей-Лесби’, was for gay men and lesbian women to find each other and set up a “bisexual” lifestyle: ‘Голубые мальчики ищут розовых девочек, и наоборот. Для прикрытия, для создания семьи, для дружбы.’²⁷⁶ Forums like *Gei-Lesbi* were seemingly successful for some starting families. In *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v Rossii* (2014), Anton and Georgii describe how, after being together for 13 years, they turned to Gay.ru to find a lesbian woman who wanted children but needed someone to father a baby.²⁷⁷ They met someone through a personal ad and raised twin boys with her.

Ultimately, the types of posts on Gay.ru's bisexual forums share many similarities with the personal ads published in the print press I discussed in the previous chapter. The dating service diverged significantly, however, in the fact that users could respond immediately and

²⁷²Ishchu druga: Bi', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 8 December 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20001208075500/http://www.gay.ru/friends/bi/index.htm>.

²⁷³Ishchu druga', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 17 November 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20001117002700/http://www.gay.ru/friends/index.htm>.

²⁷⁴‘Biseksual’nost’.

²⁷⁵Ishchu druga: Biseksualy', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 11 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991011230138/http://www.gay.ru/friends/bisex.htm>.

²⁷⁶Ishchu druga: Gei-Lesbi', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 21 October 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991021230008/http://gay.ru/friends/gaylesbi.htm>.

²⁷⁷ Masha Gessen and Joseph Hoff-Hannon, eds., *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v Rossii: Istorii Lyubvi / Gay Propaganda: Russian Love Stories* (New York: OR Books, 2014), 284–90.

directly via email and comments rather than needing to reply by letter via the editors. The level of anonymity granted was also different. It may have felt more liberating escaping virtually into an online bisexual community from a private space like an apartment (rather than needing to entrust anonymity to editors and the postal system). Additionally, on certain boards, posts were not edited, retaining typos, explicit language, emoticons, all caps, and their full length (sometimes with multiple post-scripts), which further enhanced the sense of immediacy. Users could also apply filters to their search and only see ads which interested them, including limiting the search to bisexuals (or excluding them), making internet dating an altogether different experience.

The Shifting Site Structure

Swathes of Gay.ru's earliest content survived decades of updates, albeit re-formatted and shuffled around within the soon sprawling site structure. Yet how prominently placed were bisexual voices and themes on Gay.ru? In the original homepage banner, only gay men and lesbian women are mentioned, even though *Kborosho-to kak, Masha...* had already been created.²⁷⁸ By 12 December 1998, the subtitle had not only been updated from 'о российских гаях и лесбиянках' to 'российский национальный сервер геев, лесбиянок и бисексуалов', but the navigation bar had been simplified and split into four sections reflecting the acronym LGBT.²⁷⁹ This division into separate LGBT identities was reinforced when Lesbi.ru went live in 2001, and today, although the Gay.ru subtitle still refers to bisexuality, the *Bi* section is now hidden along with *Lesbi* and *Trans* in the menu bar under the category *Eshche*. Overall, there was therefore a gradual increase in the prominence of bisexual content over time, followed by a relegation of this material within the site structure.

²⁷⁸'Homepage', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614080122/http://www.gay.ru:80/>.

²⁷⁹'Homepage', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 12 December 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981212025200/http://www.gay.ru:80/>.

Perhaps as homosexuality increasingly became seen as a political identity in the lead up to the first regional bans on ‘gay propaganda’ in 2006, the specific identity labels within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella solidified.²⁸⁰ Not to mention that distinct identity terms like *gei*, *lesbi*, *bi*, and *trans* are ideal for search engine optimisation (SEO); unlike the native Russian *goluboi*, *rozovaya*, or *tema*, these labels do not carry other meanings.

Indeed, the capture taken on 02 March 2006 is the first to show the Bi section without the *Masha i Mishka* joke at the top of the page: instead, the new introductory text explains that while millions of people are bisexual, the majority are closeted and therefore invisible. Whereas gays and lesbians, it says, ‘давно поняли потребность’ to spend long years doing the difficult work of uniting and forming communities and political organisations to make strides in political and human rights, ‘Бисексуальные люди, напротив, с большим трудом осознали себя, создавали комьюнити и формировали политические и социальные сообщества для признания.’²⁸¹ Bisexuals are framed here as a separate group and blamed both for their invisibility in society and a lack of action in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. This text remains the introduction on bisexuality on Gay.ru today.²⁸² This update was just one sign of the slowing rate of bi content being uploaded in the mid-2000s, as blogging and social media platforms soared in popularity.

Finding and Forming Online Communities

Considering how extensively the internet has permeated everyday life globally since the early 2000s, it is unsurprising that collections of queer life narratives written by LGBTQ+ Russian speakers frequently include stories reminiscing about the ways in which the internet shaped

²⁸⁰ Weidlack and Neufeld, ‘My Ne Rockery, Ne Panki, My Devochki’, 153–54.

²⁸¹ ‘Bi’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 2 March 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060302201911/http://www.gay.ru/bi/index.html>.

²⁸² ‘Bi’, xGayru.info, accessed 27 October 2023, <https://www.xgayru.info/bi/>.

their sense of identity and “coming-out” journey. Seven couples in *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v Rossii* (2014) met through web chats, blogging or online fanfiction communities. Muzei LGBTIK conducted a survey with twenty people who agreed to speak about queer life the 1990s and early 2000s, and in the responses, technological advances and new possibilities for meeting other queer people is a major theme.²⁸³ The respondents reminisce about using pagers, internet cafes, SMS chat rooms, the text service ICQ, the social media site VKontakte, blogs on LiveJournal, and websites such as Lesbi.ru. More niche corners of the internet and their possibilities for same-sex intimacy crop up too, like the lesser-known forum Zemchat for fans of the rock musician Zemfira, and a website for queer women in Yaroslavl’, LesbiYar.

Several respondents to Muzei LGBTIK’s survey reflect on whether the situation for bisexual people has become better or worse over time:

Я общалась в основном с лесбиянками. Были среди нас би. [...] Мне кажется, сейчас различия между лесбиянками больше подчеркнуты: феминистки и нет, голдстары и нет... Бисексуалок и тогда не любили, но сейчас реакция жёстче порой, на мой взгляд.

L.K. (27), from Mytischí

К бисексуалам же было недоверие, впрочем, оно и сейчас имеет место быть, потому что людям свойственно не доверять тем, кто и с теми, и с другими, но сейчас уже как-то проще: мы понимаем, что просто человек такой, и этого не изменить. Тогда - нет: либо ты с нами, либо против нас.

Toshka (33), from Yaroslavl’

L.K. and Toshka agree that bisexuals experienced discrimination from within the lesbian and gay community at the turn of the twenty-first century.²⁸⁴ However, their conclusions are at odds. L.K suggests that division and ostracization from the lesbian community has only

²⁸³ ‘LGBT-Istoriya: Vospominaniya LGBT lyudei o 90-x - nachale 2000-x’, LGBT Muzei Istorii v Rossii, 16 February 2020, <https://lgbtru.com/worldwide/lgbt-history/3958/>.

²⁸⁴ For a first-person account of biphobia within the lesbian community, see AnzheLIka, ‘Lesbi prezirayut bi?’

worsened as more attention is paid now to pureness, in the sense of being “gold star” and never having slept with a man. Toshka, on the other hand, feels that the people in the lesbian and gay community are generally more accepting now and understand that bisexuals cannot simply choose a side.

Notably, while some respondents mention identifying as bisexual at earlier points in their life, nobody identified as bi at the time of writing. In the anthology *Kvir' Sibir'* (2020), by contrast, several contributors identify as bisexual or pansexual.²⁸⁵ Across the collection, multiple authors recall that technological shifts facilitated greater self-discovery and a feeling of being connected to a queer community—or, by contrast, an additional sense of alienation.²⁸⁶ Bisexual contributor Lada Bigun, for instance, remembers her friend recommending the website Lesbiru.com as a way to learn about the distinction between butches, dykes, and femmes. Since that initial visit, Lada had not revisited the site until the time of writing. Upon returning, she was shocked to encounter levels of biphobia on Lesbiru.com that she has not experienced anywhere else in her life, even among homophobic company. She found harmful stereotypes and hateful comments towards bi women were pervasive: ‘Из материалов на портале я узнала, что бисексуалки - подлые, двуличные сволочи, которые не умеют нормально любить и, чуть что, обязательно сбегут "к члену", не преминув попрекнуть бывшую его отсутствие.’²⁸⁷ Lada concludes that lesbians too feel that she is somehow “incorrect”, connecting this experience of online biphobia with a time that someone told her straight women are better because they do not lie to themselves. The hate Lada read on this website affected her deeply, leading her to wonder: ‘Неужели прав был тот сайт, и я просто двуличная тварь, не способная на верность?’

²⁸⁵ I discuss the anthology in greater depth in Chapter Four. Siberian Queer-Feminist Initiative, *Kvir' Sibir': (bez)opasnost' i zabota o sebe* (Novosibirsk: Kvir' Sibir', 2020), https://academia.edu/44546783/Квирь_Сибирь_без_опасность_и_забота_о_себе.

²⁸⁶ For an explanation of how these two opposite feelings coincide among LGBTQ+ people on the RuNet, see Kuntsman, ‘Cyberethnography as Home-Work’.

²⁸⁷ *Kvir' Sibir'*, 168.

Roleplaying, Blogging, Belonging

Although bisexuals may not always have fit easily into lesbian and gay communities online (or offline), the rise of blogging represented another opportunity to come together. Importantly, blogs facilitated roleplaying queer desires in an anonymized forum, imagining alternative possibilities for identification, lifestyle, and self-expression. Yuliya Tarasyuk has highlighted how women in the “boys love” (or *yaoi*) community on Diary.ru in the 2000s would not only take on the name, face, and voice of a male anime character, but would write blog posts in such a way as to combine canonical facts with details of their own lives, confusing the boundary between fact and fiction.²⁸⁸ As she explains: “The characters these female BL fans loved and their stories are *not* real, which is why playing that character allowed them [to] become someone they could not be in real life with a love interest they wished to have, but could not have in reality.”²⁸⁹ Moreover, female BL community members would commonly find a romantic partner within the community—normally another woman roleplaying a male character considered a potential love interest of her own—which was widely discussed on Diary.ru and LiveJournal at the time. For some women, Tarasyuk emphasizes, the romantic relationship was just a game; but for others it was more. Some newly formed couples attended events together, coming to be known as ‘lesbian cosplayers’ even if they did not necessarily identify with that label. Tarasyuk knew of at least one case in which a married woman got divorced after falling in love with another woman in the community. Online cosplay subculture thus brought together “real” and “virtual” spaces, “real” and “imagined” selves. It necessitated going beyond the usual confines of binary gender roles and monosexualities and paved the way for exploring bi-curiosity.

²⁸⁸ Tarasyuk, ‘Queer Roleplaying Practices in Russian Female BL Fandom’, 164.

²⁸⁹ Tarasyuk, 166.

Roleplaying on blogging sites was not always related to a particular work of fiction, nor was it strictly make-believe. In *My zdes'* (2017), 41-year-old transmasculine Egor Gor relates how his self-identification has fluctuated over time, moving through labels such as lesbian, transsexual, transqueer, bisexual, and transgender man.²⁹⁰ After a devastating break-up and period of mental illness, Egor launched a LiveJournal written from the perspective of a bisexual male persona that he felt helped him externalise his inner self more powerfully than anything he had previously experienced [181]:

Первый мой шаг в сторону выздоровления был странным: я решил, что раз моей «мужской стороне» так тяжело внутри, надо ее экстернализировать – вытащить в наглядное поле. И я вытащил – завёл блог в ЖЖ, который на тот момент пользовался ещё изрядной популярностью. Завёл блог для парня по имени Егор и писал туда короткие и ёмкие фразы. Честные. Отражающие меня. Картинки постил, стихи... Придумал, что Егор живёт в Амстердаме (мечтал всегда побывать там). И что он бисексуал. Собственно, взял и вытащил из себя вовне. И надо сказать, что тот Егор мне до сих пор чертовски нравится, хоть и не похож на меня нынешнего полностью!

Egor goes on to confide that through this blog he had an unusual dating experience with a woman. Having written as a fictionalized but more authentic-feeling bisexual male self, he once again faced a frustrating need to be deceptive in this relationship [‘мне снова пришлось врать и играть... что меня и бесило и радовало одновременно’, 181]. After the woman realized what was happening, she refused to listen to any justifications and stopped responding, rejecting the validity of his gender identity [‘Ты женщина, обманщица – и точка!’, 182]. This negative experience led him to believe—even up to the time of writing—that his life is simply a lie in other people’s eyes [‘я не устаю повторять, что моя жизнь – во многом ложь для других. Пытаюсь что-то утаить, я невольно лгу’, 182].

²⁹⁰ Dzhonni Dzhibladze et al., *My zdes'*. *Sbornik trans*istorii* (Sankt-Peterburg: Vykhod, 2017), 178–84. I have previously written about Egor Gor’s story among other intersections between trans* and queer experiences: see Dowling, ‘Russian Trans* Stories’.

Egor Gor's story serves as a reminder of two important factors. First, that the line between "authentic" autobiographical writing and fiction/fabrication can be blurred, particularly for LGBTQ+ subjects and anonymous internet users.²⁹¹ Second, that self-identification is not fixed. People who publicly used a certain label may no longer use the same one today or may conceive its meaning differently.²⁹² Yet this does not make Egor's experience running a bisexual blog any less relevant to the history of Russophone bisexual voices online. His experience demonstrates how 'bisexual' spaces and histories have been shaped by others in the wider queer and trans* communities, much in the same way that bisexuals have contributed extensively to the creation of gay, lesbian, and transgender spaces and historical movements (even if these achievements have frequently been overlooked).²⁹³ There are wider echoes of this phenomenon, too. In an article showcasing LGBTQ+ memories of 1990s Russia, a person going by N. G. now considers themselves located outside of gender; but they spent many years identifying as a bisexual, and later lesbian, woman: 'В 11 лет ориентация как бисексуалки (в 21 как лесбиянки), а гендер в 31.'²⁹⁴

Blogs like Egor's had the potential to make quiet yet life-changing emotional impacts readers. Matilda Tudor (2022) found that among the queer Russian men she interviewed, many spent months or years after first discovering queer forums passively watching a particular website or MSN chat, at most anonymously messaging.²⁹⁵ Tudor terms this behaviour 'queer digital dwelling', a process of postponing, delaying, and allowing the anonymity of the online space to build up confidence and a sense of freedom.²⁹⁶ For some, 'dwelling' on blogs, dating sites

²⁹¹ Dowling, 'Russian Trans* Stories', 174–5.

²⁹² Jenny Kangasvuo, "'There Has Been No Phase in My Life When I Wasn't Somehow Bisexual': Comparing the Experiences of Finnish Bisexuals in 1999 and 2010", *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no.2–3 (2011): 271–89. In Chapter IV, I return to this theme in an autofictional novel.

²⁹³ Julia Shaw, *Bi: The Hidden Culture, History and Science of Bisexuality* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd., 2022), 29–55.

²⁹⁴ 'LGBT-Istoriya', <https://lgbtru.com/worldwide/lgbt-history/3958/>.

²⁹⁵ Matilda Tudor, 'A Queer Kind of Dwelling: Digital Thrownness and Existential Security among Sexual Minorities in Russia', *New Media & Society* 0, no.0 (2022): 9–11.

²⁹⁶ Tudor, 11–12.

and web chats enabled re-negotiating their local area from a queer perspective. Gay.ru reposted an article from a Moldovan LGBTQ+ website about how this type of ‘dwelling’ helped a bisexual woman named Yulia re-integrate her various identities.²⁹⁷ If before, Yulia felt alienated in a conservative family and town, then a queer digital space tied to local places and people demonstrated that there was a way for bisexuality and her other identities as mother, wife, and Moldovan, to co-exist.

Acceptance? Bisexuality on Early Dating Sites

Digital renegotiations of the local, which proved the compatibility of queerness and Russianness, were especially important outside of metropolitan centres like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, such as in Russian émigré communities or in remote regions.²⁹⁸ Tatiana Barchunova (2010) has argued that around 2008, attitudes in public discourse concerning female-to-female relationships altered in regionally circulating media in Siberia, including online publications.²⁹⁹ Citing an article about female bisexuality in Ngs.ru’s SHE pages, Barchunova suggests that female same-sex intimacy could, for the first time, be recognized in the region as a “healthy curiosity”. Namely, she argues that the article exemplifies the ways in which female bisexuality was being discussed as a possible lifestyle choice (as opposed to a “lesbian political identity”) with the support of quotes from medical experts and psychotherapists.³⁰⁰ Throughout, Barchunova appears to view ‘bisexual’ as a transitional, non-committal identity permitting a ‘shift’ between same-sex and opposite-sex behaviours.

²⁹⁷ Yulia, ‘Ponyat’ i prinyat’ sebya’, Gay.ru, accessed 20 October 2023, <https://www.xgayru.info/bi/life/ponyat-i-prinyat-sebya.html>.

²⁹⁸ Kuntsman, ‘Cyberethnography as Home-Work’, 4–5; Barchunova, ‘Shift-F2’, 255–56.

²⁹⁹ Barchunova, ‘Shift-F2’, 254–56.

³⁰⁰ Lera Nezabudkina, ‘Generation “BI”’, Ngs.ru, 15 April 2008, <http://she.ngs.ru/news/more/36121>.

Despite this interpretation, the article and its cited experts convey mixed messages about the acceptability of female bisexuality. On the one hand, psychotherapist Igor' Lyakh advises female readers not to worry about bisexual 'ЭПИЗОДЫ ВЛЮБЛЕННОСТИ' as they are not necessarily a pathology leading to homosexuality; instead, bisexual desires could simply remain in the realm of masturbatory fantasies, and even if they progress to "active" sexual contact, such behaviour be confined to the past. Psychoanalyst Aleksandr Fedchuk concurs that if a woman is seeking satisfaction in the embrace of another, she has neither successfully found a man, nor redirected this energy into her work. On the other hand, Fedchuk recognises that women can enjoy bisexual experiences, and while some may seek a solution with a doctor later, repressing your bisexuality can lead to suffering. The author, Lera Nezabudnika, filters these experts through a seemingly sympathetic voice. She relays statistics about the high rates of bisexuality among women; she queer-codes her subheadings with cultural references to the t.A.T.u song *Nas ne dogonyat* (2001) and the common bisexual descriptor 'И НАШИМ, И ВАШИМ'; she personally concludes that acting on these desires should be an individual choice; and ultimately, she calls on readers to accept the bisexuals they know and perhaps even try it for themselves—joking, after Woody Allen, that it will double their chances of a date. Here then, we see how discourses of acceptance, even when (con)fused with stereotypes or dismissals, can make a meaningful impression on those searching for materials about bisexuality in an informational vacuum. By virtue of being featured in a local article, bisexuality is given the status of an experience, if not an identity, which can happen in Siberia too—the question of shame or illness is left open to debate.

Barchunova connects the article's positivity about bisexuality to her observations of the Siberian dating site Sibgay.ru. She notes that bisexuality was a 'popular choice of self-presentation' on the platform, and that this high rate of bisexual self-identification was further supported by interview work. Several informants confided involvement in 'cases of

a bisexual scenario'.³⁰¹ Testing her thesis further, Barchunova launched an anonymous discussion about sexual fluidity on VK and Sibdating.ru and found that many forum participants shared views such as “love has no gender”, telling stories about friends who had “shifted” between same-sex and heterosexual relationships.³⁰² Ultimately, Barchunova proposes anonymous online communication allowed women to expand their social network and explore a “curiosity” for same-sex relations without associating themselves with a stigmatized identity, as they would if they entered the social space of a “thematic” club.³⁰³ However, this sense of security and anonymity online was already fading—informants contrasted the prevalence of fake names in the early days of the internet to the later culture of dating sites, in which a lack of real pictures or anonymous entries appeared suspicious and dangerous.³⁰⁴ Instead, dating profiles by 2010 already relied on being comfortable virtually coming out to a local community.³⁰⁵

The Rise of Social Media

Partially responsible for changing outlooks on anonymity was likely the appearance of mainstream social media in the mid-late 2000s. Social media revolutionised ways to connect and organise—and this revolution was felt particularly keenly by LGBTQ+ people and other marginalised groups.³⁰⁶ Two of Russia’s most popular social networking sites, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, were launched in 2006. In the same year, the first Moscow Pride parade was planned—although it was banned by local authorities, demonstrators still took to the streets and clashed with violent homophobic protesters. This series of events repeated year on year until June 2012, when the Moscow courts banned Pride parades for 100 years. Since

³⁰¹ Barchunova, ‘Shift-F2’, 256.

³⁰² Barchunova, 261.

³⁰³ Barchunova, 261.

³⁰⁴ Kondakov, *Violent Affections*, 27–28.

³⁰⁵ Barchunova, ‘Shift-F2’, 262.

³⁰⁶ Daneback, Ross, and Månsson, ‘Bisexuality and Sexually Related Activities on the Internet’.

2000, conservative critics had been denouncing the hyper-sexualised marketplace and its connections to the World Web, perceiving a decline in morality threatening the nation.³⁰⁷ Two vastly different responses to increased internet use and social media therefore went hand in hand: while LGBTQ+ people could form online connections with more ease than ever, authorities prepared to clamp down on their self-expression and organising.

Of course, social media use only increased as the Internet became more widely accessible and the physical means of accessing the web transformed from internet cafes and dial-up modems, to WiFi and smartphones.³⁰⁸ In 2009, Russians were recognised by multiple reports and measures as being the most engaged social media users globally.³⁰⁹ LGBTQ+ activists in Russia quickly adopted blogging and social media in their strategies.³¹⁰ While bisexual rights activism in Russia seems to have developed later and partially in response to a sense of exclusion from broader queer activism, bi activists ultimately took up similar strategies. Bi activists worked to build up their social media presence and, in recent years, organized livestreams sharing aspirations and experiences in response to viewer questions.³¹¹ Prominent social media groups offering bi-specific educational resources, memes and support were recommended by word of mouth within Russian-speaking bisexual communities.³¹² Indeed, the website BiPanRussia.com, which forms the final case study of this chapter, compiled a list of support groups and resources for non-monosexuals across Telegram, Instagram, VK, and Facebook.³¹³

³⁰⁷ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 111; 134.

³⁰⁸ Bowles, 'The Changing Face of the RuNet'.

³⁰⁹ Karina Alexanyan, 'Social Networking on Runet: The View from a Moving Train', *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 1, no.2 (2009): 1–12.

³¹⁰ Buyantueva, *LGBT Protest Activity in Russia*, 67–8.

³¹¹ Andreevskikh, 'Confessional Narratives', 196–201.

³¹² Andreevskikh, 201.

³¹³ 'Ssylki na poleznye kanaly i sotseti', BiPanRussia.com, accessed 2 November 2021, <https://bipanrussia.com/library/ssylki-na-poleznye-kanaly-i-socseti/>.

YouTube and Auto(bi)ography

Bisexual Russian influencers have made their voices heard across practically every social media platform, sharing their experiences and opinions on bisexual theory and popular culture. Searching for ‘бисексуальность’ ‘бисексуал’, ‘бисексуалка’ or ‘би’, on YouTube, I found that the main types of videos could be divided into two categories: those produced by bisexual individuals, and those produced about them. The latter included psychology videos promoting different understandings of sexual ‘normality’ and the root causes of bisexuality, as well as compilations of *neudobnye voprosy* and responses from bisexuals either in an interview format or quoting from another website such as Reddit. Meanwhile, bisexual YouTubers posted Q&As, educational content, and, most commonly, videos speaks candidly about being bisexual. There seemed to be a significantly gendered element: analysing the top results showed most autobiographical videos were made by bi women, with bisexual men appearing in smaller numbers in compilations of interviews, or as a guest on their bisexual girlfriend’s channel (rather than posting their own videos).³¹⁴

Clinton Glenn’s analysis of gay coming-out videos in Russian showed that while most involved coming out to the viewer, a significant number were recordings of coming out to loved ones. This placed the viewer ‘in the position of voyeur rather than passive confidante’.³¹⁵ The cinematography of bisexual video creators generally served different aims. The trend was to speak directly to the camera, sitting in front of a plain wall or background, with minimal cuts. The low set-up approach emphasises authenticity and the un-staged nature of the confessional narrative, perhaps in an attempt to counter stereotypes about

³¹⁴ Transgender and non-binary perspectives also feature in the top results, but notably in a documentary compilation about ‘пансексуальность’ which has over 200,000 views. I speak more about the distinctions between bi and pan voices, and how these sexual identities connect to (trans)gender identities, in the next section.

³¹⁵ Glenn, ‘YA–GEI!’, 135 and 139–41.

bisexuality as a deceitful. Rather than orchestrating public coming-outs, bisexual influencers preferred to emulate an intimate conversation with the viewer, speaking from a position where they had already worked through past shame and could advise others. Indeed, a high proportion of these confessional videos were posted during Bisexual Awareness Week, an international event which I reflect on more later in this chapter. Some videos also drew on the colour scheme of the bisexual pride flag for text transition screens. From these aesthetics and upload timings, it is clear the creators were already engaged with the global bisexual community. They were invested in producing personal videos for an activist purpose, speaking specifically against biphobia they had encountered.

For instance, one video, part of a series about the creator's experiences of bisexuality, reflected on the conflation of bisexuality with polyamory. It received over 100,000 views before being delisted in 2022. The creator spoke about two types of bisexuals: those who alternate between relationships with men and women, and those who simultaneously date people of multiple genders. She gave examples from other bi women she had met through her own dating and internet life: a woman who was married with children, but began a long-term relationship with another woman after her divorce; a woman who wanted to open her relationship with her boyfriend, but could not because of his reservations about cheating; and another woman who compromised with her male partner that she could kiss women but go no farther. The creator herself was afraid to tell her primary male partner about her desire to set up secondary relationships with women, but ultimately decided to be honest and overcome her fears. Her video was aimed at a subset of bisexuals she did not want to feel alone, given that bi communities sometimes respond negatively to polyamorous individuals who are seen as perpetuating stereotypical ideas about bisexuals and non-monogamy.

Other videos emphasised the invisibility their creators felt being bisexual. Without relatable characters on TV and not wanting to aggravate gays and lesbians by openly calling themselves ‘bisexual’, some speakers felt that life would be easier if they were monosexual—though one bi man stressed that ‘лучше’ is not the same as ‘лучше’. With explicit examples of bisexuality in popular culture few and far between, one woman recalled that growing up, she knew something was different but she never felt *розногая*, as her mother would say. She liked boys, so she felt the label confused her more than it included her. Later, emo culture showed her a bisexual alternative: the song Akt.Love (2002) by the Russian rock band Jane Air was a key moment for realising her attraction could be to anyone.³¹⁶

Web Archives Versus “Propaganda”

As evidenced above, popular culture was largely failing Russophone bisexuals. Individuals spearheaded their own representation and connected across blogs, dating sites, web chats, and social media. Meanwhile, the 2013 legislation drove activists online to create support networks and content resisting the narrative that LGBTQ+ identities were of Western origin. Archiving queer content and voices from Russian-speaking geographical spaces proved a priority in the contained web projects they created—but to what extent were bisexual voices featured?

Biblioteka LGBTIK+

The increase in the number of LGBTQ+ websites was likely compounded by the censorship of LGBTQ+ groups on social media platforms in the late 2010s. For instance, the *Biblioteka LGBTIK+* website librarian—who goes by the pseudonym Stepan Stepanov and lives in

³¹⁶ I discuss Akt.Love in the next chapter.

Ukraine—recalls a number of LGBTQ+ groups being blocked on VKontakte in August 2018.³¹⁷ Among them were the groups *Gei biblioteka* and *Lesbi i trans biblioteka*, which had existed for over four years: ‘началось массовое закрытие ЛГБТ групп... В основном открытых... Пришлось эвакуировать весь материал на личные гугл диски, но с открытым доступом для всех в сети...’³¹⁸ In December 2019, personal information linked to the group’s VK account was leaked and targeted with phone calls and attempts to gain access to the library’s email and edit the Google Drives containing archived LGBTQ+ books. Stepanov then made a Telegram account for the library, which was blocked in October 2021. The result of these encounters was the website lgbtlibrary.blogspot.com, intended to make LGBTQ+ books freely available in Russian despite the censorship and cyber-attacks: ‘цензуре нельзя уступать’.

Notably, although books with bisexual characters and themes are included in the collection, bisexuality is absent from the classifications both in the Google Drives and in the names of the original social media groups, which only categorise material according to gendered categories: ‘gay’ (MSM), ‘lesbian’ (WSW), and ‘transgender’. Of course, recognising and categorising bisexual behaviour in film and literature frequently proves difficult (as Part II explores). Along with the limitations of Google Drive—the difficulties organising documents within folders, the lack of a tagging system, and less than ideal search functionality depending on file type—the archive proves somewhat tricky to use for the bi researcher.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ ‘Vazhno! Prochitaite vse’, Biblioteka LGBTIK+, 1 May 2023, https://lgbtlibrary.blogspot.com/2022/03/blog-post_10.html. The webpage footer displays the dates 2019–2021, showing that the website component of the project is no longer active.

³¹⁸ Stepan Stepanov, ‘O biblioteke’, Biblioteka LGBTIK+, 25 December 2019, https://lgbtlibrary.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_29.html.

³¹⁹ Activists have recently gravitated to web platforms such as AirTable which allow for the creation of databases with greater flexibility in organisation, categorisation, and storing meta data alongside each entry. I refer to queer Russian AirTables in Part II.

Still, from the case of Biblioteka LGBTIK+, we can see how LGBTQ+ digital projects which began as community-led social media groups were pushed out of some of Russia's most popular social media networks.³²⁰ We can extrapolate from Stepanov's post and anecdotal evidence that groups may then have migrated to popular instant messaging services like Telegram, launched in 2014 in Russia by V Kontakte's original creators, and set up their own public or private channels. The latter require an invitation to join. A natural next step was to launch dedicated websites.

Bi and Pan Voices on We-Accept.online

The move to standalone websites for queer archival projects was spearheaded by those seeking to capture and share the kind LGBTQ+ information and voices which were restricted on other platforms. We-Accept.online [‘Мы Принимаем: Проект о преодолении в жизни ЛГБТ-людей и их близких’] was created between 2019 and 2021, and closed in 2023. The homepage now displays a message explaining that because any positive or neutral information about LGBTQ+ topics is now considered extremism, it is unsafe to keep the project running. The alternative of anonymising the posts was felt to contradict the aims of the project. I nevertheless include anonymised discussion of the posts here because We-Accept.online not only exemplified the drive for local bi+ voices among internet users, but the project additionally reflected the rising popularity of the ‘pansexual’ label in Russia.

The site was split into three sections: stories of LGBTQ+ people from countries deemed to have a high level of homo-, bi- and transphobia; stories by parents of LGBTQ+ people in

³²⁰ For one bisexual and one transgender activist's differing opinions on the potential of V Kontakte for their work given censorship, the platform's co-operation with the FSB, and homophobic users, see Andreevskikh, ‘Social Networking’.

Russia; and stories of readers who agreed to share them.³²¹ The website thus adopted a highly structured intersectional approach, always specifying the author's sexual and gender identity along with the country of origin in thumbnails and meta descriptions. Four stories fell on the bi spectrum: a pansexual woman from Tashkent, Uzbekistan; a bisexual man from Simferopol, Ukraine (Crimea was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014); a pansexual woman from Dzhairakh, Russia, and a pansexual non-binary person from Arkhangelsk, Russia. These authors were all in their twenties and there were no stories from parents of bisexual people on the site, making the narratives geographically but not generationally diverse. The story from Tashkent was the only bi+ profile included in the original project. The remaining three were reader-submitted, demonstrating demand for inclusion.

The bisexual man's story was notably more uplifting than the others as it did not dwell on discrimination and violence. The author recalled the support his mother gave him when he came out to her in tears. He stressed that her hugs and the reassurance that she would never disown him were instrumental to his mental health—having just one person in his family accept him alleviated a great deal of stress given that he had no access to LGBTQ+ groups in Simferopol. Like many others on the site, he did not want to move abroad at the time of writing and instead hoped for a change in societal attitudes at home.

By contrast, the three stories by pansexual authors were as much, if not more, about the violence and discrimination faced by Russian-speaking transgender people as they were about being pan. The term 'pansexuality' first emerged in English in the 1990s as an anti-identity, developing partially in response to various sexual identity labels seen as upholding the gender

³²¹ My Prinimaem, 'Istorii LGBT-lyudei' <https://we-accept.online/istorii-lgbt-lyudey>, 'Istorii roditelei' <https://we-accept.online/istorii-roditeley>, and 'Istorii chitatelei i chitatel'nits' <https://we-accept.online/readers-stories>. All accessed 4 February 2021.

binary.³²² This included ‘bisexuality’ because a common (but contested) definition of bisexuality is being attracted to ‘both sexes’, i.e. to cisgender men and cisgender women.³²³ Pansexuality, by contrast, designates attraction to *all* genders or “regardless of gender”, therefore deconstructing not only the homosexual/heterosexual binary but also the gender binary. The term *panseksual(ka)* only recently gained currency among Russian speakers, but it was quickly adopted to convey a more specific form of sexual fluidity than the ambiguous *kvir*.

The author from Tashkent identifies as pansexual for similar reasons to those listed above, stating that gender has never been important to her and that, in contrast to bisexuality, pansexuality is inclusive of attraction to transgender and bigender people specifically. This distinction was essential due to her coming-out story and relationship with her first girlfriend, who realised that he was transmasculine while the couple were together at university.³²⁴ Publicly shamed for this relationship, the author was moved to another class, while her partner was called a demon by the lecturers and forced to take a period of leave. Being close to her mother, she went to her for support. To her surprise, her mother threatened to kill herself if she saw her girlfriend again. This moment is likened to another memory of discovering the extreme homophobic views held by the people close to her: after asking a former friend if he had heard about the situation for LGBTQ+ people in Chechnya, he said he would like to go there himself to help kill them off too.

³²² Hayfield, *Bisexual and Pansexual Identities*, 7–8.

³²³ Bisexuality is more commonly defined among scholars as attraction to two or more genders, or the same and at least one other gender.

³²⁴ Although the author stated that she uses he/him pronouns when talking with her ex, she used she/her throughout the text to refer to him. This is perhaps due to the perception of her ex as female being relevant to both her pansexuality and the violent reactions the couple faced from others. However, I use he/him to refer to her ex, as it is an accepted and respectful practice to refer to transgender people in the past using pronouns consistent with their gender identities in the present.

The uncertain sense of safety among loved ones was compounded by the fact that strangers had also threatened to physically assault her and her friends, meaning she could no longer risk having a girlfriend in Tashkent. Instead, the author found comfort in dating a man who himself had also been in relationships with men and women. She implied that, perhaps because of his (bi)sexuality, he was different from other men who are limited by their toxic masculinity, unable to show emotion, and often controlling. In the past, people had linked her pansexuality to an abusive relationship she had found herself in after dating her first girlfriend, much like the theories of female bisexuality we saw in Chapter I. They claimed that if she had a normal boyfriend, she wouldn't be attracted to other women. Thus, while she had since found some peace among friends and through her partner's analogue sexuality, her story demonstrates that even within in a relationship read as heterosexual, existence as a pansexual or bisexual person remains precarious. When in a relationship with a cisgender man, the author was still victimised for her pansexuality and feared the homophobic violence that the people around her may perpetuate or support. Conversely, when in a relationship read as homosexual, she was shamed regardless of her partner's gender identity. It was only after psychiatrists diagnosed her partner as trans and he was able travel to Moscow to receive gender-affirming care that some began to accept them as a couple. The "gender trouble" caused by pansexual/transgender relationships means that external perceptions determine security risks in daily and romantic life.³²⁵

This story was paralleled by the young woman from Dzheirakh, who again underscored how differently others treated her according to the visibility of her partner's gender identity and her own pansexuality. Her narrative revolved around her trans husband and the various levels of openness with which she felt able to speak about her personal life—as well as the

³²⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Callis, 'Playing with Butler and Foucault'.

consequences of carelessness. Growing up in what she described as a very patriarchal and religious Muslim family, she felt isolated until her mother and sister came to terms with her pansexuality and marriage. Yet the author understood that even with family on your side, your situation can quickly become dangerous. Her husband was stealth, meaning that he had cut practically all ties to his past to live more safely without others knowing about his transition. This was a necessity—he was forced to move towns after his mother let slip that he was trans and neighbours came over armed with knives. His mother needed to move too and since learnt to speak about him only as her son to mitigate the risks.

Consequently, the pansexual author had not told her colleagues anything about her husband being trans. At a previous job, she had mentioned a previous relationship with another girl and her colleagues reacted by dismissing her pansexuality as "nonsense" which surely should have left her head after marrying a man. Silence is safer, but not totally secure. In her new workplace, she never mentioned her pansexuality, but a colleague discovered an article she once wrote about homophobia and started asking questions. Though the author asked her not to share that information, everyone soon knew and judged her harshly for being a “married lesbian”, assuming she was betraying her unwitting husband.³²⁶ These recollections illustrate that whatever privilege there may be when in a straight- and cis-passing relationship is fragile. Like the author from Tashkent, she had been scared by the extreme statements others made around her, casually stating it would be best to kill off people “like that”.

The authors expressed hope that projects like We-Accept could ameliorate LGBTQ+ people’s lives. Alongside this autobiographical writing, one had ambitions to pen a fantasy epic providing the extensive variety of LGBTQ+ characters she craved. Even knowing that

³²⁶ I discuss the prominence of this theme of closeted (bi)sexuality destroying a marriage or romance across popular music videos in Chapter III.

there was little hope for such literature to be published or read widely, bi+ people thus continued to carve out space for their realist voices and idealist fiction. Indeed, the message that speaking up is the best way to combat anti-LGBTQ+ violence was the message that the polyamorous, pansexual author from Arkhangelsk wanted to communicate. It was only after a series of abusive relationships and the fallout of being outed as a “lesbian” that they discovered the word ‘pansexual’ and felt it fit them by capturing a broad capability for attraction regardless of gender and other traditionally limiting factors like age and ethnicity.

WeAccept’s pan and bi stories may be few, but these narratives reify the connection between transgender and bisexual representation which has been emerging from this thesis and highlight the growing popularity of the label ‘pansexual’ in Russian.³²⁷ Furthermore, while only one bi+ voice was included in the initial project, the ability for readers to submit stories enabled other bi+ people to actively seek (self-)representations. Ultimately, its strategy aimed to raise awareness of a wide spectrum of sexualities and gender identities, and the ways these can intersect, through documenting the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. There was a marked insistence on the importance of improving visibility in Russian-speaking contexts and consistent expressions of hope that this would, in turn, combat discrimination—much like our final case study.

Russia’s First Bisexual Site: BiPanRussia.com

In 2021, a small activist collective named Byt’ Bi* [Be Bi*] launched BiPanRussia.com. The two lead activists, Nadya Aronchik and Polina Radd, proclaimed their website the first ever

³²⁷ Intersections between bisexual and transgender experiences and identities were explored in a special issue of *Journal of Bisexuality*, Volume 3, Issue 3-4 (2003), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/wjbi20/3/3-4?nav=toCList>. More research is needed, particularly in global contexts other than North America and the U.K.

Russian-language site about bi*sexuality.³²⁸ The asterisk here and in the initiative's name explicitly signals a broad understanding of bisexuality as an umbrella term, inclusive of a range of other non-monosexual identities like polysexual and pansexual.³²⁹ This draws on trends toward creating terminology capturing inclusivity and spectral understandings of bisexuality among the bi community and researchers globally.³³⁰

The Global Bi

The founders did not hide the inspiration taken from globalised forms of bisexual activism, in fact actively calling for international collaborations and advertising the success of their initiative in a major English-language bisexual publication.³³¹ BiPanRussia.com was launched and promoted during Bisexual Awareness Week, which runs annually from 16 September until Bi Visibility Day on 23 September. The commemorative week is marked internationally, originally spearheaded by the American organisations GLAAD and BiNet USA in 1990. Drawing heavily on the colour scheme of bisexual pride flag, BiPanRussia.com positions itself as a much-needed online space for combatting *би-стирание* and *дискриминация* in Russia both from within the LGBTQ+ community and in society more broadly.³³²

Since 2019, the small team had organised in-person events, support groups, seminars, and two exhibitions where bi*sexual people shared lived experiences and concerns.³³³ Photos

³²⁸ 'My otkryli pervyi russkoyazychnyi sait dlya vsekh bi/pan/poli- seksual'nykh lyudei i ikh soyuzn_its!', BiPanRussia.com, 16 August 2021, <https://bipanrussia.com/mainnews/ochen-glavnaja-novost/>.

³²⁹ It is seemingly inspired by the asterisk in trans*gender, which began in English and was picked up by some Russian activist initiatives (e.g. Vykhod).

³³⁰ I have not encountered 'bi*' in English, but it is comparable to 'bi+', which is similarly intended to emphasise the existence of a spectrum of non-monosexuality.

³³¹ Arontschik, 'Around the World'.

³³² 'O nas', BiPanRussia.com, accessed 10 October 2023, <https://bipanrussia.com/about/>.

³³³ See the descriptions and slideshows at: 'Neformal'nye vstrechi', BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/neformalnye-vstrechi/>; 'Gruppy podderzhki', BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/gruppy-podderzhki/>; 'Seminary', BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/seminary/>; 'Vystavki', BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/vystavki/>.

from their offline events included bisexual and pansexual pride flags, badges, and stickers. The description of their support groups reflected dialogue with and borrowing from Anglophone activism too: 'Наша группа прежде всего создана для би*сексуальных людей, но мы также рады видеть би-френдли персон любой другой ориентации.' [emphasis mine].

The website was organized into six parts: about us; news; events; publications; education [*likebez*]; and Russian initiatives. Though the 'ЛИКБЕЗ' section was itself notably named after the Soviet-era campaign to "liquidate illiteracy", its contents were based largely on LGBTQ+ terms loaned from English. This nomenclature implied that to be able to articulate a bi* subjectivity and read about bi* issues in Russian, users needed to cross not only a conceptual barrier but a linguistic one—with an authority unilaterally bestowing the vocabulary. *Likebez* featured two glossaries. The first was intended to teach essential terms related to sexual orientation and gender identity ['СОГИ']. In practice, it functioned as a list of LGBTQ+ identity labels. From the bi* spectrum, bisexuality, pansexuality, omnisexuality, and polysexuality were defined. The second glossary shared more general terminology, introducing the concepts 'би-стирание', 'деднейминг', 'аутинг', and 'моносексизм', and potentially providing new analytical tools to explain experiences of bi* life and attraction beyond the cisgender binary.

The Libraries

The Anglo-American influences deepened in the library, which listed common bi* stereotypes, bi* Pride and Visibility dates, explanations of pride flags, and recommendations

Andreevskikh, 'Confessional Narratives', 190, credits Byt' Bi* with playing a major role in the change in bi-specific resources in Russia in the last five years.

for media with bi* characters.³³⁴ These recommendations were predominantly for English-language media including but not limited to contemporary hits and cult classics: the TV series *Doctor Who* (1963-1989 and 2005-present), *Killing Eve* (2018-2022), *Brooklyn 99* (2013-2021), and *Sex Education* (2019-2023); the films *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010); and novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Sarah Water's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998). Media in other European languages featured to a lesser extent, for instance Marcel Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1921/1922). While this thesis demonstrates that Russian-language bisexual culture has long existed, it aims to *reclaim* that history for a reason. The only Russian-language recommendation was Vladimir Sorokin's novella *Tridsataya lyubov' Mariny* (written 1982-1984 and published in 1995), which I discuss in Chapter IV. Indeed, the cultural sources I analyse throughout are not necessarily well-known or easily accessible, and nor are they usually affirming of bisexual identity. Aside from the question of audience and “positive” representation a text like Sorokin's raises, it has only become more difficult to create and distribute Russophone media with LGBTQ+ themes. It is not surprising that Russia's bisexual community largely seek out representation in foreign entertainment instead.

Nonetheless, Byt' Bi* did seek out native bi* representation in other kinds of media, putting together two small archives on BiPanRussia.com: a video library consisting of thirteen YouTube videos, and a collection of fifty articles about bi*sexuality taken from across the RuNet (the vast majority of which were originally written in Russian).³³⁵ The latter included first-person accounts from bi* speakers, discussions of biphobia, inclusive language guides, opinion pieces on international bi culture, bisexual celebrity profiles, and news stories.³³⁶

³³⁴ 'Biblioteka', BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/biblioteka/>.

³³⁵ 'Stat'i', BiPanRussia.com, <https://bipanrussia.com/publications/articles/>; 'Video', BiPanRussia.com, <https://bipanrussia.com/publications/video/>. Both accessed 11 December 2022.

³³⁶ For example, the 2021 scandal in which Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed, without evidence, that several Western countries routinely teach children that Jesus Christ was bisexual. Ekaterina Kotrikadze,

Two short-form creative works depicting bisexual protagonists in Russia just trying to live their day-to-day life were also featured. These fictionalised encounters with family and friends closely resembled the reality described by bi* people in the other articles (re)posted to the website. First, the animated short *Pogovorim?* (2020), which I discuss in the next chapter, was lauded as a shining example of bisexual representation and the experience of coming out to family.³³⁷ Second, Konstantin Golava’s short story *Pritcha pro Vasyu i ego biseksual’nost’* (2015), originally published on Parni Plus, portrayed its protagonist Vasya crossing back and forth between queer and straight social circles—a frequent experience for bisexual people across the life course depending on their current partner’s gender.³³⁸ Written in the style of a modern fairy tale, as Vasya fluctuates between same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, he disappoints either his parents (who want him to be heterosexual) or his friends (who interpret his actions as betraying the gay community). Their outraged words echo one another: «Позоришь ты нас всех, Вася! Мы от тебя не этого ожидали!». In a society in which monosexuality is the norm, his sense of strangeness thus becomes a source of internal and external conflict. This is reminiscent of bisexual scholar Maria San Filippo’s argument that bisexual subjectivity and representation is distinguished by the bisexual’s sense of ‘gender impartiality’ and ‘perception of the strangeness of monosexuality’s prioritization of gendered object choice’.³³⁹ The reactions of Vasya’s family and friends appear all the more extreme

‘Lavrov i “biseksual’nyi Iisus”’: Gde glava MID obnaruzhil feik pro Khrista i pochemu LGBT v Rossii lishayut svobody’, TVRain.tv, 29 June 2021, https://tvrain.tv/teleshov/kotrikadze_inostrannyh_del/lavrov_i_biseksualnyj_iisus-532901/. Republished as BiPanRussia.com, ‘Lavrov i “biseksual’nyi Iisus”’, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/articles/lavrov-i-biseksualnyj-iisus/>.

³³⁷ I discuss this animated film in the next chapter. The YouTube video has been delisted, but the film is still viewable through these links. “‘Pogovorim?’ O samom vazhnom razgovore v zhizni LGBT”, Novaya Gazeta, 11 October 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/10/11/87469-pogovorim>. Republished to BiPanRussia.com, <https://bipanrussia.com/articles/pogovorim-o-samom-vazhnom-razgovore-v-zhizni-lgbt/>.

³³⁸ Konstantin Golava, ‘Pritcha pro Vasyu i ego biseksual’nost’’, ParniPlus.com, 19 March 2015, <https://parniplus.com/health/sex/rasskaz-pro-vasyu-i-ego-biseksualnost/>. Republished to BiPanRussia.com, <https://bipanrussia.com/articles/pritcha-pro-vasju-i-ego-biseksualnost/>.

³³⁹ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 26–27.

against the backdrop of his mundane day-to-day existence—no matter what, he must simply sigh and go to work.

What made these libraries particularly beneficial to a bi* user was that, in addition to a variety of bi-themed articles being located on a single site, some content had been liberated from paywalls. The website's creators were urgently improving the accessibility of information about bi*sexuality. However, the user experience was not optimised—articles were copied and pasted without retaining formatting, meaning that paragraph breaks are not clearly demarcated, graphics and images from the original articles were not consistently included, and any quotes which had been highlighted in bigger print on the source site were simply duplicated in the main body.

This copy-paste approach shares a great deal with that of Gay.ru, although the motivating factors are reversed. In the late 1990s, public discussions of queerness were rapidly increasing, and taking this sexual revolution online and worldwide was an exciting prospect. In the 2020s, outlets for expressing queerness and educating on LGBTQ+ issues began closing under heightened pressure, threatening unarchived content with permanent deletion. Losing queer websites from a time when the internet has become the go-to form of self-expression, research and entertainment risks erasing a generation of voices and history. The creation of the libraries on BiPanRussia.com, while digital and therefore ephemeral, contributed to the endurance of bisexual web materials by posting back-up copies. The mixtures of content on the two sites also mirrored each other to some extent: within BiPanRussia.com's eclectic range of article topics, there were features with clickbait titles on bisexual polyamory, wives reacting to their husbands coming out as bisexual or gay, and bisexual milestones in global pop culture. However, BiPanRussia.com did not include erotica or the ability to post comments and engage with other users. The sources the site drew upon

were also different in that the project creators did not cross-post from absolutely anywhere they could find discussion of bi*sexuality. Other Russian-language LGBTQ-friendly websites like Wonderzine.com, ParniPlus.com, Makeout,by, GoodMagazine.online, and Dozhd were prioritised, seemingly to foster an informative space of bisexual visibility and positivity.

The Impact of Bi Stereotypes

Likebez's page debunking stereotypes explained that bisexuality does exist, is not a phase, and that not all bisexuals are promiscuous, polyamorous cheaters who will end up with a man.³⁴⁰ Bi people, it claimed, do not experience less discrimination than gays and lesbians—rather, they experience ‘double discrimination’ from society at large and from within the LGBTQ+ community. The tale about Vasya echoed these sentiments. Yet beyond theory and fiction, how did Russian-speaking bisexuals express the ways in which bi stereotypes affected them? Below, I consider two contrasting examples copied over to BiPanRussia.com.

The first case, an article which investigated bisexual women's encounters with biphobia and stereotypes, is especially interesting.³⁴¹ The five interviewees largely agreed that the primary form of biphobia they had encountered was internalised. They each told similar tales of hesitating to tell dates about being bisexual, afraid of being dismissed. They acknowledged that this internalised biphobia emanated from external sources, like dating app profiles specifying that bisexuals were not welcome [‘Я такое очень часто вижу в анкетах на сайтах знакомств - "Только не би".’] There was also brief mention the Church's anti-LGBT stance.

³⁴⁰ ‘Stereotipy’, BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/stereotipy/>.

³⁴¹ Al Koval'ski, “‘Толко не би’: Biseksualki o stereotipakh i nedoveri, s kotorymi oni stalkivayutsya’, BiPanRussia.com, accessed 6 October 2023, <https://bipanrussia.com/articles/tolko-nie-bi-biseksualki-o-stereotipah-i-nedoverii-s-kotorymi-oni-stalkivajutsja/>. Republished from Wonderzine.com, 08 September 2020, <https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/good-question/252329-biphobia>.

However, the article overall conveyed the idea that bisexuals are taught to hold themselves back, which in turn perpetuates the problem and puts obstacles in the way of happiness.

The second case was a feature written by a bisexual Armenian woman living in Sochi.³⁴² She too had internalized the anti-LGBT views propagated by the media and authority figures, such as teachers who instilled the idea that her bisexuality was defective and unnatural. Confiding that she had experienced aggression on the street, particularly from other people from the Caucasus who perhaps felt a greater compulsion to police her sexuality, she claimed not only to understand this conduct, but to believe it justified:

С агрессивней я встречалась не часто. В основном, от людей кавказской национальности. Тем не менее, я думаю, что даже агрессивное отношение оправдано. Во-первых, потому, что это действительно противоестественно. Во-вторых, потому, что никто не будет хорошо относиться к выскочкам, слепо следующим за модой.

Evidently buying into the idea that bi/homosexuality is an insidious fashion, she connects the LGBT “trend” to the postmodern climate of individualism. Explaining that because everyone wants to be unique, a lot of young teenagers copy people with a non-traditional orientation without any having experience of same-sex relations. She does not think that same-sex couples should provoke society with public displays of affection. That inner conflict bubbles to the surface in her concluding statement: despite her gripes, LGBT people are ‘обычные люди’, and *some* of them, who do not make a fuss and publicize their sexuality [‘тихо-мирно живут’], get their work done and provide use to society. While the first article confronted internalised biphobia and encouraged others to accept themselves and live more openly, the second is a rather more assimilationist response to external threats and bi-

³⁴² “‘Ya armyanka, biseksualka i zhivu v Sochi’: Kakovo eto - byt’ chast’yu LGBT-soobshchestva v yuzhnom gorode s osobym mentalitetom”, The Village, 19 June 2018, https://www.the-village.ru/people/experience/315995-armyanka-bi-v-sochi?from=infinite_scroll. Republished to BiPanRussia.com, n.d., <https://bipanrussia.com/articles/ja-armjanka-biseksualka-i-zhivu-v-sochi-kakovo-jeto-byt-chastju-lgbt-soobshhestva-v-juzhnom-gorode-s-osobym-mentalitetom/>.

/homophobia. Keeping quiet about (bi)sexuality in public and accepting matters the way they are is perceived as the simplest route to safety, if not happiness.³⁴³

No More Updates

BiPanRussia.com quickly became static. The website was not updated since shortly after its initial launch, and Byt' Bi*'s associated social media likewise went silent following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In late 2024, the website was sadly, albeit predictably, taken down. All this is not to say that BiPanRussia.com did not mark a meaningful milestone in the history of bisexual voices on the RuNet. As Julia Shaw has argued, it is essential not to dismiss short-lived bisexual projects or claim that bisexual spaces and events do not exist., as doing so incorrectly paints a picture of 'bisexual people as mere tourists within homosexual spaces [when the] reality is that bisexual people have their own spaces and are an integral and permanent part of the larger queer community'.³⁴⁴

Instead, it would be more productive to acknowledge the impact of projects like BiPanRussia.com and interrogate the reasons why they commonly cease operations without managing to establish themselves in the long-term and without their original aspirations coming to fruition. Indeed, Byt' Bi*'s was significant as a site of affirmative bi voices and ideas. The website was remarkable for its attempt to list bisexual sources accessible to Russian speakers and bring those disparate materials together in one place, regardless of whether they were from other Russian activist websites or a foreign cultural canon. Most impressive was their interactive map of LGBTQ+ organisations across the Russian Federation—from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok—highlighting groups that held bi* specific

³⁴³ Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, 61.

³⁴⁴ Shaw, *Bi*, 133.

events.³⁴⁵ This provided practical help accessing bi*sexual support networks, as did BiPanRussia.com's hyperlinked list of bi* groups on social media.

Uneasy Calls for Bi Visibility

Overall, BiPanRussia.com undoubtedly constituted a major step in the history of bisexuality on the RuNet. However, it raises questions about how pertinent and desired the aim of greater public 'bi-visibility' was among bisexual people in Russia. This ambiguity is particularly noteworthy in a context where there was very little (and now no) public visibility for the LGBTQ+ community and the relevance of the Western visibility paradigm is debated.³⁴⁶

In the library and glossaries, the messaging from activists well-versed in Western bi theories and culture certainly appeared consistent: language needs to be bi-inclusive, bi* people need more representation, and stereotypes must be combatted. It was not, however, especially nuanced or contextualised. For instance, the project presented the 'double discrimination' of bi* people as a given and in doing so, dismissed the idea of 'bisexual privilege'. Yet it remains unclear whether 'double discrimination' was as meaningful a factor under an increasingly hostile anti-LGBTQ+ political climate. There is a stark contrast between the misunderstandings and snide comments which some speakers have experienced due to bi stereotypes, and the homophobic aggression experienced from conservatives bolstered by an authoritarian regime who do not distinguish between specific gender and sexual identities.

³⁴⁵ 'Initsiativy Rossii', BiPanRussia.com, accessed 11 December 2022, <https://bipanrussia.com/initiatives/>.

³⁴⁶ Brian James Baer, 'Now You See It: Gay (In)Visibility and the Performance of Post-Soviet Identity', in *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Cultures*, ed. Andrea P. Balogh and Nárcisz Fejes (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2013), 38–39; Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova, *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 9; Dan Healey and Francesca Stella, 'Sexual and Gender Dissent in the USSR and Post-Soviet Space', *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 62, no.2–3 (2021): 233.

Bi* Russians have expressed as much.³⁴⁷ Furthermore, the extent to which BiPanRussia.com focuses on biphobia and bi* myth-busting does not necessarily reflect the sense of importance these are given even in the articles the creators themselves sourced from around the RuNet.

So was BiPanRussia.com responding to a genuine need in the Russian bi community, or striving to educate on imported theories with limited use in the face of state-sponsored homophobia? Both are likely true to some extent. It should also be noted that while Byt' Bi* did specify the goal of decreasing bi*phobia and bi-erasure 'в широком обществе', its mission statement and listed aims concentrated on the creation of resources and safe spaces for bi*sexuals within the LGBTQ+ community and NGOs.

Despite that slight ambiguity, I suggest that greater levels of support within the LGBTQ+ community was the kind of "bi-visibility" most commonly desired according to the case studies in this chapter. From the timing of uploads on YouTube and the motivations shared on We-Accept.online, to the thoughts expressed by bi* individuals in articles collected by BiPanRussia.com, bisexual Russian speakers wanted to combat the exclusion, stigma and invisibility they encountered in gay and lesbian circles. Even earlier, on Lesbi.ru, at least one bisexual woman shared that she felt unseen—and afraid to be seen—as bisexual at lesbian community events.³⁴⁸ BiPanRussia.com therefore *was* responding to some amount of desire from within the bisexual Russian community. But the extent to which it drew on Anglo-

³⁴⁷ See Lada Bigun on why she and other bisexuals in her community have hidden and will continue to hide their orientation, even though it frustrates other members of LGBTQ+ and feminist activist groups: *Kvir' Sibir'* (2020), 164-178. One pansexual narrative on We-Accept.online was similarly named after the author's concern for her gay and lesbian friends who needed to live like double agents. Finally, see Gessen and Hoff-Hannon, *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v Rossii*, 301, where bisexual contributor Ol'ga Kuracheva ends her narrative by acknowledging that if she marries a man or lives alone, she will not have to be scared, while if she falls in love with a woman, 'я опять окажусь в этом жутком уязвимом положении. И тогда, видимо, чемодан — вокзал — переезд.'

³⁴⁸ 'Lesbi prezirayut bi'

American theories and terminology appears uneasy to reconcile with local contexts. Although the website's name, map and article library anchored the project to Russian-speaking geographic and virtual territories, this analysis has shown that large parts were left without much distinctly Russian—and for “positive” representation, users were encouraged to look abroad.

Conclusions

Together, the case studies outlined in this chapter capture how the perception and representation of bisexuality has evolved over the last three decades. The earliest site, Gay.ru, emerged at a time when the language around gender and sexuality was still being worked out in Russian. Ed Mishin sought to prioritise bisexual content when creating the site, feeling that bi behaviour, experiences, and identities had been underrepresented in the gay and lesbian alternative press. Articles about bisexuality were sourced from a range of offline and online media for *Khorosho-to kak Masha...*, providing, for the first time, a concentration of bisexual content in one (digital) location. The content was not original to the site but rather provided a kaleidoscopic view of how bisexuality was being discussed in Russophone (cyber)spaces and the kind of information and stereotypes circulating. In these articles, bi voices were largely filtered through moralising interlocutors driven to investigate the “phenomenon” of bisexuality. Alongside its curation effort, Gay.ru quickly grew to provide bi-specific discussion boards and dating services, enabling its users to chat about bisexual topics, arrange hook-ups, fantasize about threesomes, and even plan futures together as parents through the *gei-lesbi* board, which was tagged as bisexual.

Yet as LGBTQ+ discourses became increasingly politicised in Russia in the mid-2000s, the language and definitions concerning sexual identities became more fixed. The changes Gay.ru

made to the bisexual section and its prominence within the site structure clearly reflected this politicisation. Such changes coincided with the rise of social media, which drastically altered the ways that anyone, including bisexuals, could find or forge representation of their specific identities online. Along with dating sites, social media allowed for a renegotiation of the local, spotlighting bisexual (and other LGBTQ+) people and voices nearby even in places felt to be conservative and isolating. First-person accounts demonstrate that these discoveries were meaningful for many who struggled to come to terms with their (bi)sexuality from within an informational vacuum. Bisexual YouTube video creators relate similar experiences, expressing that their primary motivation for sharing their stories was to contribute to better bi visibility—hence the trend of uploading in Bisexual Awareness Week or on Bi Visibility Day. These creators often stated that they wished to dispel stereotypes and provide a means for any questioning bi viewers to have their moment of self-realisation triggered by an empathetic source. As such, bisexual YouTube videos, while still often confessional in nature, were told from a markedly different perspective than gay coming-out videos.

We-Accept.online represented part of a larger trend of activists prioritising the sharing of autobiographical contributions from LGBTQ+ people living in Russia and the former Soviet Union to counter the dehumanisation the community faces from state media and legislation. Despite the diversity of geographic locations and gender identities, only one person from the bisexual spectrum was included in the original collection, suggesting that bi voices continued to be underrepresented in important archival projects. However, the ability for readers to submit stories allowed for bi perspectives to be addressed—and so the project could tease out differences between bisexual and pansexual subjectivities and put them into conversation.

Compared to the other case studies, BiPanRussia.com operated as a more top-down, prescriptive project, without the ability for users to comment and interact. The site was also expressly ‘bi*sexual’—as opposed to other contemporary ‘kvir’ or LGBTQ+ projects interested in complex intersections of gender and sexuality with other identities like nationality. BiPanRussia.com specifically targeted the perceived needs of non-monosexuals in Russia: however, despite the ‘Russianness’ of the site’s name, map and article library, the understanding of the Russian bi* community’s needs was informed in large part by global bisexual activism. The team aimed to educate on specific issues, incorporated symbols and recommendations from international bisexual culture into the core of their website. Indeed, the lack of well-known, native representation of bisexuality in Russian was sorely felt—and it is to this question that I turn in the following chapters.

Part II
The “Fiction”

Chapter III

Bi Themes on Screen: Bisexuality in Film and Music Videos

- Папа, я бисексуалка.
- Что такое бисексуалка?
- Это человек, которого влечёт к женщинам и к мужчинам.
- Хм... А есть трисексуалы?
- Это кто такие?
- Ну это те, которые любят женщин, мужчин, и родину. Хахаха!

Pogovorim? (2020, dir. Katya Mikheeva)

This chapter explores the ways in which discourses concerning bisexuality have, or have not, changed in Russian audio-visual culture since the first forays into screening queerness. Drawing on bisexual theories of cinema, narrativization, and temporality, I investigate which visual and narrative strategies have been employed to code characters as bisexual in Russian films and music videos over the period. In these sources, the bisexual character is constructed largely through stereotypical cinematographic techniques and plot devices. Compared to the snippets of real bisexual lives in Part I, the narrativized form of film and music videos in this chapter (and literature and poetry in the next), frequently offers deeper bisexual backstories and development.³⁴⁹ However, these narrative arcs are loaded with existential meaning. Drawing on a body of bisexual theory outlined below, I argue that the audio-visual sources in question rely on the figure of the bisexual as someone bordering both heterosexual acceptability and queer monstrosity to convey messages about the status of society. Bisexuality thus plays an integral role in the ways in which anxieties about “foreign” queer influences have been articulated on screen.

³⁴⁹ This chapter does not treat television series, which merit their own study. I do however include individual bisexual episodes of *Sbestnadsat*⁺ (2021), as these are self-contained narratives within a series resembling an anthology of short films. I also reference transcripts of *Pro ETO* as a historical source indicative of mainstream, televised views of bisexuality.

I begin by introducing several key concepts and tropes identified from bisexual theory. These are *bi-textuality*, bisexual triangulations (i.e. love triangles and threesomes), bi-temporality, and intersecting forms of Otherness (i.e. ethnicity). Throughout, I demonstrate their applicability to the Russian case and show how bisexual theory can therefore be productive for Russian queer cultural studies, even when the focus of the study may not be bisexuality specifically. Following this overview, I work with individual films as case studies showing how bisexuality is mobilised on screen to enhance a given theme affecting the nation: commercialisation, the crisis of masculinity, and the intangible spectre of queerness. Between cinematic cases, I include musical interludes demonstrating how bisexuality gets used as shorthand to the same end in these more condensed forms of storytelling.

The final section considers a small handful of films and music videos which, in contrast, state “the B word” within the edit. I argue that contrary to expectations, the use of the label does not necessarily mean bisexual characters are better developed or understood. Rather, the appearance of a self-identifying bisexual consistently operates as a milestone for a protagonist to reckon with their own desires and position in society: that is, whether to embrace same-sex desire and all it represents, or to reject it. In the music video, I show that where “the B word” is said it serves a different purpose—either becoming another aspect of hypersexualised performance for the heterosexual male gaze, or connecting the lyrics and stage persona to the artist’s real identity and experiences.

Bi Theory and Audio-Visual Culture

The TV show *Pro ETO*, broadcast between 1997 and 2000, was infamous for airing discussions of previously taboo sexual topics. Yulia Gradszkova has even claimed that the program ‘was practically the first to introduce concepts new to the public discourse such as

“bisexuality” (*biseksualnost*) or “clitoral orgasm” (*klitoral’nyi orgazm*).³⁵⁰ For instance, in one episode transcribed for *Khorosho-to kak, Masha...*, a young bisexual named Maksim was quizzed on his sexual life, divulging details about men versus women under the sheets.³⁵¹ The brand of bisexual hypersexuality he presented was soon subjected to *reductio ad absurdum* in the form of ostensibly genuine confusion: an audience member asked why Maksim would choose this life rather than simply marrying a woman, having kids, and then training a (male) dog to perform any oral sexual acts he desired. Evidently, if a man was bisexual and able to experience sexual pleasure with men and women, he must also be open to zoophilia and other perversions.

That televised interaction exemplified the widespread stereotype of indiscriminate bisexuality even if Maksim brushed off the question to applause. Since at least the 1960s, the bi stereotype of attraction to “anything that moves” has been well established in Hollywood.³⁵² The canon of bi-coded films in Russian cinema is comparably small and does not share the same long history of bisexual tropes in the form of vampires, evil twins, and (bi)sexually fluid newcomers sleeping with all the members of a single family.³⁵³ Yet preconceived ideas linking bisexuals to unrestrained sexual activity clearly held some ground in Russia over the 1993-2023 period too, cropping up not only in *Pro ETO* but across the sources explored in Part I. Several concepts from Anglo-American bisexual film theory, outlined below, thus remain productive lenses.

³⁵⁰ Gradskova, Yulia. ‘Personal Is Not Political? The Sexual Self in Russian Talk Shows of the 1990s’. *Sexuality & Culture* 24 (2020): 389–407: 396.

³⁵¹ Transcript available at ‘Peredacha “Pro ETO” o biseksual’nosti’, Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083617/http://www.gay.ru/bisex7.htm>.

³⁵² Wayne Bryant, *Bisexual Characters in Film: From Ana’s to Zee* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1997), 83–88; Wayne Bryant, ‘Stereotyping Bisexual Men in Film’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 1, no. 2–3 (2000): 217.

³⁵³ Bryant, *Bisexual Characters in Film*, 84.

Bi-Textuality

Bisexual theorists have established that bisexuality frequently gets mobilised in cinematic narratives as a metaphor for, or an expression of, sociocultural phenomena.³⁵⁴ Through parallels, analogies, and the formal features of cinema, bisexuality gets mapped onto another discourse: usually another identity construct related to class, ethnicity, or other insider/outsider groups which similarly resist containment within a binary taxonomy.³⁵⁵ The very ‘presence of a bisexual figure in film is an indicator that a cultural tension is being broached, whose contours the bisexual enables the audience to negotiate, and whose dangers the bisexual always embodies’.³⁵⁶ This mechanism has been termed *bi-textuality*, as one discourse—that of bisexuality—is read through another, questioning binary frameworks by collapsing the space between supposedly opposite/mutually exclusive identifications via its bisexual plots and characters.³⁵⁷ The intent is often to destabilise these binary taxonomies and demonstrate that they are in fact a continuum, while at the same time relying on the binaries as a source of internal and external conflict to drive the plot and generate suspense.

In Russian films and music videos over the last thirty years, one of the most consistent strands entangled with bisexual representations is geopolitics, namely the cultural and political influence of the West (particularly the U.S.) on Russia. Bi-textuality has repeatedly interrogated the compatibility of queerness with Russian national identity, positioning a bisexual character caught between a male and female lover, modern Western free-market capitalism and Russian “simplicity”, and imported queer “fashions” and Russian

³⁵⁴ Roberts, ‘Muddy Waters’.

³⁵⁵ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 41.

³⁵⁶ Jo Eadie, “‘That’s Why She Is Bisexual’: Contexts for Bisexual Visibility”, ed. Bi Academic Intervention (London: Cassell, 1997), 142.

³⁵⁷ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 41.

heteronormative “traditions”.³⁵⁸ My case studies highlight how these themes have often been further entangled with scrutiny of masculinity and ethnicity; that is to say, with what it means to be a man or a Russian citizen, as films and music videos sometimes draw on (and more rarely rally against) strict boundaries concerning nationality, gender performance, and sexuality. As the dismissive joke in the epigraph above so clearly illustrates, the very notion of bisexual subjectivity calls into question possibilities for identification with Russianness: the bisexual is trapped in a love triangle not only with their partners but with the Motherland and the demands of its sexual citizenship.

The Rule of Three

The ‘love triangle’, ‘erotic triangle’, and other terms for bisexual triangulations have been variously interpreted in gay and lesbian scholarship. Depending on the gender combinations (male-male-female or female-female-male), triangulated desires have been examined in different light.³⁵⁹ They have been variously theorised to function as instruments for the heterosexual recuperation of gay male sexuality, with a woman mediating male-male erotics.³⁶⁰ Triangulations have also been shown to provide a structure in which a man acts as an obstacle to lesbian desire and ultimately wins the affections of the love interest over his female rival, thus restoring the “natural order”.³⁶¹ Triangles have, moreover, acted as a narrative ‘escape hatch’ for “returning” or “maturing” into heterosexual life after homosexual

³⁵⁸ Moss, ‘Straight Eye for the Queer Guy’, 202.

³⁵⁹ Compare Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*.

³⁶⁰ Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen’, 273; citing Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

³⁶¹ Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen’; citing Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992); See also Nicole Richter, ‘Bisexual Erasure in “Lesbian Vampire” Film Theory’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 13, no. 2 (2013): 273–80.

attraction (an understanding which has long led to animosity toward bisexuals in the lesbian and gay community).³⁶²

Yet triangles remain a key signifier of bisexuality in audio-visual texts. Indeed, as some scholars authoring theories of gay/lesbian love triangles themselves admitted, their work does not account for ‘bisexual reading positions’ despite the fact that the very use of these structures fails to fully “heterosexualise” the characters.³⁶³ By contrast, bi scholars have noted that so prevalent is the rule of three in bisexual media that threesomes, relationships between an individual and a couple, and rivalry between a man and a woman who are romantically/sexually interested in someone who is interested in them both, are key tropes distinguishing “the bisexual plot”.³⁶⁴ More than a convenient device, its pervasiveness can in part be attributed to the visual nature of film, which relies on recognisable shots constructed from stereotypes, tropes, and set narrative structures to quickly convey information.³⁶⁵

These stereotypical visualisations of the bisexual are crucial for filmmakers given that while gay men and lesbian women have long been successful in finding ways to intentionally signal their sexuality to others surreptitiously (or openly) through outfits, hairstyles, and mannerisms—and this has bled into popular culture—there is no “bisexual look” even within the bi community. Bisexuals struggle to visually encode their bisexuality into their appearance, expressing frustration at both their invisibility in the community and the inability to communicate a vital part of their identity.³⁶⁶ Moreover, in a mononormative culture,

³⁶² Jillian Todd Weiss, ‘GL vs. BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia within the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Community’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 3, no. 304 (2003): 49.

³⁶³ Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen’, 273.

³⁶⁴ Garber, *Bisexuality*, 456.

³⁶⁵ Roberts, ‘Muddy Waters’, 332–39.

³⁶⁶ Deschamps, ‘Visual Scripts and Power Struggles’; Hayfield et al., ‘Visible Lesbians and Invisible Bisexuals: Appearance and Visual Identities among Bisexual Women’; Hartman, ‘Creating a Bisexual Display’.

couples read as straight or gay.³⁶⁷ The sexuality of characters involved in a series of relationships with men and women therefore gets interpreted through the lens of the resolution—that is, the love interest who is ultimately chosen determines how the character’s past behaviour and current identity are perceived by readers or viewers.³⁶⁸

Given these constraints, triangulations provide an ideal shorthand for cinematic texts to suggest bisexual subjectivity without needing to resort to identity labels. The strategy is instrumental in appealing to multiple audiences at once (gay men and straight women; lesbian women and straight men) and constitutes a motivating factor in the widespread adoption of bisexual characters in love triangles on screen. Bi-suggestive films, which depict bisexual behaviour while distancing themselves from solidified LGBTQ+ identities, have been shown to utilise this tactic of ‘queer commodification’ to appeal to the dual markets: mobilizing bisexuality to appeal to a queer audience without threatening straight spectators.³⁶⁹ Bi characters ‘operate as intersectional hybrids that serve hegemonic and counterhegemonic functions simultaneously.’³⁷⁰

Temporality

Due to the contentiousness of claiming cinematic texts with these tropes as bisexual rather than gay or lesbian, theorists have attempted to reintroduce ambiguity beyond the “either/or” imperative and allow space for “both/and” desires to be articulated. One proposed method

³⁶⁷ Jenée Wilde, ‘Gay, Queer, or Dimensional? Modes of Reading Bisexuality on Torchwood’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 15, no. 3 (2015): 414–34.

³⁶⁸ Marcy Jane Knopf, ‘Bi-Nary Bi-Sexuality: Jane Bowles’s Two Serious Ladies’, in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*, ed. Maria Pramaggiore and Donald E. Hall (New York University Press, 1996).

³⁶⁹ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 20–23.

³⁷⁰ Michaela D. E. Meyer, ‘Representing Bisexuality on Television: The Case for Intersectional Hybrids’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 10, no. 4 (2010): 367.

is ‘reading from the fence’, whereby the spectator takes up a position in which the same- and not-same-sex desires of particular characters can be explored rather than viewed as mutually exclusive.³⁷¹ Bisexual love triangles introduce a tension which demands narrative closure through romantic coupling; the central character is expected to make a choice between partners, wherein lies the central conflict. Such choices have consistently been interpreted as a choice not just between lovers, but between heterosexual and homosexual life, love, and identities. Yet from this ‘fence’, spectators may form multiple identifications among differently gendered characters, and question the narrative pressure to foreclose bisexual desire with monosexual, coupled resolutions.³⁷²

These concepts have been enhanced with the concepts of ‘queer time’ and mononormativity.³⁷³ As Stanford argues, both sequential and simultaneous bisexuality disrupt the chronology of mononormative narrative conventions, such as the “one true love” myth. This is because sequential bisexuality needs to be constantly reasserted, such as through dialogue or flashbacks, therefore bringing the past into the present, while simultaneous bisexuality destabilises the vision of a happily coupled future.³⁷⁴ That temporal positioning of bisexuality links to Freudian concepts of bisexual ‘immaturity’ in adolescence, casting it stereotypically and narratively as an ambiguous phase in the process of maturation.³⁷⁵ In order to recognise bisexual subjectivities within cinematic texts without dismissing not-same-sex desire as irrelevant or normative, we should therefore adopt a ‘multidimensional framework’ which gives equal significance to temporality and images of desire.³⁷⁶ Such a model situates characters not on the single axes of heterosexual/homosexual

³⁷¹ Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen’, 273.

³⁷² Pramaggiore, 273.

³⁷³ Dylan Amy Stanford, ‘Rethinking Bisexual in/Visibility on Screen: The Structuring Effect of Monogamy, Temporality and Narrative in *You Me Her*’, *Sexualities* 23, no. 5–6 (September 2020): 1009–28.

³⁷⁴ Stanford, 1016.

³⁷⁵ Joseph Ronan, ‘Textual Immaturity: Bisexuality, Textuality and Adolescence’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 18, no. 1 (2018): 86–101.

³⁷⁶ Wilde, ‘Gay, Queer, or Dimensional?’

or normal/queer, but on the intersecting axes of monophilic/polyphilic and monosexual/bisexual.³⁷⁷ Object choice becomes a continuum that can be tracked as relationships evolve and we learn more about the characters' inner life.

Doubly Other

Bisexuality is rendered 'simultaneously conceivable and inconceivable' by the perception of homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive attractions to "opposite", discrete genders based on biological sex.³⁷⁸ It is both straightforward to believe that someone could be attracted to more than one gender, and totally disruptive of the way in which sexuality is constructed. Meyer argues that '[t]his paradox 'frames the way bisexual characters are imagined, created and portrayed in television narrative and carries specific ideological consequences'.³⁷⁹ Bisexual identities are therefore employed as plot devices to navigate 'a cultural struggle over the matrix of oppression through gender, race and sexuality'.³⁸⁰ Specifically, Meyer found that bi characters in the TV series she analysed were typically female and portrayed by non-White actors, locating them as multiply liminal and Other.

I show that in the Russian case, the earlier audio-visual narratives in this chapter depict bisexual men rather than women due to the cultural anxiety over the supposed "crisis of masculinity". Given the sense of queerness infiltrating Russia, it is not the bisexual who is ethnically or nationally Other but the homosexual they are involved with, or an authoritative influence they are under, who is characterised by Orientalism and other forms of

³⁷⁷ Wilde, 423–26.

³⁷⁸ Paula C Rodríguez Rust, 'Bisexuality: The State of the Union.', *Annual Review of Sex Research* 13 (2002): 180–81.

³⁷⁹ Meyer, 'Representing Bisexuality on Television', 367.

³⁸⁰ Meyer, 367.

xenophobia. In this regard, my findings align with those of Kevin Moss, whose study of gay men in Russian cinema concluded that ‘All these films place a minoritizing gay identity outside Russia, while Russians are either heterosexual or at most to a bisexual phase.’³⁸¹ In the more recent audio-visual sources, bisexual characters tend to be female, even as queerness continues to be associated not with Russia but elsewhere.

Chem pakhnut britvy (2013)

I speculate that this shift in on-screen gender balance can be accounted for by the double standard satirised in the short film *Chem pakhnut britvy* (2013, dir. Evelina Shaver). The film was made in partnership with Kvir-spektr, a since-disbanded artistic offshoot of the LGBT Network in Krasnodar. The absurdist five-minute film critiques the normalisation of certain expressions of female bisexuality in Russia against the backdrop of the oppression and ostracization of male homosexuality. It achieves this through explicit acts of scripting and ventriloquism, as two women (Ilya Braun and Aleksandrina Meretskaya) disjointedly discuss political homophobia towards gay men while sitting in bed together, wrapped in towels, in the interval between threesomes with a currently absent man. Their conversation is entirely dubbed over by a male narrator’s voice (A. Ogarev), who also reads out stage directions such as ‘(СМОТРИТ ЖУРНАЛ)’, thus attempting to exercise total control over the women’s language and behaviour. The process of filtering the women’s voices through a man’s reading of a script literalises the construction and enactment of the threesome fantasy, in which the women’s own subjectivities are overshadowed by his desire, and masking their own attraction to each other.

³⁸¹ Moss, ‘Straight Eye for the Queer Guy’, 224.

Yet until his return in the final moments of the film, the male partner (Oleg Lenskii) is both absent and asleep, highlighting the inherent queerness in the interactions between the women in the sexual encounter he has orchestrated.³⁸² This sense of patriarchal control slipping away is reflected in the loss of intention behind the narrator's words through translation, as his speech is subtitled in English through Google Translate. These stylistic elements reinforce the central theme that Russia's societal and political fixation on male queerness ignores the reality that many otherwise homophobic men ironically desire sleeping with multiple women at once, thereby unintentionally instigating queerness in their own bedroom.³⁸³

Importantly, only male homosexuality is ever semi-openly acknowledged, and its first implicit mention places it in an Orientalising foreign context via the idea that all men wear dresses in Thailand. Wondering if these cross-dressing men shave their legs, Meretskaya looks down in horror at her own leg hair (a moment suggestive of the stereotype that lesbian and bisexual women do not shave) and claims she would ban this practice. All the while, the women's physical proximity, as well as the romantic looks exchanged, evidence queerness not just in Russia but within the home. That hypocrisy is explicitly stated when Meretskaya's character wonders about Russian *golubye*, such as the ex-boyfriend of Braun's character—who reminds her of the Thai cross-dressers, given that he left her for a man with a similarly hairless chest and legs—and how they can do the euphemistic 'это'. After Braun counters 'я тоже так люблю', Meretskaya looks intently at her and reprimands her for the comparison: 'ты же женщина'. Female same-sex acts, unequivocally holding a different status, are not merely acceptable but actively desired by the intangible male presences of the narrator and the off-

³⁸² The video ends with the arrival of the male figure suddenly casting his shadow between the two women as he realises he has likely slept through something important. They conspiratorially confirm 'да, ты всё проспал' before throwing the duvet over him and the camera, the motion inviting him back into bed.

³⁸³ Indeed, Chem pakhnut britvy is not entirely alone in this regard: in the film *Pro lyubov'* (2015, dir. Anna Melikian), one of the protagonists named Borya is not at all thrilled to discover his two female lovers surprising him with the prospect of a threesome. This expected resolution never comes to fruition, as he instead leaves the bedroom and watches them giggle and touch each other through a split screen that separates him from both women. See Morley, 'Queering the Mainstream'.

screen lover. Female bisexuality is sanctioned as a performance for *his* arousal, which heterosexualises the act. Meanwhile, as their conversation about the news, the Church, and the political elite reveals, male homosexuality can only ever be seen as the foreign antithesis to the image the Russian state and the media are attempting to project.

Music and Embodiment

More condensed forms of short films like *Chem paknut britvy* as well as the genre of the music video necessitates deeper reliance on tropes to create quick visual impressions. The respective roles of sound, rhythm, costume, and lyrics all function to communicate social, political, and cultural concerns as well as to entertain. As Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins argue, the performance in music videos cannot be separated from:

power relations that pervade music production on and off the stage. Since audiovisual performance representations typically glamorize structures of social subordination, they consequently relay elaborate forms of social and cultural values and ideologies. As music videos animate our social and cultural spaces, they shape significant representations of gendered, sexualized, raced, and classed identities.³⁸⁴

In the case of sexuality, the off-camera/off-stage statements and behaviours of the performers prove especially instrumental to the interpretation of their music: debate often rages over the “true” nature of the singer’s attractions. Some are accused of ‘fauxmosexuality’, a concept developed from the performances of heteronormatively feminine, straight-identified artists do or say queer things to acquire edge, attention, views, money, social relevance, and the validation of the male gaze.³⁸⁵ This gets exacerbated by the conflation of the singer operating as themselves in real life with the fictional construction of

³⁸⁴ Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins, eds., ‘Introduction: Undertaking Music Video Analysis’, in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 23.

³⁸⁵ Kristin J. Lieb, ‘Pop Stars Perform ‘Gay’ for the Male Gaze: The Production of Fauxmosexuality in Female Popular Music Performances and Its Representational Implications’, in *Production Studies, The Sequel*, ed. Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2016), 59–72.

their persona and lyrical “I”. The prevalence of fauxmosexuality (also termed “performance bisexuality”) has been partially blamed for disproportionately negative mental health outcomes for bisexuals: while female bisexuality is hypersexualised and delegitimised for the benefit of male writers and a male audience, bi men are erased, exacerbating anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidality.³⁸⁶ Some artists, like the American singer-songwriter Halsey, have with mixed success tried to counteract fauxmosexual trends in music, adopting a strategy of creating sustained bisexual display through masculinization/feminization, the adoption of a certain attitude, and reinforcing bi subjectivity in interviews—yet even these efforts have been subject to bi-erasure.³⁸⁷

Since the infamous duo t.A.T.u. attained international success by performing lesbianism on stage but publicly rejecting it on a personal level, fauxmosexuality has proven a hot topic in queer Russian cultural studies.³⁸⁸ Artists including Eva Pol’na, the lead singer of *Gosti iz budushchego*, and another young female duo, KIS-KIS, have similarly played into ambiguous sexuality as a marketing strategy and profited from its blend of queer and straight sensibilities. Research in this area has fallen into a few clusters focussed primarily on live performance, lyrics, and community. This has ranged from Stephen Amico’s surveys of male homosexuality in in pop music to Maria Brock and Galina Miazhevich’s consideration of the aesthetics of camp performance by male artists; and from Dana Heller and Julie Cassiday’s analysis of how Russia’s entries for the Eurovision song contest play into homoeroticism to garner popularity, to Francesca Stella, Katherina Wiedlack, and Masha Neuffield’s

³⁸⁶ Johnson, ‘Bisexuality, Mental Health, and Media Representation’; Chickerella et al., ‘Janelle Monáe vs. Katy Perry’.

³⁸⁷ Harman, “Bad at Love”.

³⁸⁸ Heller, ‘T.A.T.u. You!’; Julie A. Cassiday, ‘Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory’, *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 1–23; Weidlack and Neufeld, ‘My Ne Rockery, Ne Panki, My Devochki’.

observations of lesbian pop music and the important role that even fauxmosexual performers played in creating a sense of lesbian community.³⁸⁹

Post-Soviet popular music was therefore a space where homo/bisexuality quickly and somewhat unexpectedly flourished in the 1990s and early 2000s. As Stephen Amico stated, his analysis of homosexual subjectivity in this era investigated ‘a baffling contradiction: if homosexuality was truly anathema to the vast majority of Russians, how could so many embodied examples of a “*netraditsionnaia seksual’naia orientatsiia*” be found in the mass media, and why, specifically this form— this musical form— of popular culture?’³⁹⁰ Attempting to answer this question, Amico’s analysis connected the sound of *popsa* and *èstrada* singers like Boris Moiseev and Valerii Leont’ev, as well as electronic dance music, with somatic experience. Both in terms of the embodied homoerotic performance by the artists, and that of the gay club scene in St Petersburg, where the music ‘penetrates’ the body in a pleasurable manner and the beat encourages shared movements and corporeal connection. His work advocated for de-prioritisation of lyrical meanings over non-linguistic elements, arguing for further interpretation of the performances (clothing, make-up choices, movements) and sound structures (melody, harmony, rhythm) to better understand the sensory impact alongside the messaging.³⁹¹

Dealing specifically with the genre of the digital music video, I expand on this earlier work and attempt to emphasise the importance of somatic elements retained on-screen in the production of meaning. Costumes, movements, and the ways in which body parts are screened, are all considered in conjunction with lyrics and musical style. This gives attention

³⁸⁹ Respectively Amico, ‘Visible Difference, Audible Difference’; Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*; Brock and Miazhevich, ‘From High Camp to Post-Modern Camp’; Heller, ‘T.A.T.u. You!’; Cassidy, ‘Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay’; Stella, *Lesbian Lives*, 118–20; Weidlack and Neufeld, ‘My Ne Rockery, Ne Panki, My Devochki’.

³⁹⁰ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 66.

³⁹¹ Amico, ‘Visible Difference, Audible Difference’, 356–57.

to how ‘the digitized body on display is an intricate compound of gendered, sexual, racial, and ethnic embodiment, the specific configurations of which discipline [its] materiality’.³⁹² All these interventions from bi theory, music video studies, and queer Russian studies come to the fore in our first film case study and subsequent, thematically-related musical interlude.

A Bisexual Awakening: *Ya lyublyu tebya* (2004)

Ya lyublyu tebya (2004, dir. Ol’ga Stolpovskaya and Dmitry Troitsky) is significant not only as Russia’s first “gay” movie, but as one of the clearest examples of *bi-textuality* in Russian cinema. The film revolves around the introduction of a homosexual-coded Kalmyk man named Ulyumdzhi (Damir Badmaev) into the relationship between bisexual-coded Timofei (Evgeny Koryakovsky) and the heterosexual-coded Vera (Lyubov Tolkalina). Yet as Alexandar Mihailovic has argued, the central conflict of *Ya lyublyu tebya* is not the love triangle itself, but the choices the protagonists make ‘at the instigation of a protean and rapid-fire marketplace that they ultimately reject’.³⁹³ Each member of the love triangle confronts the new, sexualised realm of commerce in their own way: Ulyumdzhi, the most unaccustomed to this world of companies preying on consumer desire, feels at the costumes (and bodies) of advertising mascots walking Moscow’s streets; Timofei works at an advertising company assisting the infiltration of American products into all aspects of Russian culture (even the military, as in one marketing campaign soldiers proclaim their love for Cola); while Vera constantly consumes due to her “secret passion” for eating, and, moreover, harbours nightmarish fears about her lack of bodily autonomy in her job as a newsreader where executives argue about how best to style her to better sell their network to viewers.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Burns and Hawkins, ‘Introduction’, 24.

³⁹³ Mihailovic, ‘Exotic Diversity’, 65.

³⁹⁴ The scene speaks to the ways in which style is political, gendered, and performative. See Cassiday, *Russian Style*.

Through Ulyumdzhi's ethnicity and Timofei's brief life in the West, same-sex desire likewise becomes associated with non-Russian influence in this new marketplace—and Timofei's bisexuality comes to embody to the uncertain future of Russia.³⁹⁵

Yet *Ya lyublyu tebya* still interrogates notions of homosexual and bisexual identities/acts. For instance, Timofei's affection for Tchaikovsky—perhaps Russia's most famous queer male icon—has been subject to particular attention from Alexandar Mihailovic and Kevin Moss. Both read his ringtone (taken from *Shchelkunchik*) and ownership of a small bust of the composer as a signal that Timofei's same-sex desire predates his relationships with Vera and Ulyumdzhi.³⁹⁶ Mihailovic and Moss are especially interested in the role the statue plays during Timofei's sex scenes. The miniature Tchaikovsky bounces up and down before falling off its shelf when the passionate sexual encounter with Ulyumdzhi shakes the room, whereas later, Tchaikovsky gets in the way when Timofei and Vera are trying to have sex on the floor. Mihailovic interprets Timofei reaching out to push away the statue, before breaking down crying, as a 'gesture that signals the impossibility of denying the reality of one's sexual identity'.³⁹⁷ Moss likewise sees the scene as symbolic of Timofei repressing his 'potential homosexuality'.³⁹⁸ However, Timofei's actions could be interpreted not exactly as repressing his desires and failing to return to "heterosexuality", but because he is grieving the loss of Ulyumdzhi from his life as a direct result of his own mistakes—he cannot simply move on or return from his new polyamorous relationship to his old monogamous one.

It is true, however, that Timofei's same-sex and not-same-sex desires are not given equal treatment in the film. Timofei's commitment to Vera is certainly made more ambiguous

³⁹⁵ Baer, *Other Russias*; Mihailovic, 'Exotic Diversity'; Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy'.

³⁹⁶ Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy', 208; Mihailovic, 'Exotic Diversity', 70.

³⁹⁷ Mihailovic, 'Exotic Diversity', 70.

³⁹⁸ Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy', 208.

when he mimics the romantic apology given by a Central Asian character on TV. The man's speech becomes the script for expressing his own feelings, but the words therefore seem empty, especially when Timofei utters the titular line, 'я люблю тебя', making a syntactical error in his native language. Later, Timofei makes the same grammatical mistake again but in Kalmyk, apologizing to Ulyumdzhi without the need to follow someone else's example, and contrasting the emotional resonance of his words and the syntactical error. The Othered ethnicity of the speaker Timofei copies also directly correlates the character to Ulyumdzhi (accurately or not), thereby mirroring the dimensions his two relationships and mediating not-same-sex desire through a symbol of his same-sex desire.

Timofei's relative interest in Vera and Ulyumdzhi is also called into question due to the discourses his bisexuality is both mapped onto and read through. Vera and Ulyumdzhi represent opposing sanitised commercial desires and wild animalistic desires respectively. The first time Timofei and Vera have sex (a year before Timofei meets Ulyumdzhi) Vera's consumerism is literalised by her obsession with food. Her near addiction leads her to multitask, eating from a pile of green apples which roll out around them. Their bedspread also features a green apple print, cementing the conflation of sexual and consumer desires through the transformation of three-dimensional passion into a two-dimensional pattern. By contrast, when Ulyumdzhi and Timofei first have sex, they growl and jump at one another, wrestle, spray each other playfully with a shower head, and nestle beneath fur rugs. Indeed, Ulyumdzhi is associated with animals in an Orientalist manner throughout the film, from his position as cleaner at the zoo, to his childhood herding sheep and Timofei's gift to him of a small cowbell necklace. This animal connection amplifies the sense of him enabling Timofei to act on his "wild" same-sex urges.

While Ulyumdzhi's ethnicity heightens his status as a queer Other, his family are simultaneously used to depict Kalmyk culture as unsympathetic and homophobic when they kidnap him and force him into the Russian army. Homosexuality is shown to be possible for Ulyumdzhi only in the Moscow metropolis, away from what is imagined as a more strictly "traditional" culture as yet untouched by Western commercialisation and sexualisation. As Brian James Baer states, Timofei's bisexuality therefore strikes a balance between Vera's 'decadent internationalism' and the supposed 'simplicity' of Ulyumdzhi's 'eastern' love, representing a broader 'cosmopolitan Russian bisexuality' and even an 'alternative modernity'.³⁹⁹ Of course, the film is projecting these 'eastern' qualities onto Kalmykia, which is located to the south of Moscow in the Volga region: the choice of Ulyumdzhi's ethnicity was determined by casting difficulties. In special features footage, the directors explain that they wanted to exaggerate the position of the third partner as an outsider by making him Yakut, but they could not find an actor of that description willing to work on the film. They settled on a Russian-Chinese actor playing a Kalmyk man. The Orientalist tropes described above further Other him and amplify the clash of cultures: not only Russian/"Kalmyk" but also metropolitan/rural and heterosexual/homosexual. This uneasy treatment of Ulyumdzhi thus simultaneously decentres ethnocentric ideas of Russianness and reinforces imperial connotations of post-Soviet identity.

As is clear from the above summaries, Timofei's relationship with Ulyumdzhi is privileged through the narrative and its bi-textual metaphors. Vera receives less and less screen time, featuring primarily as a voiceover towards the end of the film. The final kiss between her and Timofei is a one-second goodbye peck on the cheek at the airport, markedly less amorous than the twelve-second sequence between Timofei and Ulyumdzhi in which the camera spins

³⁹⁹ Baer, *Other Russias*, 6.

around them and the iconic Triumphal Arch. Nonetheless, if we adopt Wilde's model of dimensional sexuality, then Timofei's sustained interest in Vera throughout the film becomes more evident. He originally pursued Vera in the coffee shop where they met (although he deceives her by saying he did not see anyone steal her purse, and simply pays for her coffee instead); he is wowed when she takes off her coat to surprise him with new lingerie, and pauses to lean back and take in the view of her body; at the drag club when another bisexual man takes an interest in Vera and starts to kiss and undress her, Timofei is jealous enough to crush a plastic shot glass in his hand and try calling a taxi home (this is before he agrees that a threesome in the club bathroom would be more fun, though this then gets interrupted by a call about Ulyumdzhi)); and finally, when he gifts Ulyumdzhi a romantic getaway, he offers Vera a ticket to join them.

It is *Ya lyublyu tebya's* true ending, however, which is one of the most interesting interventions into the representation of bisexuality in the film. It outrightly rejects sociocultural and narrative pressures to resolve the triangle with a coupled conclusion, instead presenting a future in which Timofei, Vera and Ulyumdzhi have seemingly settled into a throuple and established a co-parenting arrangement. This epilogue, released on the international English-language DVD, is set two years after the main events of the film. The camera takes on the perspective of a crying baby, and Timofei, trying to calm the child, appears in our view. He is followed swiftly by Ulyumdzhi, who tries ringing the bell necklace Timofei gifted him. The cries continue, however, and Vera pushes her way gently into the shot between the two men, their faces all pressed close together, reassuring the child that their *mama* is here. This scene in which the three protagonists have established a harmonious queer family dynamic, where jealousy has been worked through and all the various romantic, sexual, and platonic relationships have continued, was deemed too radical for Russian audiences at the time. The original Russian theatrical release instead ends immediately after Ulyumdzhi's uncle

confesses to the Duma deputies he is chauffeuring, with tears streaming down his face, that his nephew is gay; and the two men, whom we earlier saw at the drag party, respond with approving laughter. This ending leaves Ulyumdzhi in the army, separated from Timofei, who remains with Vera having had the “choice” made for him.

In the special features, Stolpovskaya reveals that this epilogue was essential to her vision. Basing elements of the narrative on her real experience being involved in a love triangle, she conceived of *Ya lyublyu tebya* as offering an alternative to the agony of experiencing the breakdown of a triangulated relationship and being reduced to a couple—which is what happened to her. Although this ending was ultimately not screened in Russian cinemas, Troitsky believed that universal bisexuality made Timofei’s situation potentially relatable to any viewer: ‘Человек по природе своей - бисексуал. Поэтому, в жизни каждого может произойти похожая история.’ Timofei’s bisexuality was therefore integral to the intended structure and messaging of the film, despite the fact that production and distribution decisions ultimately created obstacles to bisexual interpretations, and the label was never used in the edit.⁴⁰⁰

Musical Interlude №1: Commercialisation

Over the last thirty years, these same interconnected themes of bisexuality disrupting monogamy and the queer “Western” commercialisation of Russia have reverberated through popular culture. Music videos are no exception. The typical narrative is one in which a heterosexual-coded singer bemoans how their duplicitous, bisexual-coded partner has betrayed them with a homosexual-coded lover. This plot can be connected to sources

⁴⁰⁰ The only identity label used is *goluboi*, which is by Ulyumdzhi to refer to himself.

analysed in Part I, where I uncovered a prevalence of content about extra-marital affairs and bisexuality. The TV show *Pro ETO* similarly grappled with the issue of bisexuality as a destabilising factor for the nuclear family in an episode where a woman self-identifying as bisexual confessed that she might want to lead a heterosexual family life in the future, though she did not personally see her bisexuality as obstacle to this, merely an extra sexual drive.⁴⁰¹ Stories and experiences like these circulating in mainstream and fringe media alike evidently provoked broader anxieties about the spectre of queerness within ostensibly heterosexual relationships. Three examples produced at ten-year intervals demonstrate the pervasiveness of the trend in Russian music videos.

***Nelyubov'* (1999)**

As mentioned above, the vocalist Eva Pol'na of the duo *Gosti iz budushchego* was rumoured to be bisexual and constructed herself in interviews as a singer of love regardless of gender, enjoying a large gay male fanbase due to her allusions to *golubizna* throughout her songs.⁴⁰² Pol'na alluded to female same-sex love too in one of the duo's most famous songs, *Begi ot menya* (1999).⁴⁰³ In the video for *Nelyubov'* (1999), Pol'na catches her boyfriend (played by the duo's other member, musician Yurii Usachev) eating American hamburgers at the mall on a date with another man. This setting overtly alludes to the rapidly introduced "queer" capitalist influence of the U.S./West. The singer's relationship has been torn apart by this attractive male model who worked with her photographer boyfriend, compounding the implication that the fashion industry is to blame for the bisexual "trend". Crucially, the video emphasises a past where the original couple existed blissfully without signs of impending

⁴⁰¹ Gradszkova, 'Personal Is Not Political?', 401.

⁴⁰² Amico, 'Visible Difference, Audible Difference', 353-5.

⁴⁰³ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 255.

danger, picturing them on a date, walking while holding hands, hugging, kissing, and spinning around. She believed in the authenticity of their relationship, yet his love was not love [‘НЕ ЛЮБОВЬ’] and her love is now its antonym, hate [‘НЕЛЮБОВЬ’]. Together, these practically indistinguishable words are used 34 times in the song, interrogating the line between unloving emotions and how you can tell when love is not real. A “homosexual spectre” may lurk just under the surface.⁴⁰⁴

The video’s sterile lighting compounds the emotional coldness as the heart-breaking discovery puts the trajectory of her life in reverse. While in the first half of the video Pol’na is constantly on the move, walking with cool purpose or running towards the camera in distress, after she spots her boyfriend with his boyfriend, the music slows and changes pitch. From this moment, Pol’na starts to move backwards through the same spaces and fight against the rope restraints that have suddenly entrapped her. The gold glitter tears she cries perhaps nod to how, despite the messaging of the song, it is precisely these camp aesthetics and queer themes which were making Pol’na a gay icon. Even as the lyrics suggest her boyfriend intentionally used her for his own gain while keeping his bisexuality a secret—letting her pour her aspirations into the relationship in vain—they seemingly reference Mikhail Kuz’min’s landmark gay novella *Крылья* (1906): ‘Я в тебе свою мечту искала, / Крылья для тебя свои сломала, / Только слишком поздно я узнала, / Что в твою игру в любовь играла.’⁴⁰⁵ For *Gosti iz budushchego*, the bisexual betrayal storyline thus offers a liminal space between queer and straight performances/audiences, allowing the lyrics to voice a “heterosexual” perspective and anxieties about rising “homosexual” trends while still showcasing a romance between two men in the video.

⁴⁰⁴ Baer, ‘Engendering Suspicion’.

⁴⁰⁵ The name of the novella similarly appears in the last verse of the group’s song *Goluboi angel* (2000): Amico, ‘Visible Difference, Audible Difference’, 354.

Modnaya lyubov' (2009)

The song *Modnaya lyubov'* (2009) by Viktor Pivtorypavlo and Lika Dlugach of the band *Zapreshchennye barabanshchiki* concurs that bisexuality is a symptom of the fashion industry with the potential to destroy relationships, but without any of the ambiguity that Pol'na brought to *Nelyubov'*. Rather, it introduces the additional premise that bisexuality actively undermines Russian “tradition”. The lyrics recall how Dlugach’s character, Lyudmila, abandoned her boyfriend late at night to move in with her girlfriend, Natashka. She once loved him, but no longer [‘разлюбила’], and her betrayal has destroyed his life for reasons he cannot quite comprehend [‘Ведь ты всю жизнь мою разбила / Милая, зачем?’]. As elsewhere in Russian popular culture, the answer to his rhetorical question is found in the correlation of same-sex relationships with ‘false modernity’.⁴⁰⁶ The chorus repeats the titular concept of it being fashionable to act on bisexual potential and, as it is implied, “choose” to follow the imported consumerist trend of loving someone of the same sex [‘Роковая страсть моя, / Модная твоя любовь, / Модная любовь твоя, / Нетрадиционная.’].

In the video, the notion that homosexuality corrupts unsuspecting heterosexual individuals through fashion is once again literalised in the form of a photoshoot. Dlugach plays the model girlfriend of Pivtorypavlo’s photographer persona. She dances or models behind him, her poses documenting the progression of her bisexual duplicity, while he sings and stares accusingly into the camera. The sense of twisted development is compounded through Dlugach’s costume and choreography, as Lyudmila abruptly switches between her past “straight” self in a well-fitting red gown and classy hat, and her new “lesbian” self in loose-fitting, butch clothing and short spiky hair. After the transformation, Dlugach makes

⁴⁰⁶ Baer, *Other Russias*, 7.

exaggerated facial expressions and plays childish games with the props, suggesting regression to an immature bisexual state strange [‘странно’] for an adult. Most strikingly, Lyudmila poses, dances, and almost kisses a mannequin representing Natashka throughout the video until Pivtorypavlo picks up a pickaxe and smashes its plastic body to pieces.

Amico’s work on post-Soviet popular music placed the success of handsome, athletic, stylish and well-groomed male performers in opposition to one of the ‘quintessential symbols of Russian masculinity, the *muзhik*’—a man who is strong, rough, mature, and a member of the lower classes.⁴⁰⁷ Pivtorypavlo’s costume and narrative arc situates his persona between these two opposing masculinities, achieving neither. Despite working in fashion photography, he is a balding, bespectacled, and dressed-down working man. His arc culminates in the decision to vent his frustration at the ways his masculinity is being impeded—perhaps sacrificing his job in the process—through physical strength and aggression. Symbolically, this moment marks a return from the new queer world of style and commerce to the old “tradition” of male assertiveness and brute force. At the same time, he remains powerless to stop a change in society so much bigger than him; he can destroy only this plastic representation of his wife’s new lover, and not the rival woman or her bisexuality itself.

***Krasivyi mal’chik* (2019)**

A more recent intervention into the musical space of commercially induced bisexual betrayals is MOLLY’s *Krasivyi mal’chik* (2019). Like *Nelyubov*’ twenty years earlier, the singer wonders about how true the love she remembers ever was [‘ЭТО МОЖЕТ ЛЮБОВЬ, А БЫТЬ МОЖЕТ И НЕГ’]. She struggles to reconcile her memories with the present [‘ТЫ ПОЗДНО СКАЗАЛ, / «ХОЧУ

⁴⁰⁷ Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 111 citing; Igor’ Kon, *Muзhskoe telo v istorii kul’tury* (Moskva: Slovo, 2003).

не тебя»]. *Glamour* abounds as she drives in a glistening red Ferrari and despairingly lounges on an expensive sofa, her signs of wealth offering little comfort without the love of a man.⁴⁰⁸ This lonely life of luxury is juxtaposed with a mass of male bodies dancing together at the gay club where she performs.⁴⁰⁹ Her backing dancers include her boyfriend and his lover—a signal that in the narrative of the video, the singer is commodifying her own tragedy to capitalise on what she knows will be a popular theme. This recalls not only Pol’na’s glitter tears and references to Kuz’min, but broader trends in Russophone music: for instance, in the video for *Vasilek* (2012) by the Ukrainian girl group *Payushchie trusy*, the song about being in love with a gay man is interrupted by the other members disgustedly asking if this ‘хуйня’ is really ‘модно’ off-stage, before stepping in front of the cameras to dance (and even fist) their homosexual-coded male partners. Through lyrics and videos, these music videos carefully toe the line between attacking the bisexual “fashion” and acknowledging that they are benefiting from it by making it the subject of their music, which will likely still appeal to a queer audience.

MOLLY’s song is made yet more ambiguous through the scene where her boyfriend’s lover catches him heavily making out with her in the stairway. His eyes widen, and their shared boyfriend jumps away from MOLLY as he notices his presence. MOLLY looks between the two men before sighing and walking away, leaving her boyfriend to stare up at his male lover; yet he runs off too, and the screen fades to black. Is the bi boyfriend cheating on them both? Or do the lyrics tell one version of events (cheating on her), and the video another (cheating on him)? The song’s titular lines [‘Красивый мальчик, хоп-хей, / Как жалько что ты гей, / Как жалько что ты гей’] could be read either as MOLLY pining over him knowing that he doesn’t love her back, or a series of flirtatious attempts to tease and win him over when

⁴⁰⁸ On *glamour* see Cassiday, *Russian Style*, 48-9.

⁴⁰⁹ As mentioned in the Introduction, Amico identified two Moscow clubs, Mono and Metro, which were popularly considered spaces for bisexuals. *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 10.

he is not “truly” as gay as he is making himself out to be. Either way, the bisexual boyfriend is shown to be duplicitous, promiscuous, and ready to destroy the life of one or both of his partners out of self-interest.

Together, these videos associate bisexuality with a specific form of cheating which implicates the bisexual not only in a betrayal of their partner, but of their nation. Bisexuals throw away long-standing “traditional” relationships and get swept up in the excitement of new money, hot models, the latest fashions, and commercial spaces. Yet the videos are self-aware that even when criticising the bisexual shockwave evidently shaking Russia, they are profiting from popularity with the same “emergent” queer audiences that their lyrics are condemning because same-sex desire is nonetheless spotlighted on screen. But what paved the way for the so-called “bisexual trend” to take hold in Russia in the first place?

The Crisis of Masculinity: *Zakrytie prostranstva* (2008)

Billed as Russia’s first emo-movie, *Zakrytie prostranstva* (2008, dir. Igor’ Vorskla, a.k.a. Igot’ Lebedev) vocalises anxieties concerning societal decline, an obsession with wealth, the crisis of masculinity, and where this has all left the Russian youth. Set over the course of two days, the film primarily follows two emo young adults, Venya (Leonid Bichevin) and Vika (Masha Mashkova), as they form an intense romantic and sexual relationship based on mutual disdain for society, their parents, and life. However, Venya also has a boyfriend, Rostik (Oleg Makarov), who cares for him even as Venya rejects his affection, acts impulsively, and attempts to harm himself.

Despite the centrality of this erotic triangle to the narrative, we only meet the first of these protagonists after nine minutes. The opening sequence is instead depicts an meeting in a Moscow skyscraper between two cigar-smoking fat(cat) businessmen, Arnold and Lyonya. Their conversation begins off-camera as one confesses that he has cancer of the scrotum, which the doctor cannot heal. Soon after, Lyonya reveals he has betrayed Arnold in a German business deal and the two men brawl, rolling around, attempting to strangle each other with their ties and body weight, threatening to report back to mama—they are evidently brothers. This scene immediately establishes the two key discourses which will be read through bisexuality in the film: Russia's (cancerous/fatal) crisis of masculinity; and the corruption of the older generation by foreign money, causing "family values" to fail. Scenes of Arnold and Lyonya fighting in the office are interspersed with scenes of the three protagonists and footage of an artist's mannequin suspended by puppet strings. The behaviours of Venya's younger generation, Vorskla is obviously suggesting, have been determined by the generation before them.

The plot and themes perfectly align with the conventions of emo subculture—a post-punk music and fashion movement which gained popularity internationally in the 1990s and early 2000s, especially among White male youths. As Emily Ryalls demonstrates in her analysis of popular music videos and lyrics by emo performers, singers often represented themselves suffering from (and punishing themselves for) the everyday traumas they experience as a result of their gender expression.⁴¹⁰ Due to the emo boy aesthetic of long dyed hair, tight jeans, and skinny bodies, as well as the self-presentation as being emotional and sensitive, these young men were bullied for being "gay". In the audio-visual texts Ryalls surveyed, the 'bullying that emos may suffer as a result of their gender troubling [...] is resolved by a return

⁴¹⁰ Emily Ryalls, 'Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2013): 83–97.

to extreme violence—a hallmark of hegemonic masculinity. [...] Emos are feminized through their victim narratives, and then remasculinized through misogyny and reflexive sadomasochism.⁴¹¹ Through this turn to sadomasochism—in which emo performers would stage a transformation of psychological pain into physical pain, thereby gaining control over their situation and bodies and bringing them pleasure through self-injury—the artists could ‘re-assert masculine dominance’.⁴¹²

Venya’s self-destructive and violent behaviours are triggered by both a (national) crisis of masculinity and a (generational) sense of isolation. His bisexuality can similarly be seen as an aspect of emo aesthetic conventions. Performances often incorporated homoerotic elements, and various waves of emo fashion were adopted and adapted by queer male youths who positioned themselves against the grain of hypermasculinity and mainstream gay masculinity alike.⁴¹³ Moreover, emo has even been named, alongside goth (another subcultural movement which developed from punk rock since the 1980s), as a key aesthetic within bisexual communities for attempting to generate a bisexual “look”.⁴¹⁴ Emo’s fixation on mental health may appeal to many in bisexual communities, where rates for depression, suicidality and self-injury are higher than in heterosexual and homosexual communities alike, as an alternative yet resonant form of representation given that bi identities are generally neglected on screen. Emo subculture could thus be considered not only as a site where the meanings of masculinities are negotiated, but where bi-potential can be explored.

⁴¹¹ Ryalls, 90–91.

⁴¹² Ryalls, 94.

⁴¹³ Brian M. Peters, ‘Emo Gay Boys and Subculture: Postpunk Queer Youth and (Re)Thinking Images of Masculinity’, *Journal of LGBT Youth* 7, no. 2 (n.d.): 129–46.

⁴¹⁴ Hayfield et al., ‘Visible Lesbians and Invisible Bisexuals: Appearance and Visual Identities among Bisexual Women’, 179.

Indeed, at the centre of *Zakrytye prostranstva*'s triangle is the bisexual character Venya, who has taken to living confined in his apartment. Venya's diagnosis of agoraphobia literalises his conditioned fear of the outside world, where men commit and are *expected* to commit violence under societal/market forces. When he was just a boy, his older brother was assassinated on the street by the very Japanese spies to whom he had just agreed to rent out an apartment for a large stack of cash.⁴¹⁵ We watch in a flashback how Venya's agoraphobia was particularly triggered by/in the shopping mall, where he hyperventilates pressed up against display windows. Only the blank faces of mannequins stare back at him, offering no human connection in a world of commerce, glass, and self-occupied consumers moving past him on the escalators and revolving doors.

Due to the extent he is suffering from panic attacks and derealisation in public spaces, Venya is receiving treatment from a psychiatrist who prescribed medication—which he is refusing to take—and recommended 'полноценный, качественный секс' with a woman to alleviate his anxieties.⁴¹⁶ Venya cannot do sex without love, he responds, so the doctor suggests that if he cannot manage *prostitutki*, he could engineer a stressful situation to make a woman he likes fall in love with him faster as they will bond under the tension. Acting on this advice, Venya traps the pizza delivery girl Vika in his apartment, where he coolly announces his plans to rape her and subjects her to a series of cruel games based on logic ('ЛОГИЧНО'), such as making her write out a complex dictation on his chalk board as he cross-dresses as her old teacher and makes her remove items of clothing. Throughout the film, Venya's fears of the violence existing outside appear to have been ingrained in him to the extent that they drive

⁴¹⁵ Note again the suspicion of foreign influence and actors within Russia.

⁴¹⁶ The psychiatric setting has elsewhere similarly been employed for commentary on the (differently) existential status of Russian society in a music video protesting Putin's rhetoric of order, compared to the disorder that the patient witnesses in daily life. See Rebecca Reich, 'Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Russian Variations on a Psychiatric Theme', in *Psychiatry in Communist Europe. Mental Health in Historical Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 196–215.

his behaviours and sexual fantasies, leading him to replicate them in his own domestic space: this cycle appears to be self-conscious, as at one point he teases Vika that her mother should have taught her to expect domestic abuse.

At various points, the dynamics between Venya and Vika are reversed; she slashes his leg with a knife, decides to save him from an almost completed suicide attempt by hanging, ties him up, and threatens him with anal rape with a screwdriver. Venya's sardonic response to her threat that 'кроме удовольствия, мне ничего не принесёт' reduces same-sex pleasure to the act of anal stimulation regardless of consent or psychological/emotional connection. He smirks at her suggestion she will do it in a way that makes him 'нормальным'. As Kevin Moss states, in the film, 'Homosexuality, like rape and agoraphobia, are merely markers of urban alienation'—another symptom of the abstract societal decline, not an attempt at representing the lived experiences of queer Russians.⁴¹⁷

More than merely objectifying queer men's bodies, this scene reasserts the direction of violence and male dominance. Even when Vika physically restrains him, Venya continues to control the situation psychologically, whereas she had been angry, terrified, and humiliated by his threats. With methods proving ineffective against the rigidity of heteropatriarchal power dynamics, Vika's only remaining option is to remove Venya's masculinity and she prepares to castrate him, clipping his mouth and nipples while she writes the words 'я говнюк' on his chest. If he guesses correctly, she will not go through with it; again, he outwits her and correctly determines the phrase. Despite her anger, she cuts off not his penis but his bandages, and Venya goads her by claiming that she has fallen in love with him. Trusting that his games have worked, he finally reveals where the apartment key is. Vika quickly unlocks

⁴¹⁷ Moss, 'Straight Eye for the Queer Guy', 206.

the door, but instead of leaving, she returns and cuts him free while moving as if to kiss him. Suddenly, the couple are shown like the suspended mannequin, dangling in the air and trying to regain enough control over their own limbs to reach out and hold each other. When they succeed, they spin around and we cut to a shot of them lying naked in bed. This symbolises their sense of autonomy being reclaimed through sexuality and self-destructive practices which mark their bodies with pain and pleasure.

The morning after they sleep together, another pizza delivery girl comes and goes and Vika tries to storm out in anger, feeling she is part of a disturbing conveyor belt. Opening the door, she calls Venya ‘БОЛЬНОЙ’ and discovers Rostik (Venya’s boyfriend) standing just outside—once again cementing the association of pathology with same-sex desire. Rostik appears unsurprised by Vika’s presence, likely correlating it with Venya’s other attempts at sexual self-harm: earlier in a flashback, we witnessed an argument between him and Venya in which Rostik explained in medicalised language that he was not jealous, just concerned about the orgies with sex workers [‘Просто, эти оргии, это симптома твоего саморазрушения!']. Vika once again decides to stay, and the three start preparing a meal. The uneasiness between them quickly escalates. Vika calls them both ‘пидарасы’, labels their relationship ‘нестественно’, and kisses Venya to aggravate Rostik when arguing about which of them should leave. Rostik is horrified when he learns Venya tried to hang himself, and accidentally burns himself while cooking. After another series of restraints and rape jokes (to Rostik) and death threats (from Rostik), he too becomes suicidal and escapes onto the roof, where the others pin him down and convince him to at least write a note before he goes so they will not be blamed.

This scene unites the three protagonists through physical and psychological pain as well as the circulation of threats of sexual violence against each other. Each now as disturbed as the

others, the atmosphere finally calms and an equilibrium is established. The three take to bathing and kissing in a paddling pool while holding up a framed portrait of Yuri Gagarin, then lying on top of one another half-naked while decorating a tree with New Year candles and baubles. The failures of their father figures become the topic of discussion as they participate in these sexualised versions of childhood activities. Soon we learn that Vika's money-obsessed stepfather (the self-interested businessman Arnold), is also Rostik's biological father, who abandoned his family. At the end of the film, this revelation of the incestuous nature of the bisexual triangle is taken further when Venya confesses to his psychiatrist that he realises Vika must be his sister because she has the exact same kind of homemade tree decoration his father had made. The psychiatrist tells him he must not blame himself or fixate on the incest, as he was not aware of their blood relation when they were intimate. In what is perhaps an ironic reference back to the destructive love triangle of Aleksandr Herzen's *Kto vinovat?* (1845-6), Venya's final pointed question, 'А КТО ВИНОВАТ?', summarises the unambiguous message of Vorskla's film. It is the fathers who are to blame for failing their children on the psychosexual front. According to the logic of the narrative, Venya's bisexuality is just one 'СИМПТОМА' of his turbulent upbringing, a sign of his mental instability and his inability to distinguish "correctly" between those he should and should not desire (members of the same sex and the same family).⁴¹⁸ Post-Soviet men evidently cannot live up to the legacy of Soviet male icons like Gagarin.

⁴¹⁸ Bisexual characters are often marked by mental health conditions which literalise the idea of competing psychological worlds and sexual desires. In the case of Russia, one might look to KION's series *Beg ulitok* (2021), in which the bisexual protagonist's "split personality" (an outdated term for Dissociative Identity Disorder) operates as a plot twist, revealing that the lesbian and heterosexual character have been the same woman all along.

Musical Interlude №2: Emo

Aside from *Zakrytye prostranstva*, the bisexual emo made an appearance in Russia in the song *Akt.Love* (2002) by alternative rock and emo band Jane Air.⁴¹⁹ The vocalist, Anton Lissov, grapples with as much desire as he does disgust after being “tricked” by a transgender woman and realizing it is no longer fashionable to be in a “boy-girl” relationship. Lissov performs with a screechy voice against the heavy drums, guitar and bass. He jumps, spins, stamps and headbangs around the stage with eyes widened in an exaggerated show of madness. The first two lines echo general homophobic sentiment that while women may engage in same-sex acts and relationships because it is hot for the heterosexual male gaze, two men cannot be together because it is disgusting: ‘Девочка с девочкой — это прикольно! / Мальчик с мальчиком — это противно!’. Nonetheless, the use of the first person makes it clear that Lissov’s persona has found himself desiring another man: ‘Нам с тобой опять по парадным’; ‘Хочу любить тебя модно’. The words ‘модно’ and ‘по парадным’ situate his desire as both temporary and influenced by fashions coming from the West, hence the English word ‘Go!’ repeated throughout the song. While the term bisexual is not used, the line ‘Плывать, какого ты пола!’ reflects common (self-)definitions of bi/pansexuality as attraction regardless of gender and biological sex.⁴²⁰

Transitioning to the last verse, Lissov suddenly speaks in a breathier voice, widens his eyes further, and gestures out to the audience as if having a flashback to his encounter with the dream-like woman: ‘Она была хороша словно сон, / А потом оказалось, что она - это он!’. Tricked into desiring a person assigned male at birth, he feels powerless to resist the

⁴¹⁹ Jane Air, *Akt.Love* (Okna Otkroi, 2002), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpIU9KN6cmE>.

⁴²⁰ Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, one bisexual Russian Youtuber recalled *Akt.Love* being a meaningful source of bi representation.

advances of this transgender woman. Everything and everyone around the persona is screaming to let go of his inhibitions: 'Даёшь свободу тела! / Даёшь свободу слова! Go!'. Those who have already embraced the fashion, the 'голубые' and the 'лесбиянки', are said to be singing and dancing now that their love had begun to be normalized in Russia. Internally, however, the disgust he feels at the idea of two biological males together remains. If the trend was not to do away with heterosexuality, he would have felt justified in murdering the trans woman in a so-called "gay panic" defence: 'Блядь, убил бы его, но это нормально, / Это мальчик с девочкой не актуально!'. As Lissov sings these lines, the volume and the backing music pick up again, intensifying the sexual and moral frustration his persona feels under the surface and underscoring the image of male dominance through violent fantasy.

The overall result is a rock anthem about being caught in the in-between, raging against the apparent injustice of gender performances and identifications which do not align with biological sex, screaming back against the loudness of Western culture and its supposed promotion of queerness. But at the same time, this is done using a Western musical genre and acknowledging that there may be a part of himself open to same-sex desire, that he might want to be together ['Хочу любить тебя'; 'Нам с тобой'], and that this type of relationship might perhaps be 'нормально' after all.

Intangible Threats: *Kholodnyi front* (2015)

Bisexuality is evidently unsettling. It provokes 'anxiety' by 'forcing into the foreground the idea that it is not always possible to tell the entirety of a person's desires based on his or her

current sexual actions’ – whether these desires are innocent or more murderous in nature.⁴²¹ Judith Butler’s theory of performativity outlined how homosexuality “haunts” the heterosexual matrix through its unintelligibility. Yet as bi theorists have argued, Butler’s foundational queer-theoretical work largely omits bisexuality from its discussion and underplays its possible significance despite the usefulness of bisexual studies to the theory, and the theory to bisexual studies.⁴²² Hannah McCann has recently extended this line of argument to show that ‘Given the bracketing of bisexuality enacted in *Gender Trouble* we might turn to how it is perhaps plurisexuality that haunts hetero- and homo- sexuality, containing both, and neither, at once.’⁴²³ Bisexuality therefore acts as a spectre which “haunts” the binary: an ‘unsettled identity’ with a sense of ‘groundlessness’ that refuses to adhere to the expectations of gender and monosexuality.⁴²⁴ Due to these dynamics, bisexuality has often served to create an unnamed, unintelligible threat in cinema. Indeed, throughout the sources in Part II of this thesis, bisexuality exists in the crevices between the supposedly strict divides of “tradition” and “modernity”, “universal” and “minority”, “Russian” and “foreign”.

The suspenseful *Kholodnyi front* (2015, dir. Roman Volobuev) literalises these themes and theories in its use of bisexuality. The film follows an artsy couple spending New Year in an isolated cabin on a moody beach in a nameless region of France. Two parallel events begin to unravel the already unfulfilling relationship between the writer Il’ya (Aleksandr Molochnikov) and the artist Sasha (Dasha Charusha). Foreignness and Russianness are

⁴²¹ Katherine Farrimond, “‘Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film”, *Journal of Bisexuality* 12, no. 1 (2012): 144.

⁴²² Callis, ‘Playing With Butler and Foucault’; Susan Feldman, ‘Reclaiming Sexual Difference: What Queer Theory Can’t Tell Us about Sexuality’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 3–4 (2009): 259–78; Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell, ‘Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 3–4 (2009): 297–315; Nowell Marshall, ‘Refusing Butler’s Binary: Bisexuality and Performative Melancholia in Mrs. Dalloway’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 3–4 (2009): 317–41; Pennington, ‘Bisexuals “Doing Gender” in Romantic Relationships’; Hannah McCann, ‘The Refusal to Refuse: Bisexuality Trouble and the Hegemony of Monosexuality’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 22, no. 1 (2022): 71–89.

⁴²³ McCann, ‘The Refusal to Refuse’, 76.

⁴²⁴ McCann, 83.

uneasily mingled through both this setting and the English radio they play intermittently throughout—they are in the wrong space, with the wrong language being spoken, the wrong weather, and the wrong person. That unease is intensified when the carcass of a chimera washes up on shore on the very same day that bisexual-coded Masha (Svetlana Ustinova), Sasha's former classmate from art school, unexpectedly arrives in the closest town and bumps into Il'ya. Not realising that the two women know each other, Il'ya cheats on Sasha with Masha while she is away for the night. Masha ostensibly leaves in the morning, yet when Sasha returns, the two are together—Masha suspiciously missed the last train.

Masha becomes a third party to the relationship, freezing the unhappy couple in a state of purgatory. Will they begin the New Year together as planned, or be torn apart? As detailed earlier in this chapter, bisexuality unravels the conventional sense of temporal progress in a narrative, introducing a tension not only between the lived experiences of the bisexual characters and its narrativization, but between present relationships, future aspirations, and “past” identities.⁴²⁵ Bisexuality can never fully exist in the present.⁴²⁶ Through the introduction of a love triangle with Masha, bi-temporality impedes their relationship from advancing towards expected milestones and happy endings. This reinforces the broader sense of timelessness and lack of definition, reflecting the blurred edges of the women's (bi)sexuality and building suspense. The plot crawls forward and the changing dates are signalled only by title screens, each day feeling indistinguishable from the last. The holidays mean no one is truly working, so the protagonists barely leave the house and even when they do, it is either to drive alone to a tiny town or to run along the beach. The constant sound of the wind keeps their voices muffled, limiting dialogue and forcing them either into silence or other modes of physical dis/connection.

⁴²⁵ Stanford, 'Rethinking Bisexual in/Visibility on Screen'.

⁴²⁶ Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*; Du Plessis, 'Blatantly Bisexual'.

As time loses its definition, so does the ‘криптид’ and the two bisexual women themselves. Il’ya can barely distinguish them [‘Саша, Маша - какая разница?’]. When sporting matching hoodies and leggings to run along the beach together, Il’ya cannot keep up with them and is left breathless, looking longingly after them as they forge ahead. This motif of the double or the carbon copy is well established in sapphic Russian literature and film and has been connected with narcissism and incestuous storylines.⁴²⁷ It is also a trope of horror cinema: a recurring figure representing the relationship between normality and monstrosity which, read bisexually, ‘signifies a blurring of the lines between the sexually normative individual and the queer Other, ultimately suggesting the presence of both within everyone’.⁴²⁸ *Kholodnyi front* literalises this process of bisexual, monstrous mirroring via *mise en abyme* with Sasha’s ominous video montage project, in which clips of war speeches in English and Russian slowly transpose into women’s faces and the overlapping audio and video blur together until one of the women merges with a roaring lion.

Masha’s bisexuality and its connection to her ‘криптид’ nature is first suggested by her reaction to this video. When she runs from the room, Sasha follows her to bed to comfort her. In the next scene, Il’ya, now in the bed with Sasha, suggests that Masha’s behaviour is motivated by her attraction [‘Понятно. Меня кажется, она в тебя влюблена.’]. Later, the correlation is hammered home by the ending, where instead of leaving the couple behind quietly, Masha bites Sasha’s hand hard enough that her mouth becomes bloodied, a penetrative act of seduction discussed across lesbian/bisexual vampire theory.⁴²⁹ Masha leaves claw marks from scratching barehanded to get out of the barn door which Sasha bolted

⁴²⁷ Baer, ‘Body or Soul’, 289–90.

⁴²⁸ San Filippo, *The B Word*, 112 drawing on; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁴²⁹ Weiss, *Vampires and Violets*; Richter, ‘Bisexual Erasure in “Lesbian Vampire” Film Theory’.

in her escape; and retreats half-naked into the wild long grass. The final shot of the film shows her wearing nothing but a fur coat in weather cold enough to have turned her bare legs purple. Earlier, we saw her kill a lobster without remorse—and now, as this foreshadowed, Masha’s violent bisexual nature has evidently moved on from an attempt to destroying the couple’s relationship (by inserting herself and sleeping with them both), to destroying the couple’s bodies (by ripping them apart). Thus, the vision of the bisexual as a psychopathic killer comes fully to fruition.⁴³⁰

Saying “the B Word”

Not one of the audio-visual sources examined thus far names bisexuality in the final edit. Studies of North American and Western European cinema similarly outline that despite the prevalence of bisexuality as a theme or narrative device, instances where “the B word” is named are exceedingly rare. Even major series which openly label the gender and sexual identities of a large cast of lesbian and transgender characters, such as *Orange is the New Black*, do not name bisexual identities and instead present these characters as “above” or “not interested” in categorisation.⁴³¹ International film and book franchises which mobilise bisexuality in marketing materials to attract certain audiences, like *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, omit mentions of bisexuality in both the original Swedish sources and English adaptations.⁴³²

⁴³⁰ Bryant, *Bisexual Characters in Film*, 59–65; Farrimond, “‘Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’”.

⁴³¹ Michelle E. Bloom, ‘Eliding Bisexuality in Orange Is the New Black’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 23, no. 3 (2023): 341–46.

⁴³² Maria San Filippo, ‘The Politics of Fluidity: Representing Bisexualities in Twenty-First-Century Screen Media’, in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex, and Sexuality*, ed. Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood, and Brian McNair (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 70–80.

Given its laws on censorship (and now extremism), the Russian media landscape is markedly different. Nonetheless, Russian bi audiences have evidently felt overlooked in an even more limited pool of cinema. This culminated in an open letter in October 2020 circulating on bisexual groups on social media, calling for the organisers of St Petersburg’s international queer film festival *Boke o boke* to improve their tagging system and denote films as bisexual when they contained bi* characters or themes.⁴³³

As described in the case *Biblioteka LGBTIK+* in Chapter II, the task of tagging and providing accurate metadata for potential viewers, readers, and researchers can be contentious due to the absence of clear bisexual identification. Cinematic texts merely provide a window into a slice of a life and frequently withhold information about motivations or inclinations, forcing the audience to determine whether bisexual behaviour (e.g. sleeping with the same sex for personal gain) is a meaningful sign of attraction or openness attributable to bisexual identity.⁴³⁴ Additionally, concern that classifying a character as bisexual will erase potentially more valid lesbian and gay readings is not unfounded.

I have argued throughout this chapter that bisexual-coded characters and bisexual triangulations are frequently employed as a mechanism to explore the dramatic implications of “slipping” from heterosexual to homosexual life. In some cases, we cannot be certain if characters are bisexual because they are written to be feeling uncertain about this too.⁴³⁵ At times, a film may appeal to bi-coded characters and bi-specific tropes in order to portray homosexuality in a certain light and allow the negative outcomes of the plot to lead the character to form a moral judgement which encourages their return to sexual “normality”.

⁴³³ These posts were shared among bi community pages on multiple platforms (including Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and VKontakte) for which I do not provide URL citations following the guidelines set out in Chapter II.

⁴³⁴ Bryant, *Bisexual Characters in Film*, 3–7.

⁴³⁵ Bryant, 4.

As the directors of *Ya lyublyu tebya* noted, given the idea that everyone is potentially bisexual, such stories could potentially affect anyone. It is precisely this uncertainty and sense of universality that renders bisexuality instrumental to the narrative, even when the point the screenwriters are trying to make is about homosexuality or heterosexuality.

These difficulties in classification make the open-source database created by the KvirKlub initiative all the more impressive.⁴³⁶ The researcher outlines clearly what ‘бисексуальное поведение’ they observed in each of the more than 200 post-Soviet queer films they have consulted. The brief descriptions they provide in this dedicated box additionally signal how such instances could be read in different ways, thereby epistemologically “reading from the fence”.⁴³⁷ For instance, in the case of *Strana glukhikh* (1998, dir. Valerii Todorovskii), the potential bisexual and lesbian readings and intentions are acknowledged together: ‘гг в отношениях с мужчиной, но у нее складываются Странные Отношения с женщиной (по повести — более прямым текстом лесбийские)’. Of the 178 films shot (at least partially) in Russia, 55 featured a form of bisexual behaviour deemed noteworthy.⁴³⁸ The listed behaviours include love triangles, fluctuations from heterosexual to homosexual relationships, cheating on a spouse with a same-sex partner, and partaking in an orgy.

Across these entries, there are only three instances where characters identify with the label bisexual: the film *Zbestokost*’ (2007, dir. Marina Lyubakova); the web series *Ya idu iskat*’ (2020, dir. Andrei Fenochka); and the short film anthology series *Shestnadsat+* (2021), produced by and for the streaming platform KION. However, as I argue below, in each case, the self-

⁴³⁶ KvirKlub, ‘@kvirkklub: An Interactive Online Archive of Post Soviet Queer Culture’, n.d., <https://linktr.ee/kvirkklub>; The online library data can be accessed in a spreadsheet at KvirKlub, ‘Cinémathèque, CSV Format’, AirTable, n.d., <https://airtable.com/appbcRnFJmQU9tHEQ/shrFo3t89QRmaQhuJ/tblTOKZ3GuAnmKYU2>; or via a responsive, sortable web table with graphics at KvirKlub, ‘Cinémathèque, Interactive Format’, AirTable, n.d., <https://airtable.com/appbcRnFJmQU9tHEQ/shrTbmNDIbYnSY4W6/tblTOKZ3GuAnmKYU2>.

⁴³⁷ Pramaggiore, ‘Straddling the Screen’.

⁴³⁸ Accurate as of 01 May 2025; the list is still growing.

proclaimed bi characters are always secondary. Saying the “B word”—and by extension engaging with bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity—does not necessarily entail a more nuanced depiction, nor a more detailed portrait of the bisexual character.⁴³⁹ Instead, I demonstrate that these films use bisexual-identified secondary characters as a plot device marking a decisive moment between heterosexual beginnings and homosexual endings and as a foil for protagonists exploring their sexuality for the first time.

***Zhestokost'* (2007)**

The film *Zhestokost'* (2007, dir. Marina Lyubakova) follows the relationship between the strapped-for-cash teenage girl Vika (Anna Begunova) and the middle-aged lawyer Zoya (Renata Litvinova). The wild Vika persuades Zoya to take revenge on her married lover, who not only left Zoya but hired henchmen to rape Vika and smash her camera after she tried to blackmail him with photos proving his adultery. Their revenge feminism spirals into the realm of the criminal as they steal a car, burn down a house, and hatch a plan to destroy his family. Beginning from Zoya as ‘an object of [Vika’s] voyeuristic gaze’, these two opposing personalities ultimately ‘share clothes, spaces, and particular gesticulation; and they confuse heterosexual men who misread the women’s revengeful feminism as lesbianism’.⁴⁴⁰ The drama thus plays out via a similar type of sapphic doubling to that explored above.⁴⁴¹ This pits their original relationships to society against one another to play out the consequences of deviating from a well-to-do life and becoming a queer outcast. That transformation—

⁴³⁹ Surveying English-language TV series, bi scholar Sarah Corey underscored the difference between simply advocating for “more” bisexual characters, and for “more diverse” (i.e. less stereotypical) bisexual characters. See Corey, ‘All Bi Myself’.

⁴⁴⁰ Vlad Strukov, ‘The Gesture of Alterity: Renata Litvinova and the Mediation of Contemporary Russian Sensibility’, in *Transgressive Women in Modern Russian and East European Cultures: From the Bad to the Blasphemous*, ed. Yana Hashamova, Beth Holmgren, and Mark Lipovetsky (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 72.

⁴⁴¹ Baer, ‘Body or Soul’, 289–90.

whereby Zoya starts to feel more liberated but morally regresses by acting and dressing like the teenager Vika—only fully completes after the bisexual dancer Arkadii (Aleksei Frandetti) appears.⁴⁴² The scene marks a shift after which ‘Zoya throws away her high heels and puts on sports shoes and replaces her designer coat with a hoodie and baggy jeans that now conceal her femininity’.⁴⁴³

As Vlad Strukov observes, the moment at which Arkadii is introduced is far from incidental:

Cruelty is characteristic of its historical period in terms of representation and evocation of homosexuality as a liberating, comical and yet threatening social transposition. In fact, Zoya’s emancipation starts to occur after the women’s encounter with Arkadii (Aleksei Frandetti) who presents himself as a bisexual. The introduction of this character registers the ambiguity of the women’s position in relation to society and each other. Arkadii is a dancer and he invites Zoya and Vika to his performance. Zoya is so taken by his solo dance in clouds of dust on a poorly lit stage that she starts photographing his movements. It is in the process of observing the (male) other that she re-discovers the (female) self. Arkadii’s performance enables the transposition from gesture to gender in the realm of vision whereby the lens of the camera transgresses the realms of identification.⁴⁴⁴

Intriguingly, Arkadii’s hair is half-blue, potentially paying homage to the concept of *polugolubižna* I outlined in the Introduction. His first line explicitly distinguishes him from pure homosexuality, stating ‘Я не педик. Я бисексуал.’ in response to Vika’s direct interrogation of his appearance. Moreover, on the morning after the two women sleep at his apartment, platonically sharing a bed, his boyfriend Maks arrives and simply asks if they are new girlfriends. Arkadii’s bisexuality is thereby associated not only with liberation but with polyamory and simultaneity. His stereotypically transgressive appearance and sexuality, located multiply on the borders of acceptability, mirrors Zoya’s inner conflict and acts as a plot device motivating her final evolution.

⁴⁴² Of course, bisexuality was long associated with teenage sexual immaturity according to Freud.

⁴⁴³ Strukov, ‘The Gesture of Alterity’, 72–73.

⁴⁴⁴ Strukov, 74–75.

Ya idu iskat' (2020)

The web series *Ya idu iskat'* (2020, dir. Andrei Fenochka) follows the Russian-Armenian protagonist Roma (Arsen Khandzhyan) as he slowly comes to terms with his homosexuality. Due to the fact that the creators financed the production and released the episodes for free on YouTube (rather than producing it for internet platforms in a way that left open the possibility of a TV release), Artem Prokhorov considers *Ya idu iskat'* to be a 'pure web series'.⁴⁴⁵ Despite this indie positioning, Prokhorov argues that screenwriter Liza Simbirskaya's approach was closer to the 'post-gay mode of representation' characteristic of US television, which has shifted away from narratives of struggle to embracing and assimilating LGBT identities and queer stories into the mainstream.⁴⁴⁶ The creators certainly seem to have had an international audience in mind given that English subtitles were provided and the series was screened at film festivals in Germany, England, and France, drawing media attention which accumulated hundreds of thousands of views.⁴⁴⁷ Queer series are the most widely circulating sub-genre of web series globally, and *Ya idu iskat'* can still be seen as a gay analogue to the marginal culture of grassroots, lesbian-themed web series produced in Russia in the way it negotiates local and global discourses and experiences of sexuality.⁴⁴⁸ This melded approach recalls the work of BiPanRussia.com, which sought to elucidate different sexual identities under the queer umbrella through loaning English terminology and highlighting the particular issues bi* groups face both globally and within Russia.

⁴⁴⁵ Prokhorov, 'The Reversed Monomyth in a Queer Russian Web Series', 2. Unfortunately, the series has recently been removed from YouTube and is now unavailable online.

⁴⁴⁶ Prokhorov, 8.

⁴⁴⁷ Prokhorov, 3.

⁴⁴⁸ Ratilainen, 'Lesbian Love Stories and Online Popular Culture'.

The way that *Ya idu iskat* treats bisexuality exemplifies these trends, as the writers try to debunk misconceptions, legitimise the label, and show that claiming a queer identity does not need to be a big deal. In episode eight when Roma meets Anya (Taso Pletner) for the first time and assumes she is a lesbian, she chastises him for making assumptions and tells him that she is ‘би’. In the next episode, he expresses his concern to Grisha (Pavel Milen’kin), wondering if it bothers him that Anya is bisexual—but Grisha simply responds that if she likes girls too, they just have more in common to talk about. Roma looks perplexed but listens to his friend. This is the extent of the bisexual storyline in the series, yet these conversations constitute key moments in Roma’s character development as they blur the line between the new queer world he is exploring and the familiar “straight” world he thought he understood. Anya and Grisha’s comments subvert his expectations, demonstrate that someone can be secure in their relationship with a bisexual without fearing they will cheat with the “other” sex, and exemplify the kind of easy identification with labels and queerness that Roma is learning to apply to himself throughout the series.

***Shestnadsat*+ (2021)**

By contrast, *Shestnadsat*+ (2021) is neither a ‘pure web series’ nor completely mainstream; the short film anthology was released on the streaming service KION, which has since removed three of the ten episodes from the platform. Each episode introduces new teenage characters, who are wrestling with real issues that people their age experience—as a lengthy clip of the cast members played before each episode explains. They recommend viewers reach out to trusted loved ones or the anonymous psychological support service available through the number on screen. Only after this exposition is the mandated 18+ rating displayed. This clip, plus the show’s title, directly challenges legislation on appropriate

content for teenagers, essentially re-writing the age warning for censored topics and bringing it in line with the age of consent.

The premise of each episode was developed from popular songs. That intertextuality is instrumental to the narrative structure, as the songs play at key moments in character arcs. KvirKlub categorises two episodes as featuring bisexuality: the seventh episode, *Leti* (dir. Irina Bas), and the tenth episode, *Ya ne boyus'* (dir. Vladimir Bek). The former makes no mention of the label and is structured according to the stereotypical devices explored above: a bisexual love triangle forms following a break-up as a way to aggravate (and later interest) the boyfriend, and it ends with an implied threesome. Ultimately, the plain, straight, good girl protagonist Ksyusha (Polina Shelepova) symbolically dons the “bad bisexual” Dasha’s (Kristina Kucherenko) shiny coat, representing her seismic shift in personality and fulfilling the promise of Mary Gu’s song *Kosichki* (2021), the basis of the episode [‘СЕГОДНЯ ОНА НЕ ВЕРНЁТСЯ ДОМОЙ / ХОРОШАЯ ДЕВОЧКА СТАЛА ПЛОХОЙ’].

Ya ne boyus', by contrast, is set at a party that a gay protagonist is attending. There, he meets two others who, the AirTable entry states, ‘ПРЯМЫМ ТЕКСТОМ ГОВОРЯТ, ЧТО ОНИ БИСЕКСУАЛЬНЫ’. This description is somewhat complicated by the fact that the characters do not technically say “the B word”. Instead, they self-define as people who can fall in love with someone regardless of what is ‘в штанах’ and speak about being able to love both men and women. This dialogue provides the most common definitions for bisexuality while technically leaving the label unsaid and, perhaps, the same-sex attractions of these characters less “fixed”.

The moment when this bisexual (non-)definition occurs is essential to the dénouement. At the party, the protagonist Misha (Illarion Marov), who has just tried and failed to enjoy sexual

contact with a girl, listens intently to the discussion about the possibilities of loving someone with a different gender than you are supposed to—or even loving or being a different gender identity than what is supposed to exist. While some at the party seem unbothered by the thought of two women or two men together, the concepts of ‘трансгендер’, ‘гендерквир’, and ‘небинарный’ are ridiculed. When an apparently bisexual and non-binary character (Taso Pletner) says they could love a transgender person, the guys laugh and say they could probably fall in love with a dog.⁴⁴⁹ Then, when Fil (Mark Eidel’shtein)—the guy from college that Misha is secretly seeing—speaks up about how kissing a boy does not make him gay, and kissing a girl does not make him straight, Misha becomes angry. His actions in the moment (calling Fil a *pidor* and punching him in the face) are contrasted to his desires (unashamedly kissing him).

This internal conflict is developed from the song which formed the basis of the episode, Sergei Sorotkin’s *Beisya serdtse, vremya bitsya* (2016), about of a young man who wants to stop fighting himself and give into love but is scared of the consequences [‘Всё, что страшно потерять / Надо потерять’]. As the lyrics suggest, shortly after the party scene the story resolves with Misha realising that he is holding himself back. He runs down the street to find Fil while remembering their joyful times together. Bi and non-binary characters thus mediate Misha’s journey to self-acceptance. Their liminal identities permit him to question societal expectations as he is confronted by the fact narrow views of gender, sex, and sexuality do not align with the fluidity of his peers’ experiences.

⁴⁴⁹ This echoes the interaction between bisexual guest Maksim and the audience member in *Pro ETO*.

Pogovorim? (2020)

The final artistic production worth mentioning here which is not yet included in KvirKlub's archive is the short film *Pogovorim?* (2020, dir. Katya Mikheeva).⁴⁵⁰ It was produced for Illuminator Info, an initiative which shared invaluable video resources for parents of LGBTQ+ people before its YouTube channel was sadly taken down. The four-minute animation was based on a young woman's lived experience of coming out as bisexual to her family, as revealed in the concluding 30-second interview.

In the animated portion, the protagonist challenges each family member's preconceptions about bisexuality individually: first, her mother's belief that she must have done something wrong as a parent; then her aunt's insistence that a 'нормальная полноценная семья' is made up of a husband, wife, and children, although she does not have that herself; and lastly, her father's dismissal of bisexuality as a valid sexual identity when he jokes about the existence of *triseksualy* as those who love men, women, and Russia. She abandons the claustrophobic domestic spaces of her family's kitchens, with their whistling kettles and uncomfortable conversations, and slides along a zipwire with her suitcase between the boxy Saturn-like planet she is leaving behind to the round moon where her loving girlfriend Natasha is waiting for her.

Slowly, her mother begins to reach out and explains that her negative reaction was due to fear; she sees how the media treats LGBTQ+ people and is scared for her daughter because it will not be easy for her in Russia. At this moment, the narrative focus shifts onto Polina's

⁴⁵⁰ Illuminator Info, YouTube video '18+ ФИЛЬМ О КАМИНГ-АУТЕ "ПОГОВОРИМ?", directed by Катя Микеева (2020). The channel has since been delisted from YouTube.

mother as she takes up the role of the protagonist—it is her emotional journey to accepting her daughter that operates as the key narrative arc. The story resolves with her agreeing to talk about her experience to a support group for LGBTQ+ youth, where she explains that they might just need to give their parents the same amount of time to accept their sexuality as it took them to come to terms with it themselves. Now, mother and daughter wave at each other from the surface of the two planets, managing to keep some emotional closeness despite the different “worlds” they inhabit.

Musical Interlude №3: Bi Bi Bi

Over the course of my project, I have located just two music videos where “the B word” is used. Both were released in the 2020s, but they employ a near opposite politics of bisexual representation. On one extreme is Nastya Rybka’s song *BI* (2020), in which female bisexuality is performed as a glitzy, erotic show of ostentatious wealth. On the other is the gentle ballad originally released under the name *Biseksualka* (2021) by indie artist Oksana Volua, which gives voice to the experience of navigating the world as a bisexual woman.⁴⁵¹

***BI* (2020)**

The original video for Rybka’s *BI* has more than 500,000 views, higher than most other videos on her channel about make-up and how women should behave in relationships with men. Against this backdrop of often quite sexualised heterosexual content, *BI* can be viewed

⁴⁵¹ The song has since been renamed to *Zabludilis’ v zbelaniyakh*.

as an example of bisexual display for a presumed male gaze as the video leans heavily into the fetishization of bisexual women.⁴⁵² Moreover, the image of bisexuality as decadence is reinforced through the *glamour* aesthetic: an essential Russian style in which women are brought into a zombified state of erotic trance through a fantasy of exclusivity and luxury, while being discouraged from political involvement.⁴⁵³

Indeed, the song begins by dismissing the applicability of the feminist fight for gender equality in the modern day, toying with the concept of equal rights by applying the logic to sexual tastes [‘Девочки, мальчики / Все мы давно равны / На вкус одинаковы / Еа’]. Modernity means men and women being equal before the undiscriminating bisexual gaze. These tastes are commercial, too, much like in *Ya lyublyu tebya* two decades earlier: the sets spotlight expensive vehicles (aspirational symbols of masculinity and wealth), alternating between the backseat of a chauffeured taxi and a high-end GoKart arena. The refrain plays on the sonic connection between ‘би’ for ‘bisexual’ and for the beep of a car [‘Ну же погудим / Би би би би / Мама да, я би / Би би би / Я би’]. The song’s association with financial fortune and VIP status plays into the stereotype of bisexuality as a life of sexual excess and the product of consumerism, wanting it all without having to choose: ‘Я на заправке БиБи / Я не хочу выбирать / Дайте мне сразу три / Три, но от слова пять’; ‘В тачке не одни / Любишь сразу три / Ну же заходи / Мерси Ви ай пи’.

A shorter alternative video was released in December that year, named *Bi (Ferrari Black)*. This version is comprised of a series of glamour shots of a glossy black Ferrari and the powerful

⁴⁵² On the fetishisation of bisexual women, see Christine Serpe et al., ‘Bisexual Women: Experiencing and Coping with Objectification, Prejudice, and Erasure’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 20, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 456–92; Amy R. McCole, Michael Thai, and Joel R. Anderson, “‘An Extra Set of Bits for Your Fantasy’: A Qualitative Exploration of Bi + Women’s Fetishization Experiences’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 2025, 1–23.

⁴⁵³ Cassidy, *Russian Style*, 48–49.

engine being maintained by Rybka as she poses. Sporting a black crop top, short shorts, and high heels, she climbs on top of the car and washes it, sometimes squeezing a cylindrical (i.e. phallic) washcloth and ringing it out between her spread legs while looking directly at the camera. This highly stylized overt sexualization of a cleaning role recalls Julie Cassidy's conception of how female "cisgender *travesti*?" operates in the context of post-Soviet postfeminism—particularly in the case of "Putin's Army", where scantily clad women perform standard sets of moves found in porn films, including washing cars, for their leader.⁴⁵⁴ Taken together, the two videos enact an implied heterosexual male fantasy of success widespread in popular culture: a vision of hot cars and a hot woman who cleans and might agree to a threesome (or even fivesome) because she is bisexual.

All this is not to say that no suggestions of male bisexuality are made in the main video. While most shots are focused on same-sex acts between the two women, there are a smaller number between the three men which consequently code everyone as bisexual and polyamorous. The three men put their arms around one another in the car, move as if to kiss, and even share a bath together while blowing up balloons—evidently a suggestion of oral sex.⁴⁵⁵ In the other shots, these men are dressed all in white, emulating the same variety of camp aesthetic produced for Russia's Eurovision performance by Dima Bilan in 2008.⁴⁵⁶ Yet the men's bath scenes are incredibly brief, lasting only a few seconds at a time [0:10-0:13; 1:07; 1:34; 2:20-2:21; 2:27; 3:06]. The men stare at the camera, their gaze inviting the viewer in, but are never shown with any significant physical contact despite their proximity and nudity—the most we see is their shins or arms touching as one leans on another.

⁴⁵⁴ Cassidy, 130.

⁴⁵⁵ The men are also clean-shaven with hairless chests, a look commonly associated with queer effeminacy, as pinpointed in *Chem pakhnut britvy*.

⁴⁵⁶ Cassidy, 'Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay'.

By contrast, the two women are extremely sexualized in this same bathtub. Throughout the video, they squeeze each other's naked breasts and wave their butts at the camera in unison while wearing matching thongs. Rybka licks the other woman's buttocks in a close-up. A similar image of Rybka's tongue glazing another woman's butt cheek was put through a red filter and used as the background image for the lyric video for *BI*, also released in 2020, which to date has 189,000 views. At other times, the two women lock eyes and move up and down each other's bodies excitedly—but whenever they move to kiss, they either break away or the camera jump cuts to another location. The two are therefore not permitted any romantic touch for themselves, only a sexual one for others. Meanwhile, the women's interactions with the men are considerably more wholesome and romantic. In the taxi, they hold hands, hug, or otherwise press against them. The women are doing this not for themselves, but for the male viewer, who is intended to not feel threatened by the bi-coded men in the video. Indeed, the background image for *BI*'s lyric video is edited to resemble an Instagram post; and this act of referencing a highly artificially posed form of social media signals bisexual performativity for the gaze (and likes) of others, rather than as authentic acts of attraction.

***Biseksualka* (2021)**

To the extent that Rybka's *BI* suppresses emotion between women in favour of their looks, Volua's *Biseksualka* seeks to illuminate the internal emotional life of a bisexual woman attempting to negotiate her romantic interests. Whereas many of the songs described above have presented women's (bi)sexual fluidity as, conversely, either an openness for your male partner to enjoy, or a source of distrust for him, Volua's song speaks to the specifically bisexual tragedy of having others wrongly define your sexuality under their binary framework. The indie artist narrates the internal experience of trying to make sense of your

desires when others do not believe in the possibility of having a stable bisexual identity, which has, perhaps, made you unable to believe in its existence yourself. The lyrics recall pressure to make a choice not only between partners but between men and women as a life-long commitment [‘Если в двоём, то до конца’]. The persona does not yet know how she wants to define herself [‘Кто все эти люди, / Кто среди них я?’] and feels pulled in multiple directions [‘Заблудилась в желаниях’]. Ultimately, Volua subverts the usual bisexual refusal to choose (keeping both partners) by rejecting them both [‘Ты тонкий и звонкий / Сердце девицы разлетается на осколки / Ты жёсткая прочная / Пошли прочь от меня / Прочь’].

In a 41-second video made to promote the song, Volua is pictured with a man and woman standing against a blank wall where images of fireworks, church windows, and blossoms are projected over them.⁴⁵⁷ Their poses and expressions shift as they stand sometimes embracing, sometimes apart, in different combinations. Threesomes, sequential bisexuality, confusion, and the expectation to choose are all tropes incorporated into *Biseksualka*. Yet the distinctly bisexual subjectivity articulated in the lyrics, along with the way these topoi are treated in the video, affords the song the status of a self-aware microcosm of some of the most persistent themes among audio-visual bisexual representations. The final image of Volua, happily alone and smiling at her bold rejection of both suitors, places importance on getting to know yourself, being in touch with your emotions, and finding pleasure on your own terms. This is an unsurprising moral, perhaps, for an artist whose musical catalogue includes pioneering a new genre of “dildo-pop”, an uncompromisingly sex-positive approach to creating music through the sounds of a vibrator; and accompanied by animated videos in which, for

⁴⁵⁷ Experiences not only of religious oppression, but of empowerment, among queer Russians have been analysed by Polina Kislitsyna, ‘Religious Experiences in Life Stories of Homosexuals and Bisexuals in Russia’, in *Decolonising Queer Experience*, ed. Emily Channell-Justice (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), 173–88.

example, women joyfully ride dildo rockets from their beds to the new (orgasmic and masturbatory) heights of the cosmos.⁴⁵⁸

Conclusions

Judith Butler's recent book on the international "gender critical" movement identifies gender as a phantasm: a site onto which anxieties over the moral decline of society are wrongly projected.⁴⁵⁹ Fear that a more flexible understanding of gender will destroy civilisation and erode rights (of women, of the nuclear family, etc.) ironically causes the erosion of rights and protections through gender-based violence and anti-LGBTQ+, anti-women legislation. This chapter has suggested that bisexuality in Russian audio-visual culture has a similarly phantasmic nature.

The intangible threat posed by bisexuality certainly provided drama and suspense enough for *Kholodnyi front*'s ominous storyline, wherein the untrustworthy bisexual adopted chimera-like, vampiric traits. But even in those audio-visual texts which adopted the threat of bisexuality less conspicuously, the bisexual was more often than not used to signal moral decline. This was especially true in productions of the early 2000s, like *Ya lyublyu tebya* and *Zakrytie prostranstva*, when the arrival of a new sexualised marketplace sparked concern that Russia faced a crisis of morality and masculinity.

⁴⁵⁸ *Kosmonavtka* (2021). Sex and masturbation as a means of self-discovery and a medium of knowledge about the self are themes further explored in literature and poetry in Chapter IV.

⁴⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, 2024).

The same theme reverberated in music videos, from the bisexual drama in the sterile shopping centre of *Nelyubov*’, to the rage of *Akt.Love* and the decimation of the bisexual mannequin in *Modnaya lyubov*’. Over a decade later, *BI* dramatized that association of bisexuality with fashion which was so feared by her *mama*’s generation. It used that sexual rebellion to glamourise a life of luxurious wealth only achieved by embracing the knowledge that sex sells in a hyper-capitalist marketplace. Indeed, when “the B word” was said, bisexuality was not necessarily given better treatment in the narrative. Instead, bisexual characters in *Zhestokost*’, *Ya idu iskat*’, and *Shestnadsat*’+ were secondary and existed to walk the line between mainstream and queer sensibilities, propelling the main character onward in their negotiation of individual (sexual) liberation through their example.

Yet were these treatments of bisexuality on screen markedly different to those in literature? Which themes and narrative devices got taken up or contested by writers? And how did those wanting to reflect their own bisexual subjectivity in their work create innovate bi aesthetics in Russian? It is to these questions that I turn in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV

Putting the Bi in *Biblioteka*: Toward a Bisexual Literary Canon

How might scholars go about determining a bisexual literary canon? Which texts should be included, and why do we need to distinguish between bisexual and other ‘queer’ texts in the first place? What, exactly, do we gain from analysing a text from a specifically bisexual perspective? In the recommended list of bisexual texts put together by the activists behind BiPanRussia.com, only one Russian narrative made the cut: Vladimir Sorokin’s *Tridtsataya lyubov’ Mariny* (written 1982-4, published 1995). All other texts were translations, primarily from English. Meanwhile, Biblioteka LGBTIK’s Google Drives include gay, lesbian, and trans groupings, but no bisexual classifications. KvirKlub’s AirTable for literature includes a bisexual tag, but unlike the corresponding film database, no explanations are provided for which elements indicate bisexuality.⁴⁶⁰

In this chapter, I propose a broader bisexual Russian canon consisting of texts which, for the most part, have not been included in these projects. I investigate the various strategies that Russian authors have employed to situate their work in a distinctly bisexual space. While justifying each text’s inclusion in that bisexual canon, I analyse *how* bisexuality is mobilised in relation to its plot, characters, style, and other themes. I am interested, therefore, not only in cases where bisexuality is named and represented as an identity, but in cases where bisexuality is imagined as a “slippage” between homosexual and heterosexual lives, relationships, and

⁴⁶⁰ At the time of writing, the database includes 236 records for texts written between 1852 and 2023, of which 17 fictional works originally written in Russian are tagged as featuring bisexuality in some way, two of them prominently: KvirKlub, ‘Bibliothèque, CSV Format’, AirTable, n.d., <https://airtable.com/apprsmwQY0P5FzPHh/shrGRsq07rq11UyRs/tblkwI2kDPXhdduNO>. While neither my chapter or this database claim to provide a complete list of bisexual works written in Russian (many may have been lost or simply not yet identified), it is interesting to note that both lists are weighted towards the late 1990s and early 2000s on the one hand, and post-2018 on the other. Only a small selection of texts are found to represent bisexuality in between the first regional gay propaganda laws circa 2006, and the late 2010s, when queer activism and culture was reinvigorated after several years under the national ban.

(sub)cultures. I demonstrate that the societal, familial, and political forces imagined as the cause of an individual's bisexual "slippage" speak to the same discourses of bisexuality circulating in audio-visual materials. Namely, those of; hypersexuality and group sex; national identity around the collapse of the Soviet Union; and, more recently, (semi-)autobiographical accounts focused on bisexuality as an identity.

I group texts according to their form (prose, poetry, and short pieces in journals) to better highlight the influence of literary traditions to the development of bisexual poetics in various styles of texts. I further organise the texts chronologically within these genre groupings, noting a shift in tone and motivation between the earlier texts and more recent works. Broadly speaking, the former are more frequently written by male authors adopting a darkly satirical tone and employing Soviet settings and reminiscences to investigate (bi)sexual fluidity. The latter, meanwhile, are frequently written by female authors aiming for "authentic" and perhaps uplifting representations of lived experiences of bisexuality which draw on globalised LGBTQ+ culture and language. Finally, I explore the innovative linguistic and structural strategies developed primarily in poetry to articulate bisexual subjectivity in their work. The sense that the bisexual individual is fragmented—or split in two—becomes an impetus for breaking apart syllables, dividing structures in half, and alternating between masculine and feminine addressees.

Reading Bisexual Literature

Scholarship on bisexual representation has so far focused largely on film. The tendency has been to prioritise the screen, as major motion pictures and TV series can more easily be linked to stereotypes or biphobia experienced in the bisexual community. Fewer bi theorists

have engaged with novels or poetry; and there have been no monographs or edited volumes centred around the topic of bisexuality in literature, meaning that the specific dimensions of bi-themed writing have not been as comprehensively theorised.

What work has been done instead primarily attempts to reclaim particular texts or even authors as bisexual. The approach of using literature to “prove” bisexual identity is rightly contentious: ‘bisexual activists have insisted that Sappho and Oscar Wilde, for example, were really bisexual rather than lesbian and gay. [...]o insist that these characters were really bisexual or transsexual is often politically counterproductive as well as historically oversimplified, telling us far more about contemporary concerns than about the past’.⁴⁶¹ Indeed, some attempts to put forward bi readings have made anachronistic motivations explicit by naming ‘today’s bisexual erasure’ as complicit in rendering historical literary representations invisible.⁴⁶² Along these lines, the studies so far on bisexual literature tend to pick out textual evidence of bi behaviour and identity, rather than engage with questions of structural or aesthetic trends across bisexual texts. When many texts are considered together, the conclusions drawn usually pertain to ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ representations.⁴⁶³ The present chapter addresses this lacuna in the research first by avoiding judging according to these metrics, and secondly by emphasising matters of style and form designed to enhance bisexual characterisations, themes, and metaphors.

⁴⁶¹ Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces*, 119.

⁴⁶² Christine L. Roland, ‘Jane Eyre, The Invisible Bisexual: Bisexual Erasure in Historical Literature’, *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*, 4, no. 1 (2023): 1–8.

⁴⁶³ B. J. Epstein, “‘The Case of the Missing Bisexuals’: Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 14, no. 1 (2014): 110–25; Audrey T. Heffers, ‘Resisting Monosexism: Representations of Bisexuality in Literature’, *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 30 (2020); Elizabeth L. Chapman, ‘We’re Not Here and We’re Not Queer: Bisexual Erasure and Stereotyping in French Young Adult Fiction’, in *International LGBTQ+ Literature for Children and Young Adults*, ed. B. J. Epstein and Elizabeth L. Chapman (London: Anthem Press, 2021), 29–54.

It is worth noting that an emergent direction of research into bisexual literature concerns Young Adult novels.⁴⁶⁴ Scholarship has dealt specifically with the issue of “compulsory binarization”, that is, the assumption that a character must be homosexual or heterosexual unless otherwise labelled.⁴⁶⁵ This issue is not unique to YA, as “Typically, bisexual texts fall into a space of exclusion from both “straight” and lesbian communities or canons, because, like people, texts pass in different categories.”⁴⁶⁶ This work has argued against mechanisms of bi-erasure, suggesting that effective bisexual representation in fiction must name bisexuality in the text and challenge binaries and stereotypes.⁴⁶⁷ However, as I showed in Chapter III in the case of *Zhestokost'* (2007), *Ya idu iskat'* (2020), and *Shestnadsat'+* (2021), naming bisexuality, even within statements challenging stereotypes, does not fully overcome normative uses of bisexuality as a plot device for another character’s progression.

The scholarship on stereotyping and desexualising bisexuality in YA is of limited use for research into bisexuality in Russian literature given the near impossibility of legally publishing LGBTQ+ fiction for minors since 2013. Before the extension of the law in 2022, translations of popular YA series with LGBTQ+ themes or characters were often shrink-wrapped and rated 18+; others had queer storylines redacted without seeking permission from the author.⁴⁶⁸ When Popcorn Books, an imprint focusing on queer literature, published Elena Malisova and Katerina Sil’vanova’s *Leto v pionerskom galstuke* (2021) and its sequel *O chem molchit lastochka* (2022)—which were originally written in Russian and recount a love story of

⁴⁶⁴ Epstein, “‘The Case of the Missing Bisexuals’: Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers”; Bonnie Kneen, ‘Neither Very Bi Nor Particularly Sexual: The Essence of the Bisexual in Young Adult Literature’, *Children’s Literature in Education* 46 (2015): 359–77; Jennifer Coletta, ‘The Missing B Word: Compulsory Binarization and Bisexual Representation in Children’s Literature’, *Jennesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 10, no. 1 (2018): 85–108; Chapman, ‘We’re Not Here and We’re Not Queer: Bisexual Erasure and Stereotyping in French Young Adult Fiction?’.

⁴⁶⁵ Coletta, ‘The Missing B Word?’.

⁴⁶⁶ Knopf, ‘Bi-Nary Bi-Sexuality’, 145.

⁴⁶⁷ Coletta, ‘The Missing B Word?’.

⁴⁶⁸ Alison Flood, ‘Authors Voice Fury at Russian Publisher Cutting Gay Scene from Novel’, *The Guardian*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/16/authors-fury-russian-censorship-gay-scene-schwab-shades-magic>.

two young men who met at a Pioneer camp in 1986—the unprecedented success quickly led them to become embroiled in a court case. Following the continued persecution resulting from printing this duology, ten publishing professionals, including members of Popcorn Books, have been arrested in Moscow on charges of extremism.⁴⁶⁹

As a result of the above factors, in this chapter I continue to draw primarily on bisexual theory developed for the cinema to produce bisexual readings. In both cases, representations and applications of bisexuality are shaped by the restraints of the form, and many of the same structuring devices apply to written narratives. The triangulated “bisexual plot”, in which the main character is torn between a woman and a man, produces action and suspense.⁴⁷⁰ Scenes of threesomes and group sex evidence sexual interest in men and women at once and often serve as a turning point for the breakdown of a seemingly more stable monosexual pairing or, inversely, for the establishment of a polyamorous arrangement which only brings the original couple closer. The expected flow of narrative time is disrupted, becoming ‘an important issue in reading bisexuality, especially since most readers distinguish the sexual orientation of characters in novels based on the desires or relationships at the end of a text—rather than looking at the fluctuations and variations throughout the novel.’⁴⁷¹ If anything, the metaphorical technique of *bi-textuality* is more consciously adopted and loaded with specific cultural, political, and ideological associations as an author uses bisexuality to provoke debate and express their perspective.

Where the written form distinguishes itself is in the fact that the literary text can frequently provide greater psychological insight into what the bisexual character feels (or often in the case studies below, the bisexual author’s persona of their younger self). I argue throughout

⁴⁶⁹ ‘Russia: Book Publishers Arrested in Anti-LGBTI Campaign’, *Amnesty International*, 15 May 2025.

⁴⁷⁰ Garber, *Bisexuality*, 456–74.

⁴⁷¹ Knopf, ‘Bi-Nary Bi-Sexuality’, 157; cf Stanford, ‘Rethinking Bisexual in/Visibility on Screen’.

this chapter that this literary introspection allows bisexuality to be articulated not only through externally observable signs of desire (relationships, sexual acts, looks between characters) but also through experiences of confusion and ambiguity that the writer deliberately semi-conceals and semi-reveals through language and narration. The reader is effectively invited to ‘wander with the “uncertainty and doubt” that is the bisexual psyche’.⁴⁷²

Prose

Before delving into examples of early post-Soviet bisexual prose, it is important to note the legacy of the two late Soviet texts featuring bisexual women that came before. Neither novel was published for around a decade after it was drafted, but the two share strikingly similar themes and plots.

Late Soviet Literary Legacy

The first is Viktor Erofeev’s *Russkaya krasavitsa*. The novel was written in 1980-2, although it did not appear in print until 1990 and was additionally edited to make it ‘less inhibited’ in 1992. The book is written from the point of view of a bisexual high-class call girl and model named Irina Tarakanova, who recalls the affair she had with the man who got her pregnant, as well as her relationship with her lesbian lover.⁴⁷³ Irina’s attraction to women is framed as another aspect of her sweeping ability for arousal and attributed to being repeatedly raped in childhood by her disabled father. Notably, though she is involved with as many as ten men

⁴⁷² Christopher James Wells, “‘Uncertainty and Doubt’: Heterotopic Bisexuality in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*”, *Journal of Bisexuality* 21, no. 1 (2021): 135.

⁴⁷³ Emily Schuckman-Matthews, “‘The (D)Evolution of the Prostitute in ‘Russian Beauty’””, *The Russian Review* 74, no. 3 (July 2015): 435–51.

and women simultaneously, it is her lesbian lover Ksenia and the homosexual photographer to whom she introduces Irina which leads to downfall when he publishes pornographic pictures of her in an American magazine. The same associations we witnessed in Chapter III between bisexuality and modelling/fashion at the instigation of queer, capitalist Western influence were already visible. The workplace censure Irina undergoes further recalls the experience of lesbians outed and disciplined by the “comrade’s courts”.⁴⁷⁴ That social ostracization pushes Irina to try to save the nation, leading her to turn to mysticism, religion, and eventually, suicide, after she becomes a vessel into which all of Russia’s evil is poured through sexual assault by the undead Soviet literary authority figure Vladimir Sergeevich.⁴⁷⁵

The other is Vladimir Sorokin’s *Tridtsataya lyubov’ Mariny* (written 1982-4, published 1995). Many of the same ideas entangled with female bisexuality motivate the plot. As mentioned above, this novel is the most famous bisexual Russian literary text to date. The protagonist, Marina Ivanova Andreeva, is a piano teacher making a journey around Moscow by taxi across three days in March 1983 to see a string of colleagues, lovers, friends, and dissident acquaintances ‘with whom she exchanges material assets and sexual favours’.⁴⁷⁶ The journey is interrupted through flashbacks to each of her 29 female lovers, as well as dream sequences explaining how Marina became involved in the hippie movement and grew to see Solzhenitsyn as a defender of the true Russia who could heal her personal traumas. These traumas are portrayed as the origin of Marina’s bisexuality: the result of childhood sexual abuse by a teacher at a pioneer camp as well as by her father on a summer vacation before he committed suicide by drowning the next day.

⁴⁷⁴ Stella, *Lesbian Lives*, 49–52.

⁴⁷⁵ Schuckman-Matthews, “The (D)Evolution of the Prostitute in ‘Russian Beauty’”, 436.

⁴⁷⁶ Karin Grell, “When Non-Negotiation Is the Norm. Sorokin’s *Tridtsataya Lyubov’ Mariny* and Marina Tsvetaeva’s *Krysolov’*, *Slavica Bergensia* 9 (2009): 170.

Her bisexuality, borne of paternal authority figures abusing her body, is a response to the equally abusive paternal authority figure that is the Party. This bisexual dissidence ultimately must be “corrected”. When the ‘believing communist’ Sergei Rumiantsev rapes her, this coerced sex is somehow also desired because he closely resembles Solzhenitsyn as a young man.⁴⁷⁷ Submitting to the type of patriarchal authority she respects, Marina experiences her first heterosexual orgasm and becomes assimilated into the collective.⁴⁷⁸ This ‘paradigmatic change’ in ‘political ideas and ethical thought’—instigated in a Soviet factory by a heterosexual orgasm to the sound of a Russian national hymn—is the culmination of her dream to meet the perfect man who can help her overcome the sexual trauma which left her ‘incapable of experiencing an orgasm together with a man’.⁴⁷⁹ In a bi-textual fashion, bisexual Marina is torn between not only men and women but opposing political ideologies: dissidence and patriotism.

The precedent established by Erofeev and Sorokin thus positions bisexual representation as inextricable from commentary on the mechanisms of social control in the USSR and the failures of the Party. Sexual violence serves as a stand in for violence of state actors toward its citizens. Bisexuality is not only symptomatic of trauma but symbolic of a failure to adapt to the collective norms of late Soviet society—an extreme marker of dissidence. Irina and Marina’s sexuality outside of a nuclear family setting is intolerable for the Party, for whom women must conform and serve through motherhood even when father figures fail.⁴⁸⁰ Both have their bisexuality “corrected” through the rape of an alternate paternal figure who they desire as the women seemingly accept the cycle of abuse and their position in the collective,

⁴⁷⁷ Grelz, 171.

⁴⁷⁸ Dirk Uffelmann, ‘Marina’s Thirtieth Love and Dissident Narratives’, in *Vladimir Sorokin’s Discourses: A Companion* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 43–57.

⁴⁷⁹ Grelz, ‘When Non-Negotiation Is the Norm.’, 170.

⁴⁸⁰ Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and The Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

allowing themselves to orgasm anyway. Neither text depicts bisexual identity as much as they present the idea of bisexual slippage between mainstream society and marginalised groups. The ‘excitement’ of the novels is ‘both sexual and ideological, a proud and patriotic erection’.⁴⁸¹

Post-Soviet Reckonings with the Past

As I summarised in the Introduction, Rustam Alexander’s analysis of psychiatric patient Pavel Krotov’s letters concluded that there is little way forward for researchers looking for bisexual sources and identifications in the late-Soviet period.⁴⁸² Dan Healey’s work concurs that pressures to marry young made ‘bisexual experience common to the gay man’s biography’; and the impact of ‘social proscription’ is further echoed by Stephen Amico, with the addendum that the label bisexual was perceived as trendy or a sign of “complexes”.⁴⁸³ Lesbian activist Evgeniya Debryanskaya cited the Soviet housing registration system as an obstacle not only to freedom of movement but to dating and co-habitation with a same-sex partner.⁴⁸⁴ Despite these complicating factors, early post-Soviet authors took advantage of relaxed censorship and the new market to retrospectively and fictitiously document bisexual lives and identities in the past.

Male Bisexuality in the GULAG

One example of a text which not only negotiated the legacy of bisexuality being used in ideologically-driven scenes of sexual violence, but succeeded in eroticising a space that could

⁴⁸¹ Borenstein, *Overkill*, 76.

⁴⁸² Alexander, ‘Taming the desire’.

⁴⁸³ Healey, ‘Active, Passive, and Russian’, 219; Amico, *Roll over, Tchaikovsky!*, 10 and 137.

⁴⁸⁴ Hammond, ‘Gay Activism in Russia’. My thanks to the IHLIA.

not easily be taken up by gay male pornography, was Gennady Trifonov's *Setka* (1994, republished 2005). The novella follows two *zeks* who come to self-identify as bisexual, drawing not only on the specific history and association of same-sex sex in the GULAG camps and Soviet prison system but the author's own experience of incarceration. Given that Trifonov was imprisoned after being arrested in 1976 under the anti-sodomy laws, his *tyuremnyi roman* stands out as an incredibly important text for reconstructing a history of men who had sex with men in the camps.

Reading *Setka* in this way is especially meaningful because most memoirists avoided discussion of same-sex sex in the camps, leaving us with a minimal canon of queer GULAG testimony.⁴⁸⁵ When writers such as Evgeniya Ginzburg and Varlam Shalamov do discuss it, they tend to exhibit an extreme, tangible disgust toward the men and women involved, describing them in zoomorphic terms and distancing themselves through appeals to class differences and the type of sentences being served.⁴⁸⁶ Men and women discovered to be engaging in same-sex sex (or who were openly doing so) found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, below even political prisoners. They were themselves hierarchically split between the 'active' and 'passive' partners. Male, sexually passive partners known as *petukhi* were at the disposal of the active *kozly* and made to perform menial tasks or endure arbitrary humiliation.⁴⁸⁷ Witnesses record instances such as new prisoners being forced into a "degraded" squad, raped, and beaten to death.⁴⁸⁸ Indeed, GULAG slang pertaining to sexuality featured extensive terminology to describe various specific acts of sexual violence, as well as derogatory names for the people partaking, particularly "passively".⁴⁸⁹ There were

⁴⁸⁵ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 227–43; Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 27–50.

⁴⁸⁶ Kuntsman, 'With a Shade of Disgust'.

⁴⁸⁷ Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 36.

⁴⁸⁸ Masha Gessen, 'The Gay Gulag: A Survivor Recalls His Nightmare Years in a Soviet Prison', *Advocate*, 23 February 1993.

⁴⁸⁹ Kozlovskii, *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury*; Mielke, *The Russian Homosexual Lexicon*.

several specific slurs for bisexuals: ‘биссектриса’, ‘двужопый крокодил’, ‘двужопое чудовище’ and ‘двустволка’.⁴⁹⁰ It seems that even these seemingly niche bisexual terms bled out past the zone into a more general use, as one of the bisexual interlocutors (woman b. 1979) of Polina Kislitsyna’s study on non-heterosexuals recalled being shamed as a ‘грязной ДВУСТВОЛКОЙ’.⁴⁹¹

While *Setka* may be fictional, written not at the time but decades after Trifonov’s own experience, his text nonetheless deserves to be considered a part of the small, buried canon of queer Gulag testimony. Trifonov draws on an insider understanding of how the late-Soviet penal system operated without shying away from discussing the spectrum of same-sex sexuality (consensual or otherwise) which he no doubt encountered there. His novella highlights how alongside the hostility and degradation, prisoners were also able to form meaningful romantic and sexual relationships with one another.

His dramatization of this clash between scenes of trauma, and those of serenity and sensuality, echoes other rare contemporaneous queer writing from the camps, such as the cycle of poems Anna Barkova wrote for her camp girlfriend Valentina Makotinskaya in 1954.⁴⁹² The most pertinent of these poems in comparison to *Setka* is perhaps her poem *Obyknovennyi uzhas*, which likewise describes a tender relationship despite the brutal environment, the exhaustion of the prisoners’ bodies through hard labour, and the hostility of the eyes and ears around them who might witness and snitch on their love. While the people around them had been beaten down and lost their humanity, their bright human faces

⁴⁹⁰ Mielke, *The Russian Homosexual Lexicon*, 60–61.

⁴⁹¹ Kislitsyna, ‘Mnogoznachnaya bisexual’nost’, 83.

⁴⁹² Geordie Kenyon-Sinclair, ‘Anna Barkova’s 1954 Love Lyrics in the Gulag’ (conference paper abstract, n.d.), https://www.aatseel.org/100111/pdf/abstracts/1924/Kenyon_Sinclair.PDF.

transformed into ‘морды’, the two women’s love for each other kept the memory of another time alive.

Trifonov’s novella, written from the first-person perspective of *zek* Sasha Korolenko, recounts a sexual and romantic relationship blossoming with fellow inmate Sergei Obraztsov.⁴⁹³ The gentle affection that develops between the two men is contrasted to the degradation and violence integral to the forced sexual hierarchy around them. Their love helps them retain their humanity against the backdrop of terror. It also leads Sasha to question his sexuality: he has never been with a man before, so confides in Sergei that their relationship changed his sense of self. Importantly, although we know from the outset that his relationship with Sergei evolves into a loving one (the opening scene is their heartfelt kiss goodbye), Sasha’s thoughts during their first sexual encounter oscillate between excitement and anxiety. Officially belonging to a different brigade, Sasha details the events that led him to spend his time working for Sergei in the mechanical workshop. One night, Sergei insists they go finish up something urgent. With his blanket still wrapped around him, Sasha reluctantly follows him to a room where Sergei locks the door quietly behind them. He moves close to Sasha before kissing him, stroking him, and pinning him with his full body weight when Sasha asks him to stop [‘не надо, я боюсь’] and starts to tremble partly in pleasure, partly in fear [‘мне стало и страшно, и приятно’; ‘Мне было и страшно, и счастливо!']. A short time passes before Sasha returns his kisses and feels a flurry of emotions [‘страх, возбуждение, любопытство, нежность к нему, доверие и даже некая смелость...’].

Sasha’s arousal ultimately outweighs his fear (and dubious initial consent), but he still panics the next morning that Sergei will reveal what happened:

⁴⁹³ Perhaps due to the timing of the book’s republication, or perhaps due to the intensity of the connection that forms between them, the 2005 blurb describes the plot as the *Twilight* of the GULAG.

«Ну все, пиздец, — думал я. — Опустят, загонят в „петушинный“ отряд и будут трахать все, кому не лень. Неужели Сергей окажется такой подлой скотиной? Но разве такое бывает? А может, нет. Может, все будет нормально, все путем, и я только напрасно сам себя накручиваю».

His worry stems from the fact that not only was he the passive partner but, regardless, he has less authority and influence than Sergei. If discovered, he would be condemned to a life of misery as a communal *petukh*. He launches into a long reflection on the sexual violence he witnessed in his time in the *spetsPTU*, though it does not compare to the treatment of *petukhi* in the general camps: ‘Они живут жизнью, которую и жизнью назвать язык не поворачивается [...] На них страшно и, признаюсь, противно смотреть. Забитые, замученные, зачумленные, они производили впечатление не людей, а теней.’ The intensity of love the reader knows Sasha and Sergei will feel for each other by the end of the story may negate these concerns, but his doubt and the precarity of their relationship remains integral to the narrative and Trifonov’s interrogation of the extent to which real romance and trust could form in the Zone. Indeed, the qualifier ‘здесь’ dominates the novella, limiting their bond spatially and temporally due to the fixed-term nature of their stint: ‘я чувствовал, что я ему нужен, даже необходим здесь, и был счастлив.’; ‘Но здесь ты — моя семья.’; ‘Я засыпал с мыслью о Сергее и о том, что теперь здесь я не один, а нас двое, мы вместе, и каждый — друг для друга и друг за друга’.

Nonetheless, Trifonov pre-empts dismissals of their intimacy being solely due to the loneliness, showing what the two men feel to be more than “situational homosexuality”. While Sasha may not have experienced sexual attraction toward men *na vole*, he suspects that Sergey has had a string of male lovers before him—wondering if he is an ‘очередной мальчик’ and noting Sergei’s confidence when instructing him ‘делай то же, что и я’. In a conversation about their past and future attractions (and how their current relationship fits into their lives and identities outside the camps), Sergei assuages some of Sasha’s anxieties

by suggesting that they are both ‘бисексуалы’.⁴⁹⁴ More than that, Sergei introduces him to the idea of a spectrum of sexuality, including implying through a superlative that there are multiple gradations of bisexuality: ‘Вот это и есть самая настоящая бисексуальность, когда и с девочками, и с мальчиками хорошо’. Interestingly, this statement also makes a distinction between people who *have* sex with both men and women, and those who consistently *enjoy* (‘хорошо’) sex with both. They are the most “real” because they *do* enjoy sex with men and women alike. We can picture this “truest” form as the middle of the Kinsey Scale, which, as I showed in Chapter I, was much discussed in the 1990s alternative press in relation to the theorised origins of homo/bisexuality and its modern expression.

Of course, the implied distinction Sergei makes between bisexual behaviour and identification reflects the challenges that prove so troubling for historians like Alexander and Healey. They are rightly concerned with the difficulty of determining motivations and distinguishing between people who were attracted only to the same sex but married out of necessity, and those who maintained relationships with men and women because they felt desire towards more than one gender. Nonetheless, it seems clear that in this literary case, Trifonov is using bisexual identification to separate out Sergei and Sasha’s reciprocal, romantic relationship from the frequently violent acts of same-sex sex which other men had due to a craving for intimacy—the bisexuality of these protagonists stems from who they are in themselves, outside the camp, and not only from how they act under the pressures of its confines.

Still, the limitations of the historical source base go some way to explaining why Healey dismissed the discussion of bisexuality in this text, seeing it as a barrier to ‘embracing [...]’

⁴⁹⁴ This term is used once in the novella, and ‘бисексуальность’ twice.

gay desire'. His interpretation of Sasha as 'eschew[ing] bisexuality in favor of a preference for men himself', while at the same time seeing 'the diagnosis of bisexuality leav[ing] Korolenko, the novel's hero, the psychological freedom to return to "normal" heterosexuality upon release from prison' overlooks that this is a reversal of expectations vis-à-vis past and future relationships.⁴⁹⁵ Importantly, the two men each share different dreams for the kind of life they would like to lead. Sasha, inexperienced with same-sex relationships, worries that being with women will no longer be enough after his release [‘Что мы будем делать, если на воле с девками будет не в кайф? Захочется с парнем, а где его взять?’]; while Sergei, who has been with men before, expresses an ongoing desire to build a nuclear family life [‘Конечно, каждому нормальному человеку хочется иметь свою семью, свой угол, уют, домашнее тепло.']. Instead of noting the shifts in desire and the characters' relationships over the life course, Healey focuses only on the gender the characters anticipate being with at the end of the narrative (as Knopf pinpoints as a common barrier to bisexual literary analysis above). Finally, this interpretation does not account for the fact that the couple's penultimate act of intimacy is initiated by the sight of young men having sex with women in the park next to the local town's *diskoteka*, which they watch from the roof of the hilltop barracks. By depicting his protagonists continuing to find apparently "heterosexual" sex erotic, Trifonov triangulates their desire and brings together the sequential with the simultaneous within the present moment, resisting the mononormative narrative pressures to "choose".

⁴⁹⁵ Healey, 'Active, Passive, and Russian', 230.

Bisexual Satire of Soviet Life

Where Gennady Trifonov sought to depict closeness between men in the camps beyond sexual violence and fill a void in testimony, the writer Vadim Kalinin took a near opposite approach. The absurd plot lines of Kalinin's darkly satirical stories draw on specific Soviet cultural touchpoints, using bisexuality as a marker of the unravelling system which puts diametrically opposed ideologies and lives together. Born in Moscow in 1973, Kalinin is a bisexual writer who published poetry and prose in *Vavilon*, *Mitin zhurnal*, and *ARGO-RISK*, among other Russian-language journals, in the early 2000s. His short stories were published in print by Kolonna in 2002 as *Kilogramm vzryvchatki i kokaina*, though several of the collection had already been posted on Gay.ru in a small section dedicated to his work.⁴⁹⁶ According to an interview with Ed Mishin, first captured by the WayBack Machine on 11 May 2000, approximately a third of Kalinin's stories constituted '«тематическая» проза'.

While attributing his uniquely bisexual viewpoint ['формирования бисексуального взгляда на вещи'] to an interest in gay culture developed in puberty, Kalinin explains that he sees his protagonists as sharing his bisexual subjectivity rather than being gay.⁴⁹⁷ Having been with his wife for seven years at the time of the interview, this had not prevented the occasional affair. As described in the Introduction, Kalinin contrasts the ease of his relationships with other women to those with bisexual men, who he terms *simii*. This play on *goluboi*—suggesting that bisexuals are simply another shade of blue—was similarly evoked in an amateur short

⁴⁹⁶ The section was live between approximately 2000 and 2005. 'Vadim Kalinin: Ob avtore', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 8 July 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000708100709/http://www.gay.ru/art/literat/kalinin/index.htm>; 'Vadim Kalinin: Ob avtore', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 23 December 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000708100709/http://www.gay.ru/art/literat/kalinin/index.htm>.

⁴⁹⁷ Mishin and Bulavin, 'Vadim Kalinin'.

story posted to Gay.ru in 1998.⁴⁹⁸ It seems, then, that the term either enjoyed at least some currency among bi men at the time who wanted to distinguish their bisexual behaviour and lifestyle from gay experience and identities, or that there was an attempt to invent vocabulary which might capture this. In Kalinin's use, it seems to specifically refer to bisexual men who are romantically or sexually involved with both a man and a woman at the same time: 'Даже между двумя людьми сложно сохранить хорошие отношения, а уж между тремя – это вообще кошмар.' Yet he explains that his wife always accepted his other relationships, and 'даже не прочь была развлечься втроём – она сама любит девочек.'

Bisexuality for Kalinin, then, is necessarily triangulated, unsuited to family life, and therefore frequently temporary and transactional. It is from this understanding of bisexuality that the tension of his plots most frequently arises. In *Chudaki*, Petr is deep inside his partner Oleg (despite having a short penis) as they travel by train—the *купе* door opens and in walks Oleg's ex, Olga, and her new husband Vasily. They all exchange social niceties and refuse to acknowledge the public sex even as the motion of the train, rushing past churches 'по русской России', shakes them and simulates thrusting. Kalinin refers to this story as an example of how his characters exhibit a specifically bisexual behaviour and subjectivity:⁴⁹⁹

Хоть мои рассказы не автобиографичные, тем не менее, ментальность моих героев отнюдь не геевская – она бисексуальная. Взять, например, рассказ «Чудаки» - два молодых человека, оба бисексуалы, один из них встречает в поезде свою любовницу – вот вам, пожалуйста, бисексуальная тематика.

Indeed, the collection was swiftly reviewed by Linor Goralik, a Ukrainian-Israeli author who emphasises the uniquely bi aspects of Kalinin's writing: 'самым экстремистским аспектом всего сборника показалось мне изумительное изнасилование архетипов путем

⁴⁹⁸ Roman, 'Kak ya stal biseksualom', Gay.ru, Internet Archive, 14 June 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/19980614083430/http://www.gay.ru/bisex1.htm>.

⁴⁹⁹ Mishin and Bulavin, 'Vadim Kalinin'.

перенесения их в бисексуальный (именно не гомосексуальный, а бисексуальный) аспект.⁵⁰⁰

Goralik here pinpoints bisexuality as a narrative device allowing for shocking “slippage” between the accepted to the sexually or ideologically dissident:

Вот что ценно мне тут: проза Калинина, несмотря на то, что в ней постоянно совокупляются мужчины и мужчины, — не гомосексуальная, а бисексуальная, и для меня, пока я читала, все интриги строились не на закрученном сюжете и не на гомосексуальных страстях, а на этом вот переходе от «гетеро» к «гомо», от размеренного и общепринятого к как бы экстремальному, как бы эпатажному. И каждый раз в темном переходе поджидала меня, радостно урча, мысль о такой любви как об отдушине, и раз за разом я попадала в ласковые ее лапы и понимала: выход здесь.

Kalinin’s satirical tone and perspective on bisexual dynamics within/beyond a marriage is quickly established by the first story in the collection, *Neveroyatnaya i pechal’naya istoriya Mishki Shtrykova i ego zhestokoserdoi zheny*. We are introduced to Misha as his wife, Masha, walks in on him having sex with unnamed male friend. The friend panics and jumps out the window, breaking both the glass and two of his ribs, while Misha, acting on shocked instinct, punches his wife in the eye as she squeals at her discovery. Masha, however, had been supporting him financially up until now, paying the bills through her modelling career. Her beautiful face now ruined, she immediately decides that Misha will have to become the breadwinner of the family and earn with his arse [‘—Жопой!'].

Masha thus forces Misha into a life of prostitution, calling his first two clients that very minute with one phone in each hand. Here, Kalinin responds to the trope of the ‘hard-currency prostitute’ that had been widely circulating in Russian *chernukha* and perestroika

⁵⁰⁰ Linor Goralik, ‘Nasilovat’ ikh na puti k dalekomu Alefu: Vadim Kalinin, Kilogramm vzrvyvatki i vagon kokaina. - Tver’: Kolonna, 2002.’, *Russkii zhurnal*, 20 March 2002, <http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/nasilovat-ih/>.

cinema.⁵⁰¹ The clothing they arrive in also recalls the contrasting attires of Slavophiles and Westernizers in the nineteenth century, one man wearing a white *khalat* and the other a dark-blue waistcoat, further tying the tale to the great debates (another binary) of Russia's past. Soviet/Russian imperialism is critiqued as Misha waits on a sofa that appears 'необъятного, как украинская степь', and the two men take him together and then in turn. This initial scene of sex work embodies geopolitics: Masha's ears pressed to the two receivers stand in for Russia's double-headed eagle looking East and West, which are in turn represented by the two clients; while Misha, sexually sacrificed as the vast Ukrainian land "buffer" between Russia and Europe, is attacked from both sides.

Over the next three weeks, the situation escalates and the clientele grows until Misha's anus hurts from accepting the seemingly never-ending queue of naval officers and film directors at an expensive hotel. Masha orders him special ointment from Hollywood which she rubs onto him while he cries and she spoon-feeds him black caviar; his pain is so acute that he is afraid to eat and therefore need to use the bathroom. The abject here contrasts sharply with the luxury food, marking a twisted fantasy of money to burn and an inexhaustible supply of men to sleep with. The success of this sex work business leads Misha on tour before setting up a base in Yalta. It is not long before the *Sovet Obshchestva Zashchity Seksual'noy Bol'shinstva* steps in and frees Misha, initiating him into a high-profile public life as a saved representative of the "sexual majority". His new regimen includes stereotypically masculine activities such as fishing and rock climbing, alongside heavy drinking, eating at multiple banquets a day, and nights of 'здоровым сексом' with five or six ladies back-to-back to prove himself. He prefers this to the 'ад, которым стала для него супружеская постель'.

⁵⁰¹ Borenstein, *Overkill*, 15.

Yet the Duma soon forces him to return to Masha when tourism in the region fell fourteen times upon the closure of his gay prostitution business, damaging the local economy. Eventually, following more sex work, advertising campaigns promoting the unique benefits of his buttocks, and surprising shenanigans with guns and explosives, Misha manages to muster the strength to leave after he sees Masha cry and realises that if she can be weak, he can be strong. The overarching plot might then be seen as a reversal of the tropes of bisexuality established by Erofeev and Sorokin, and not only in terms of the gender of the protagonist. Kalinin's story features a bisexual man begins and ends with dissident independence, while the middle of the story's action involves submitting to first matriarchal, and then Party, power and sexual abuse. His bisexuality also came before any sexual trauma – the violence was committed against him as a result of his sexual fluidity, reversing the order of causation.

Other stories in the collection follow suit, blending Soviet aesthetics and settings with graphic and violent bisexual triangulations. Homoerotic socialist competition is another key theme, for instance, as Kalinin writes about a man sent to assist a legless craftsman in his workshop as punishment for trying to rape men on the street but accidentally attacking a masculine-looking female traffic controller instead. The two men's bodies blend together through their work and they fall into a 'сладкий, напоминающий глубочайший оргазм, транс' filling the workshop with the smell of semen 'в ходе соцсоревнования'. The story concludes with the protagonist being rescued and setting up a hut in swamp where he can lure passers-by and sexually assault them. Sex is something taken seemingly indiscriminately in these stories, but is always rooted in the sociocultural specificities of the late Soviet period.

1970s Moscow and Ukraine

A third text which has not been sufficiently recognised as bisexual in the literature is Faina Grimberg's *Mavka* (2001), which again captures a markedly different style and tone from the above. The thematization and historical contextualization of the text is far more complex than the length of the *povest'* might suggest: *Mavka* was first published across 26 A4 pages in *Znamya* [No.10, 2001, 14-39] and reprinted in a 40-page A5 literary supplement to the journal *Ostrov* in 2003.⁵⁰² Despite the compact nature of the narrative, Grimberg deftly details the impact of decades of Soviet history on an extensive family tree made up of people with mixed Russian, Ukrainian, Polish and Romani heritage. No doubt Grimberg's specialisation in the history of the Balkans at the University of Tashkent in Uzbekistan, from which she graduated in 1975, as well as her later interest in the histories of Bulgaria and Russia, helped in this regard. While she has often been simply called a Russian poet or said to be from Russia, this does not adequately capture the complexity of her position as someone who grew up "on the periphery" in one of the most Russified republics in the former Soviet Union. Along with her work as a translator of several languages (including English, Greek, and Bulgarian), this likely made her especially sensitive to the position of peoples colonised by the Soviet Union and the web of cultural, linguistic and historical connections.

Grimberg uses *bi-textuality* to explore how contradictory characteristics, behaviours, and identities can coexist simultaneously and even harmoniously within a single person, relationship, history, culture, or narrative. In particular, Grimberg employs a Russian-Ukrainian-Romani love triangle to overlay conversations about international relations, Russian imperialism, and other historical and contemporary conflicts and map bisexual

⁵⁰² All page numbers cited in this section refer to the 2003 reprint.

relationship drama onto geographical space. The unnamed Russian-Jewish female narrator recounts her romantic, sexual, and poetic relationship with the Ukrainian-Romani protagonist, Tata Kolisnichenko, and Tata's Ukrainian childhood friend, Andrei Kotchenko, in Moscow in the 1970s.

The narrator first encounters her love interest at the Literary Institute in Moscow, where Tata was accepted in part due to the influence of her Romani father and the Ukrainian-language poems he had encouraged her mother to submit on her behalf (benefiting from her position as *natsmen*). The two soon start living together in hotel rooms, before squatting in an abandoned communal apartment block in a rejection of society and its expectations. When Andrei arrives unexpectedly at their temporary residence, Tata invites him into their relationship—he was the first man she ever slept with, and a secret partner back home. The throuple live and love for a while, apparently without jealousy, reciting plays and poetry to one another and warming each other's bodies. However, Tata continues to struggle with addiction; soon, withdrawing from society is not enough and she withdraws from them too. When she (presumably) takes too much one night, she dies by suicide, jumping from the window in her altered mental state. Her death leaves behind an emptiness which the narrator and Andrei decide to fill through marriage, displacing their grief and projecting their love for Tata onto one another. The story concludes with a note of uncertainty about how this relationship will pan out.

The threesome is one of the most pervasive and easily identifiable tropes of bisexuality, and *Mavka* is no exception:

Ночью мы легли все вместе и после так ложились, всегда, покамест вместе жили. Было очень хорошо, чудесно. А зимой, когда не было тепла в больших батареях, мы согревались друг с дружкой. Было весело щекотаться, совать друг другу руки под мышки, перепутываться голыми ногами и руками и смеяться, и дышать друг дружке на грудь. И очень хорошо было целоваться. У Андрея и у Таты были такие живые,

горячие, какие-то сладкие тела. И особенно было хорошо мне целовать их поочередно в горячую нежную шею, утыкаться губами часто-часто и лицом. Внутри, между грудью и животом, делается такое обмирание, как будто вот-вот сознание потеряешь. Я это называла "шейный оргазм", и мы все смеялись... [29-30]

Emphasising a sense of mutual connection, harmony, and playfulness, the narrator here recalls being with both Tata and Andrei simultaneously. The three enjoyed tickle fights, intertwining their bodies, and keeping each other warm when the radiators gave out in winter. She hyperbolically repeats 'хорошо' three times on top of 'чудесно' and 'весело' to describe a time of kisses and laughter (the verbs 'целоваться' and 'смеяться' also repeat).

In his overview article of Russian lesbian literature, Aleksandr Chantsev recognises that '[i]n the sexual relations among the novella's three main characters such harmony reigns that nothing can cause any jealousy or discord'.⁵⁰³ Yet his focus on how *Mavka* constitutes an example of naturally-occurring sapphic desire that 'contrast[s] with the female poets and singers who "played" at lesbianism in the 1990s because it was "in vogue"' causes him to overlook the bisexuality at the heart of the text.⁵⁰⁴ Instead, he argues that the text spotlights a period of idyllic happiness among outcasts before Tata realizes that it cannot last. In his reading, Tata continues her trend of removing herself from society by removing herself from the relationship, thereby allowing Andrei and the narrator to live as a socially acceptable couple.

Tata, too, leaves the narrator and Andrei, through suicide: as a radical outsider, she understands her own inability to fit into their relationship and the possibility of destroying that relationship and hurting those she cares for most, whereas the narrator and Andrei are able to form an entirely traditional pair (as happens in the novella's finale, when they marry).⁵⁰⁵

Chantsev thus sees the resolution of the narrative as a return to 'tradition', marking the impossibility of queerness as the "heroes" are positioned against the "crowd". Yet this

⁵⁰³ Chantsev, 'Our Attitude Toward This Passion', 68.

⁵⁰⁴ Chantsev, 67.

⁵⁰⁵ Chantsev, 65–69.

argument overlooks Tata's instrumental role in the relationship between the narrator and Andrei, who would never have come together if not for her. The pair is also not entirely traditional: while she does love her husband, she still loves Tata. Through telling her story, she retains and expresses her bisexual subjectivity, showing fluid desires over time. Interpretations of literature and film should recognise such fluctuations in order to "see" bisexuality rather than reducing sexual fluidity to a monosexual identity matching the pairing at the end of the narrative.⁵⁰⁶

The narrator and Tata, then, exhibit both sequential and simultaneous bisexual behaviour, two ways in which bisexuality is frequently conceptualised and narrativized. Unlabelled bisexual behaviour, seen as a more fluid form of sexuality, was essential in Grimberg's objective to depict characters who rejected identity categories in general: '[*Mavka* is] about the period of stagnation that preceded the collapse of the USSR, which was essentially an imperial state, and about the attempt of a strong individual (my heroine, Tat'iana Kolisnichenko) to reject self-identificatory scenarios imposed by society.'⁵⁰⁷ Indeed, Tata's characterisation as a rebellious, bisexual Romani Gypsy means she is positioned in a liminal space between not only heterosexual and homosexual identification, but between being a provincial Ukrainian girl and a metropolitan Russophone intellectual, a Soviet citizen and an ethnic Other. Her mix of ethnicities and claimable identities creates an exoticized erotic difference that simultaneously singles her out as an object of the imperial gaze and provides her with a power to wield over her lovers.

⁵⁰⁶ For instance: Knopf, 'Bi-Nary Bi-Sexuality'; Wilde, 'Gay, Queer, or Dimensional?'; Stanford, 'Rethinking Bisexual in/Visibility on Screen'.

⁵⁰⁷ Chantsev, 90: citing F. Grimberg, "Na storone proigravshikh, ili Filosofskii kamen'," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 71 (2005), 335.

Her anti-identity is a queer response to various national identity crises that ensued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As bisexual geographers researcher Clare Hemmings has established, bisexuality exhibits ‘placelessness’ and is conceived on the borderlands.⁵⁰⁸ This echoes the other key discourse Grimberg is drawing on: the stereotypical representation of Romani Gypsies, who are ‘[u]sually typecast as untouched by any government, as rebellious wanderers always at the borders of nations and centuries’.⁵⁰⁹ Like her bisexuality, her Roma heritage situates Tata on the border. Yet even as she appeals to this image of the wanderer, Grimberg also ties Tata’s sense of self and family very closely into local and national histories, distinguishing *Mavka* somewhat from the ‘typecasting, even in Russia, [which] often goes so far as to deny any local Gypsy commitment, religious or national’ and instead aligns with how ‘Roma nevertheless are and speak of themselves as connected to local places and pasts.’⁵¹⁰

If Tata’s Ukrainian-Romani background is used alongside her bisexuality to underscore social and geopolitical tensions, the Russian narrator’s bisexuality is used to amplify the complexities of form, voice, and positionality. How can we classify *Mavka* as both short story and multi-generational epic? How much of the story is fact versus fabrication? And is her love genuine, or is she simply a stalker who manipulated Tata? The events span across time and geographical space, with the narrator imagining how Tata experienced the world and how others experienced Tata’s beauty throughout her life. The unreliability of the narrative perspective, which begins in the unspecified Ukrainian town where Tata grew up, long before the narrator knew her, only further highlights her obsession.

⁵⁰⁸ Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces*, 190–91.

⁵⁰⁹ Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Post-Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

⁵¹⁰ Lemon, 3.

For instance, she first tracks down Tata at the Institute after hearing about her from a mutual friend, Arkadii Sh., who spoke of her as an unspoilt indescribable beauty: ‘Ему было тогда лет пятнадцать, но он уже был поэт и понял, что́ есть Тата Колисниченко. То есть она не явилась этим самым «кто», а вот именно явилась «что» - явление природы, краса, очарование очам.’ [2]. The narrator checks the lecture lists, seeking Tata out and sneaking into a seminar to orchestrate a meeting. Combined with the possessive objectification of Tata as a “what” and not a “who”, this speaks to Russian/Soviet imperial consumption. The narrator’s voice, representing the imperial gaze—a Russian view of Soviet colonized peoples—takes on a fetishizing and exoticizing character as she finds herself drawn to the erotic difference which Tata’s mixed heritage and ethnicity represents. She relays less fact than fantasy: a romanticized vision of Tata’s life and image. The irony of Tata’s ultimate suicide through overdose is that to the narrator, Tata was the drug: ‘Я вся на ней уже была, как человек, вот уже привык, то есть к наркотику привык, и весь на наркотике, вся жизнь его – на наркотике. Так я была уже вся на ней, с первой той встречи..’ [21].⁵¹¹ The narrator consumed Tata not only like an addict, but like the imperial centre consumes its subjects and peripheries.

Once again, however, Grimberg complicates this dynamic by making the narrator Jewish as well as Russian. Among the otherwise rose-tinted recollections of her time with Tata, one ‘мучительный’ conversation stands out [6]. Discussing the actions of her mother under the occupation, Tata vehemently swears and calls her mother a hero, denies that anyone could

⁵¹¹ The narrator claims to be honest when saying their second meeting was not planned, but she was “led” like an addict to a score: ‘как наркоман вдруг чувствует, куда идти, где он добудет свои травки’ [21]. Her insistence on her honesty, then, in fact is ironically intended to undermine her image of trustworthiness—leaning into a bisexual stereotype of duplicity. See Klesse, ‘Shady Characters’; Moreover, it is no coincidence that the setting for her reunion with Tata is the bathrooms of Yaroslavskii station. Train stations and public toilets were well-known cruising grounds for men who had sex with men. See Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, 99–102; and Fiks, *Rodnaya rech’*. Grimberg appropriates that history here, placing two bisexual women into it to erode this contrast between the Soviet history of male and female queer cultures.

have known that the Jewish population were being rounded up to be shot, and arguing that everyone thought they were being deported. The narrator is outraged too, pointing out that deportation is no good thing either:

утверждала, что ее мама Яся - героиня, и нечего подходить к ней "с этими гребаными советскими мерками". [...] И Тата говорила, что ее мама не обязана была хранить верность "этой деспотии, этой империи", и не знал никто, не предполагал, что евреев потом расстреляют, а думали, что просто депортируют...

Retrospectively, the narrator concedes to the reader that her friend Volodya later convinced her that she cannot speak 'девственно' or always and only from 'с позиции жертвы', due to a parallel situation in Israel (where he saw the two paths ahead to be deporting or shooting Palestinian Arabs) [5-6]. The language in these discussions ['гребаный'; 'девственно'] sexualizes the debate and overlays violent/aggressive, as well as innocent, sexual roles onto their debate about responsibility and guilt in historical and contemporary conflict. That kind of sexualization is commonly applied to discourses of war.⁵¹² After conceding the truthfulness of Tata's final remark in their argument - that nobody is right – we immediately move on to learn about the beginnings of their sexual relationship. This structural decision cements the connection between the international tension/historical conflict and the two women's (bi)sexuality.

Tata's suicide can therefore be read as a commentary on how the difficulties encountered by those who either reject binary modes of thinking or do not conform to convention and expectation: be it through choice or by birth. Importantly, her death is shown to be just the latest in a string of tragedies among other students from the provinces who also died from drug dependency – the overconsumption of alcohol. Specifically, several of Tata's course mates die from 'пьянства и бурного невозддержания' because they started drinking to cope

⁵¹² For instance, in online posts and media covering the war in Ukraine: Gaufman, 'Damsels in Distress'.

with the LitInstitut's lifestyle. The two named characters who die due to this culture are the Yakut girl Yana, and Ira Ch-va the daughter of a Tajik poet. Crucially, this is explicitly related to Russian imperialism as the capital chews them up and spits them out: 'Они чувствовали себя провинциалами, а хотели сделаться столичным людьми; и погибли, как должны были погибнуть провинциалы в столице империи (империя зла-козла)...' [19].

Overall, bisexuality is used alongside a range of other marginalised subjectivities to complicate binary thinking and identity categories on every level of the text. Tata is fetishized and exoticized yet also painted as a complex character negotiating extremely detailed family dynamics and opposing cultural and linguistic spaces. She is an object of desire not only for the narrator, but for the people around her throughout her life; she is rebellious, a non-conformist social outcast who turns down opportunities, is indifferent to her living conditions and takes drugs. Along with her mixed Ukrainian-Romani heritage and migration to the imperial capital, Moscow, this characterisation makes her geographically, linguistically, ethnically, socially, and sexually "on the border". If at first she is unequivocally on the side of Ukrainian independence, swearing against 'гребаными советскими мерками' and Moscow, by the end she perhaps comes to embody the Soviet Union itself. How can the relationship between Russia and Ukraine continue, Grimberg asks, without cultural mediation and translation across borders? Is it doomed to fail like an uneasy marriage? Or will the marriage truly work as a kind of reunification after the loss of what held them together? Bisexuality, then, is mobilised to underscore the major themes of Grimberg's story and pose questions about the future of international relations between the imperial centre and the peoples it occupied and colonised, such as Ukraine.

Autofiction and Authenticity

As indicated above, there was a shift across the period from texts which used bisexuality to satirise or interrogate specific socio-historic contexts, to those in which the aim is to represent bisexual identity in a way deemed authentic to the author's own experiences. The boundaries of bisexual identity and language solidified in Russia over this time. Debates and confusion over who "counted" as bisexual, so prominent in the 1990s and 2000s alternative press and the early forums of Gay.ru, dissipated and distilled into a stricter definition aligned with globalized bisexual identity. The understanding shifted to someone who experiences attraction to men and women throughout their life, rather than bisexuality as an intermediary transitional state, a one-off experience (like a threesome), or ability to cohabit and copulate with both same- and opposite-sex partners. In this section, I contrast two autofictional novels to exemplify this evolution across the period: Almat Malatov's *Dvoichnyi kod* (2005), and Sveta Luk'yanova's *Ya nichego plokhogo ne delayu* (2023).

Bisexual Sex, Soviet Teenagers

A few years after *Kilogramm vzryvchatki i kokaina*, Kalinin wrote the introduction to another bisexual text, Almat Malatov's *Dvoichnyi kod* (2005). He praises how in the experimental autofictional novel, 'Алмат умудряется успешно сочетать в своем alter ego крайние проявления всех трех возможных для мужчины стратегий сексуального поведения. Он и натурал, и гей, и бисексуал одновременно' [6]. Kalinin's metatext frames Malatov's alter ego as encountering three times as many problems due to this triple sexuality compared to 'у привычного нам персонажа' [6]. These descriptions suggest a suspension of identity in alignment with the complexities of the Russian bisexual lexicon which I laid out in the thesis

Introduction. Rather than a purely utopian, label-less queerness of the kind observed by David Tuller and Laurie Essig, Malatov identifies with multiple labels which were not interchangeable, but did have overlapping uses and meanings.⁵¹³

The title of the novel itself refers to binary code in computing as well as the binary system of sexuality and gender. Yet it points not to a desire to resist binary categorization, but to personal clarity achieved only through sex in different combinations [7-8]:

Я занимался сексом с женщинами, мужчинами, и неодушевленными предметами.
Секс - моя нулевая сигнальная система.
Текст, мимика создают между людьми среду, в которой преломляется информация. Самый честный разговор происходит на уровне тел, секс не врет. Нельзя соврать на двоичном коде, ложь сразу будет заметна.
Секс прост и безграничен, как двоичный код.
Женщина - 0
Мужчина - 1
00
01
11
011100101011011101110000110101011100111...
Мне говорят, что я разбрасываюсь, но это не так. Я - собираю.

Divulging his earliest memories to his most recent, Malatov's novel (like Kalinin's stories) pushes the boundaries of acceptability and uses gritty, explicit scenes of (bi)sexual experimentation to poke at the reader's sensibilities. Within the first few pages, he records sexual play at the age of five [9]; recalls masturbating to gorillas after a school trip to the zoo [10]; and confesses how, at fourteen, he would go to the banya 'посмотреть на голых гм... петухов, с целью набраться новых впечатлений для процесса' [12] leading to attempted grooming. As he reaches maturity and gains more agency, Malatov immediately flips that vulnerable position from potential victim on his head, taking drunken 'мычание' as a sign of consent when a teenage girl he took home from a party could no longer speak [14].

⁵¹³ Essig, *Queer in Russia*; Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*.

This opening section of hypersexuality leads into the only chapter in which Malatov names bisexuality outright—yet it is not in relation to himself. Instead, we are transported to Kaliningrad in the summer of 1989 and introduced to Bob. His first words (the first of the chapter) proudly proclaim ‘Я бисексуал!’ [14] to all the girls: ‘В целом, прием «я – бисексуал» действовал на калининградских девиц в 89-м году почти безотказно. Нравятся девушкам бисексуалы, ой, нравятся.’ [15]. This statement kickstarts the delegitimization of Bob’s bisexual identification, which is ultimately deemed ‘сомнительный’ and likely a heterosexual desire to appear edgy and attractive. The claim is that this works because the girls do not know the meaning of the word: ‘Что такое бисексуал, она не знала, но словообразующий элемент «секс» услышала’ [15].

Bob’s bisexuality once again operates on a textual level as a pretext for exploring late-Soviet geopolitics through a ‘секс-группой’ [15]. Malatov compares each group member to a famous figure: Bob, with his American name and looks, is professional actor and boxer Mickey Rourke; Lelya recalls the Ukrainian-Russian singer Lyudmila Senchina; and Gosha is reminiscent of Christ [15-6]. The conscious extension of the love triangle into a love square once again embodies mixed ethnic, national and religious identities, demarcating fissure lines between the USSR and the West which are reinforced by the setting of Kaliningrad (as an enclave separated from Russia geographically and surrounded by foreign influences). Much like the label, Bob exists only within the confines of this chapter, restricting bisexual identification in the novel’s structure. Conceived as a Western-influenced, a ‘подростковый’ phenomenon related to a phase in psychosexual development when all that matters is ‘секс без осознания’ [15], bisexuality is simultaneously a consistent feature of the book, and a category doomed to collapse in on itself like the Soviet Union in 1989.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹⁴ By contrast, Malatov’s persona never adopts the label but instead slips between heterosexual and homosexual life and experiences.

Less Fiction, More Self-Acceptance

At autofiction's other extreme is Kazan'-based author Sveta Luk'yanova's *Ya nichego plokhogo ne delayu* (2023), an expressly queer novel about a period of bisexual identification and coming to terms with your "authentic" self. Luk'yanova, who co-founded the Russian edition of the British educational programme Write Like a Grrrl, openly self-identified as bisexual for several years, writing articles and guest-starring on podcast episodes about bisexuality.⁵¹⁵ *Ya nichego plokhogo ne delayu* explores the dimensions of the author-protagonist Sveta's sexuality from childhood to adulthood, motivating the move first from heterosexual monogamy to a bisexual open marriage, then to lesbian identification. Its title refers not just to the eventual acceptance of her desire for women, but to the mantra she develops to reassure herself that her same-sex sexual encounters are not cheating given the agreed-upon rules of extra-marital intimacy she developed with her initially supportive husband, Aidar.

As Sveta's sexuality shifts and takes on new forms, so does Luk'yanova's novel. Though written in Russian, English is increasingly used as she learns more about queer sex and culture through her travels as a musician. Most narration is from her own perspective, but at other times the story is told in third person—from the point of view of the younger girl who has a crush on her, and each of her parents as they go through a divorce—or even second person:

Когда мы пьем чай в перерыве между еблей [...], ты снова шутишь, что ты стопроцентная гетеросексуальная женщина, я встаю на колени перед твоим стулом, зажимаю двумя пальцами твой сосок под футболкой и говорю: «Гетеросексуальные женщины так не чувствуют».

⁵¹⁵ Sveta Luk'yanova, 'Luk'yanova's Personal Website. Homepage.', n.d., <https://svetalukyanova.ru/>; Her bisexual article is listed on her website. The hyperlink is broken, but it can be accessed at Sveta Luk'yanova, 'Ya i moya bisexual'nost', 5 April 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200813092306/https://batenka.ru/resource/sexy/bisexuality/>; Sadly, the podcast is no longer accessible, but the link is again included on Luk'yanova's homepage. 'Svetlana Luk'yanova: "Samaya Bol'shaya Bifobiya Shla Iznutri"', Puti Prinyatiya, n.d., <https://mave.digital/rkn/>; 'Write Like a Grrrl Russia Homepage', n.d., <https://writelikeagrrrl.ru/>; 'Sveta Luk'yanova, pisatel'nitsa, soocnovatel'nitsa shkoly WLAG v Rossii?', Setters Media, n.d., <https://www.setters.media/setters-a-list/sveta-lukyanova>.

Inviting the grammatically feminine reader into multiple sexual encounters, Luk'yanova challenges her audience to recognise any feelings of arousal within themselves. Indeed, the crux of the novel revolves around how she had suppressed her own for so long it made her physically and mentally unwell, needing to find guidance on sex and ethical polyamory online through content by the likes of Sasha Kazantseva, a well-known Russian feminist and lesbian activist.

Most strikingly, Sveta's internal conflict is at one point staged in the novel through a deliberately unstageable play. After secretly harbouring unrequited love for a woman who rejects her, Sveta is consumed by guilt and shame without being able to confide in Aidar. The form of the novel fractures as her sense of self deteriorates, echoing the dissociation between mind and body that she experienced in the ensuing period of depression and self-harm. Her narrative voice shatters across stage directions, a 'героиня' acting out her actions in the past, a 'женский голос' retrospectively reflecting on that time with her husband (who himself is represented as 'герой' in the past and a 'мужской голос' in the present), and, finally, the independent 'голос' of her eating disorder which does not respect the chronological divides and speaks to all versions of herself. Only once she has hooked up with English-speaking women through dating apps while on tour is she able to move past the words 'experiment and bicurious (fucking hate it)', accept her 'бисексуальность'. With this more solid identification and the help of her husband and a therapist/sexologist, her narrative perspective is restabilised.

It again disintegrates when Aidar meets her girlfriend Guzel', a moment which instead of bringing about the expected 'Бисексуальный рай' instigates the breakdown of her fourteen-year relationship with her husband. The text accordingly deteriorates into italicized sections

of lyrics without punctuation. The next chapter is presented as an essay, another new form for the start of a new era in which she will come to identify as a lesbian. However, this shift only occurs after engaging closely with media dissecting bisexuality. Namely, Luk'yanova references an article she herself had written about bisexuality, alongside Desirée Akhavan's TV series *The Bisexual* (2018) and reporting on American singer Kehlani's discovery of the Lesbian Master Doc.⁵¹⁶ For Kehlani and Sveta herself, reading this infamous online document put an end to identifying as bi and ushered in the label 'lesbian'. Thus, Luk'yanova's novel might conclude with lesbian identity, but it remains fundamentally a story about a multi-year period of bisexual identification which was authentic for her at the time. The narrative is about participation in bisexual culture, navigating bisexual polyamorous relationships, and ultimately, coming to terms with your innermost desires—even if this means coming out for a second time and recognising that the bisexual label no longer fits. Crucially, Sveta specifies that lesbian is not immutable and remains asterisked: 'я хочу заниматься сексом, любить, жить, делить судьбу только с женщинами* // *со звездочкой // Lesbian is a now-identity.'

Poetry

Where these autofictional novels moved through transitional periods of bisexuality, the semi-autobiographical poetry by Snezhana Ra and Olivia Kossak which I discuss in this section attempts to develop a distinctly bisexual poetics. Their artistic work stands out amongst a backdrop of individual poems which make metaphorical use of bisexuality without seeking

⁵¹⁶ Luk'yanova, 'Ya i moya biseksual'nost'; For more on Akhavan, see Maria San Filippo, 'Serial Offender: The Bisexual (2018)' 20, no. 2 (2020): 233–43; For an explanation of the Master Doc and its impact on the bisexual and lesbian communities, see Riley Hodder, 'The Lesbian Master Doc: Not Just for Lesbians', *The Michigan Daily*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.michigandaily.com/statement/the-lesbian-master-doc-not-just-for-lesbians/>.

to convey bisexual identity or desire, instead mobilising it for dramatic irony. For instance, Anna Gorenko's *Lovil sebya i byl ulichen* (2003) [‘Я бисексуален да и вообще никогда не хотел и меня никто’]. By contrast, Ra and Kossak each combine concrete sexual experiences with ambiguous linguistic devices to articulate a uniquely bisexual subjectivity.

Developing a Bisexual Poetics

According to Evgenii Kharitonov's introduction to *Pesnira* (2014), the Russian-Bulgarian poet Snezhana Ra (Snezhana Boikovna Ratomina) came onto the scene in the early 2000s. Her active years were brief but impactful: she appeared in print publications such as the Ukrainian women's journal *Nabroski* and posted poetry on Stihi.ru. After first sharing homoerotic poetry, Ra quickly began contributing to the Russian sapphic literary scene, publishing in *Ostrov*, *Pinx*, and *Labris*, as well as posting on Gay.ru and Lesbi.ru. She took part in the First All-Russian Festival of Lesbian Love Lyrics in Saint Petersburg in May that year. Her last print appearance was in 2009, when she traded poetry for her new passion: bringing *chillout* mixes to dance floors across Europe as a DJ.⁵¹⁷

In an upcoming study of the reception of Sappho in Russia's lesbian literary scene, Ra is straightforwardly described as a ‘bisexual poet’.⁵¹⁸ Yet her sexuality was certainly disputed both at the time she was most active and since she left the scene. For example, given pride of place on her blog's homepage is a quote from critic Ivailo Gotev for the Bulgarian journal *Zh"l"l"d* (2007): ‘Творчество Ра последнего времени - бескомпромиссно ироничный

⁵¹⁷ The above summary of Ra's life and work is based on: Evgenii V. Kharitonov, ‘Lichnaya delo poeta Ra’, *Pesnira* (Madrid: Ediciones del Hebreo Errante; Publication of the Mythosemiotic Society, 2014), 5-10.

⁵¹⁸ Georgina Barker, ‘Samizdat Sappho: Lesbian Receptions of Sappho in Post-Soviet Russia’, *Companion to the Ancient and Modern Reception of Sappho*, ed. by Chiara Blanco, Vasia Kousoulini, and Katerina Stergiopoulou (Brill, 2024?).

лесбийский (бисексальный? андрогинный?) авангард. Возможно, на сегодняшний день - она просто единственная авангардистка тематической 'субкультуры'.⁵¹⁹ The sexual and gender ambiguity of her work thus becomes a badge of honour, another way she has stepped outside the rigid confines of poetic form and content.

Kharitonov summarises Ra's multi-faceted career and ultimate move away from poetry: 'На сегодняшний день музыка - новая главная страсть поэта, путешественника, журналиста, антологиста, натуралки и лесбиянки Снежаны Ра.' Instead of calling Ra bisexual, Kharitonov separates her identity out into two contradictory sides, *naturalka* and *lesbiyanka*. The narrative he told was indeed that of a "straight" woman who, after a sudden literary coming-out, switched to writing "lesbian" poetry in 2007. Ra's own website, however, classifies her collection *Bi leyu leyu lei* as 'тематическая лирика (2005-2007)'.⁵²⁰ Earlier, Kharitonov had also reordered the well-established acronym LGBT to LGTB ['изданий ЛГТБ сообщества'], a move which intentionally or not displaces bisexuality and demotes it in an implied hierarchy (much in the same way that changing the acronym to 'GLBT' may be seen as intentionally prioritizing gay male experience).⁵²¹ All this suggests a reticence to believe either in the stability of a bisexual subjectivity in general, or in the possibility that Ra is bisexual in particular. Yet Ra explicitly treated the theme of her bisexuality in her poetry. Not only that, but I argue that in several of her bisexual-themed poems, Ra in fact experimented with her own bisexual poetics capable of capturing the (in)visibility and the (self-)doubt surrounding bisexuality as an orientation.

⁵¹⁹ Snezhana Ra, personal blog homepage, 'Snezhana Ra / DJ IF', n.d. <<http://snezanara.narod.ru/>> [accessed 03 Feb 2023].

⁵²⁰ Snezhana Ra, 'Bi leyu leyu lei', n.d. <<http://snezanara.narod.ru/RAlesbo.htm>> [accessed 03 Feb 2023].

⁵²¹ The acronym LGBT imposes a linear/hierarchical structure. See: Meg Barker, Christina Richards, and Helen Bowes-Catton, "All the World is Queer Save Thee and Me...": Defining Queer and Bi at a Critical Sexology Seminar", *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9 (2009), 363-379.

Bi theorists are particularly interested in how bisexuality can be made culturally intelligible; whether in fictional narratives or in day-to-day life, such as through clothing choices.⁵²² However, Ra's poetry demonstrates that it is perhaps by embracing bisexuality's unintelligibility that a bisexual subjectivity can most accurately be articulated.

1	иб сел?
2	ак ла уск
3	есиб?
4	ак ларут
5	ан?
6	отк я? кто я?
7	а нищ
8	неж
9	жен
10	отк?

11.09.2007

By half-obscuring words, splitting them up, and writing these approximate syllables backwards, Ra encodes bisexuality into her poetry while avoiding any simplistic rendering or naming. Line six is the sole instance where words and letters appear in the correct order [‘кто я?’], cementing how the only certain thing for Ra's persona is her uncertainty about how her attractions should be defined given her range of sexual experiences. The poem's only punctuation is question marks, further accentuating the sense of confusion. Each label [лесби; бисексуалка; натуралка] could apply, but all are too static and restricted. Leaving the questions unanswered reserves her ability to fluctuate between different identifications throughout her life, as with Luk'yanova's ‘now-identity’.⁵²³ Nonetheless, it is *bi* which Ra returns to time and again. Not only is the collection itself titled *Bi leyu leyu lei*, but one poem

⁵²² See, for instance, Rosie Nelson, “‘What do Bisexuals Look Like? I Don’t Know!’” Visibility, Gender, and Safety among Plurisexuals’, *Journal of Sociology*, 56.4 (2020), 591-607.

⁵²³ For data on how one group of bisexual respondents' identifications fluctuated across two studies that took place a decade apart, see Jenny Kangasvuo, “‘There Has Been No Phase in My Life When I Wasn’t Somehow Bisexual’: Comparing the Experiences of Finnish Bisexuals in 1999 and 2010”, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 2011, 11(2-3), 271-289.

is called *Ra—bi* (2007). Moreover, Ra’s poems depict a range of sexual encounters with men (often satirising their expectations of blowjobs, housewives, and loud “agreement” in bed) as well as with women (featuring oral sex, vibrators, and betrayal), as I discuss in more detail below.

The poem *Sapficheskoe zhum* (2007) reveals that in creating her bisexual poetics, Ra took inspiration from *zhum*. The genre was invented by Futurists in the Silver Age who used their knowledge of Russian word formation to deconstruct words into nonsense components that could nevertheless still be understood.

1	Би?
2	Би либ!
3	Лес
4	Би лэю лэю лэй
5	ЛесбосАп фо пар
6	Нок аннИб алзИн
7	Овь Ева би
8	секл би
9	Же!
10	же же! же-ла-ние
11	Зеу зау за
12	Зау-зау-люб
13	Ви люб
14	Ми либ!

29-30.05.2007

The first line poses the question ‘Би?’: Ra’s poetic persona may be wondering if she herself is bi, as in *ib sel?...* (2007) above; or it may reflect the general doubt expressed towards bisexuality. In either case, the exclamation ‘Би либ!’ affirms bisexuality’s existence, emphasising through its similarity with the English ‘believe!’ that ‘bi’ could characterise both her own sexual attractions and those of others—we are not limited to *lesbi* and *naturalki*. Indeed, across lines three and four, Ra splits the word *lesbi* into *les* and *bi* to highlight a distinction between lesbian and bi women. Yet this simultaneously draws attention to the linguistic connection between the two labels and suggests that bisexuals form an integral part

of the lesbian community. Lines five to nine extend this line of inquiry as Ra toys with the names Sappho, Parnok, and Lidiya Zinovieva-Annibal before claiming these foundational cultural figures of the “lesbian” canon as bisexual: ‘би / секл би / Же!’. The emphatic particle ‘же’ repeats, building in intensity as it becomes desire [‘желание’] not for women exclusively, but a more universal love of love itself; that is, if we take ‘Ви люб’ in line thirteen to be a deconstruction of the genitive singular ‘любви’ such that the decoded lines loosely read ‘за люб[ОВЬ] любви’.

Bisexual inflections in poetry have been theorized to reflect ‘the ambivalence generally associated with bisexual modes of identity and attraction [...and] disrupt existing categories of meaning [...by] open[ing] multiple readings which in turn open multiple channels of desire’.⁵²⁴ Indeed, the final two lines of the poem are not fixed in their meaning and are left open to multiple interpretations, such as understanding ‘Ви’ and ‘Ми’ as the personal pronouns ‘вы’ and ‘мы’. Ra’s choice to change their vowels to ‘и’ brings them closer to the word ‘би’. This alteration, along with the added meaning of ‘и’ as ‘and’ or ‘both’ gives the personal pronouns such a ‘bisexual inflection’. The connectives ‘и’ and ‘а’ in fact dominate the poem; these letters are frequently capitalized to draw further attention to them. In this case, ‘Ви люб / Ми либ!’ can perhaps be read as “you love one way; we love both/and!”.⁵²⁵ Moreover, the line then refers back to the second line ‘Би либ!’ and reinscribes it with the additional meaning that “bi people love both/and”. As Georgina Barker argues, ‘the poem

⁵²⁴ Analouise Keating, ‘The Intimate Distance of Desire: June Jordan’s Bisexual Inflections’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2000): 92.

⁵²⁵ Bisexual theorists have dubbed bisexuality the “both/and” (or “both-and”) sexuality. This references how the binary model of sexuality only posits attraction to *either* A or not-A, thus neglecting both bisexuality (*both* A and not-A) and asexuality (*neither* A nor not-A). See Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c2001), as well as the summary in Jenée Wilde, ‘Gay, Queer, or Dimensional? Modes of Reading Bisexuality on Torchwood’, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 15.3 (2015): 414–34 (431).

plays with the word 'love', performing a similar flexibility with the word to bisexuality's flexibility with the act'.⁵²⁶

In addition to toying with word formation to encode bisexuality into her poetry, Ra explores bisexuality more explicitly across her writing through varied depictions of sexual encounters with men and women. For instance, *Opyt ob'yasneniya v...* (2007) directly compares two sexual relationships. The first, with a man, portrays a moment mid-intercourse when Ra's persona has realized she doesn't care for her boyfriend but is afraid to tell him, leading her to exaggerate a performance when he tells her to moan for him [‘ПОСТОНИ ДЛЯ МЕНЯ’] and she intentionally cries out, separated visually from the other stanzas, ‘aaaaaaaAAAAAAAAA!’. The second, with a woman, depicts a moment of divine sex [‘сейчас узнаешь / что значит падать в небо’] and close connection as they lay together afterwards in silence, listening to their breathing. No words are needed to express their affection for one another [‘и больше ни слова’].

All this is not to say that Ra's poetry straightforwardly suggests that sex with women is better, and that she has never really been attracted to men. Far from it: line six in fact suggests she once did care for this man [‘не волнует **БОЛЬШЕ**’, emphasis added]. Other poems, such as *Ra bez bel'ya* (2006/7) and *Operatsiya po spaseniyui* (2006) depict gentle sexual encounters and genuine connection, with the latter poem going so far as to smush its words together as the couple become close [‘дыхаем рот в рот / спасаем друг дружку ... кислорода ... перетекает/текает / избегаем/меняем/изменяем/тебя’]. The short poem *Kogda-to i ya byla yunoi...* (2007) also confesses past crushes on ‘высоких красивых / мужчин...’ in her younger days,

⁵²⁶ Barker, *Samizdat Sappho*, upcoming. My thanks to Georgina for sharing her thoughts and engaging with my own.

with the ellipsis of this final line suggesting that she may be slipping back into such a fantasy as she reminisces.

Rather than sensationalized contrasts designed to establish whether men or women are better in bed (such as that found in *Pro ETO*'s bisexual episode with Maksim), Ra explores how sexual encounters can be shaped by societal conditioning and expectations along gendered lines. Her poems range in tone from satirical (and sometimes scathing) to heartfelt (and sometimes heartbroken). In the same cycle *Опыт об'яснения v...*, the men have been given a sense of entitlement and righteousness by Putin's well-propagandised plan to "save the nation" with heterosexual family values and reproduction [‘ОПЛОДОТВОРИТЬ ТВОЮ УТРОБУ / ВЫПОЛНЯЯ ПРЕЗИДЕНТСКИЙ ПЛАН / СПАСЕНИЯ НАЦИИ’].⁵²⁷ *Kukla barbi* (2007) similarly satirises how in the middle of ‘неудобный кунилингус / на сиденье заднем крутой машине’ the man she is having sex with has likely already begun to picture her doing all his chores, while she herself has decided to leave it at a blowjob and let him not bother saying goodbye to her. *Strakh Ra* (2006) mocks the guilt she is expected to feel when her boyfriend leaves her because she didn't give him a ‘послеобеденный минет’. Importantly, Ra shows how female lovers too can disappoint, albeit in other ways. *Isskustennyi chlen* (2007) captures her side of a conversation, defensively admitting that the only thing her dildo (or strap-on?) can't give her lover the children she wants. *Lyuba shuba duba* (2007) depicts the sudden loss of an intense sub-dom relationship when her lesbian lover abandons her to marry a woman in the U.S. – speaking to the pressures on LGBTQ+ people in Russia to emigrate.⁵²⁸ With men, Ra cannot see herself being valued as more than a sex object and housewife; with women, Ra cannot

⁵²⁷ On the political discourse surrounding Russia's population decline and its impact on sexual and reproductive rights since the early 2000s, see Francesca Stella and Nadya Nartova, 'Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism and Biopolitics in Putin's Russia', in *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging: Trans-National and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. Francesca Stella et al. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17–36.

⁵²⁸ Alexandra Novitskaya, 'Sexual Citizens in Exile: State-Sponsored Homophobia and Post-Soviet LGBTQI+ Migration', *The Russian Review*, 80 (2021): 56-76 (esp. 68).

see a future. Both are two sides of the same coin: of homophobic, patriarchal structures limiting relationship dynamics.

Sex and the Self

One consistent thread across Ra's poetry is sex being a means of reflecting on her own desires, identity, and values—Malatov too had suggested that his body's sexual arousal did not lie. The poem *Taboo* (2020) by Olivia Kossak takes this even further, representing sex and pornography as essential mediums of knowledge about the self when questioning one's own bisexuality. It was published in the third issue *Neznanie* (titled *Opyt*), an independent literary journal founded in 2019 by writers Arina Boyko, Liza Kamenskaya, and Sanya Guseva.⁵²⁹ The trio had resolved to support authors whose voices are not commonly heard in contemporary Russian-language literature: namely 'ЛГБТКИА+ сообщества, представителей национальных меньшинств, женщин и дебютант_ок.' [*Opyt*, 2020, 4].⁵³⁰ To produce *Opyt* and progress this mission, they worked with the queer web journal *Otkrytie* and, for the third time, No Kidding Press.⁵³¹ Kossak's bisexual poem was ideally suited for this issue, which not only strove to platform underrepresented voices but to untangle various experiences of in-betweenness [5]:

⁵²⁹ Olivia Kossak, 'Taboo', *Neznanie* 3. 2020: 55-61. Accessed 03 February 2023. <http://notknowing.ru/3>.

⁵³⁰ They further explained that in Russia, very few projects recognize that literature is more than an art form and are therefore unwilling to engage with its repressive practices such as 'элитизм, эйблизм, расизм, гомофобия и сексизм' [*Opyt*, 5]. Of course, these terms are themselves loaned from English, gesturing to a perceived lack of engagement with these systemic issues in the Russian context and, as in the case of BiPanRussia.com's *Likbez* section, the editorial drive to educate about these socially relevant conceptual frameworks.

⁵³¹ Today, O-zine has 32,500 followers on Instagram. The project was terminated suddenly. Announcements were made on their social media and through the *Prishchal'noe pis'mo* posted to their website <o-zine.ru/the-end> [accessed 23 September 2021]. *Neznanie* has also collaborated with other independent presses and queer book projects: for instance, their logo appears on the cover of Mark Franko, ed., *Lyubov' vo Vremya Karantina* (Moskva: Popcorn Books, 2021).

Как нам кажется, новый номер «Незнания» и вправду преодолевает границы между. Жанр, гендер, тема, ориентация – тексты, представленные в журнале, не требуют ярлыков и даруют свободу выбора: взглянуть на реальность можно с любого ракурса.

Indeterminacy in literary genre, sexual orientation and gender identity was central to the issue. While it is not entirely true that the texts avoided using labels altogether—as Kossak’s names bisexuality outright—authors did deconstruct them or offer multiple possibilities for identification. *Taboo* defied easy categorisation on multiple levels. Part collage, part playlist, part internal dialogue, the poem invites the reader to share in a multisensory moment of bisexual intimacy and self-reflection. Each page is physically constructed from fragments of text typed out and printed in different fonts, visualising the dissonance Kossak’s persona is experiencing. The first page is scanned clearly, while the rest are slightly blurred, capturing not only the speaker’s reticence to talk about a ‘taboo’ topic but the way she has obscured an aspect of her sexuality from herself.

Each page is further subdivided by a crudely drawn line that physically demarcates the two sides in her internal conflict, not between a ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ side, as bisexuality has often been conceived, but rather between attraction and denial; between what she does or could desire, and what she allows herself to feel. To the left of the line, she recalls the moments in her life attesting to her ability to be sexually attracted to women as well as men. Meanwhile, on the right, she interrogates her internalized homophobia and the sense of ‘taboo’ she feels very intensely. The only parts of the text which punch through and unite both sides of the page are song lyrics and the flat tones of a saxophone, typed in blocks without any spaces. The lyrics and musical notes are obviously not her words, but this visual structure and presentation allows the expressiveness and emotion of the different songs to wash over her and guide her mood and reflections.

As Kossak's persona opens herself up to the prospect that she may really be bisexual, she divulges her personal recollections not only of masturbating and picturing the faces of famous actors and actresses such as Kate Blanchett (to whom she apologizes for using her face as inspiration) but also of watching different types of pornography:

лесбийское порно я смотрела. оно такое же, как и гетеросексуальное. бывает хорошее, бывает нет. возбуждаюсь ли я от женских тел? да. возбуждаюсь ли я от мужских тел? да. но красоту женского тела я точно чувствую лучше, понимаю её. при этом от гетеросексуального порно я возбуждаюсь быстрее. но если я представляю какую-нибудь женщину, то захожу в очень медленный, плавный ритм, он сводит меня с ума гораздо острее, чем просмотр видео с мужчиной и женщиной.

While some (self-)definitions of bisexual attraction take a “gender-blind” route, expressing attraction regardless of gender, other bisexuals do express preferences and notice that their desire varies between genders.⁵³² Kossak's persona here compares watching lesbian and heterosexual porn, observing subtle differences in how she experiences arousal even if both can equally fluctuate in quality and excite her. In so doing, she paints a nuanced picture of bisexual desire, recognizing its idiosyncrasies and the range of contextual, physical sensations that arousal from different stimuli can cause in her body. Given that ‘neither the spectator's gender nor their sexuality need correlate “intuitively” with the pornography they enjoy’, porn has recently been theorized to offer multiple bi or trans ‘modes of being and desiring’ through the positions with which the spectator identifies and the objects they desire.⁵³³ Kossak's poem enacts this precise process: allowing herself to spectate and masturbate to different sexual fantasies brought her into the scenes and led her to embrace her bisexual desires as ‘*constitutive* of [a] sexual self[f] more broadly’.⁵³⁴

⁵³² M. Paz Galupo, Johanna L. Ramirez, and Lex Pulice-Farrow, “Regardless of Their Gender”: Descriptions of Sexual Identity among Bisexual, Pansexual, and Queer Identified Individuals’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 17, no. 1 (2017): 108–24.

⁵³³ Jacob Engelberg, ‘Bisexual and Transgender Potentialities in Pornographic Spectatorship’, *Porn Studies* 11, no. 3 (2024): 272.

⁵³⁴ Engelberg, 283.

Taboo culminates in a decisive moment. Having confided that none of her friends share her concern that same-sex sex is taboo (she even had a gay best friend), Kossak's persona further reflects on her own lack of same-sex experience [58]:

может быть, это какая-то задача – принятие себя. может быть, этого во мне нет. и это просто часть сексуальности. потому что у всех моих нормальных, сексуально здоровых людей, всегда были небольшие отношения с женщинами. такая бисексуальная связь, когда ты пытаешься понять, кто ты вообще есть. а у меня этого не было никогда. возможно, у меня сейчас подростковый возраст в этом смысле.

Here, she probes the line between being 'нормальных, сексуально здоровых' and its implied opposite, queer. The language emphasizes the taboo nature of queerness, as she avoids labelling or even explicitly stating her own same-sex attraction at this point, instead resorting to the popular euphemism "that" ['этого'; 'это'].

Nonetheless, it is the theory of universal bisexuality ['может ... это просто часть сексуальности'] that she first reaches for when trying to explain the prominence of same-sex history among supposedly heterosexual friends. They have all had bisexual flings in the past to figure out who they are ['небольшие отношения, с женщинами. такая бисексуальная связь']; she alone has not. This speaks to a widespread belief that you need to have a certain sexual history to be able to discover your sexuality or identify in a particular way. Yet the sense of being left behind subverts the stereotype of bisexuality as an immature phase in sexual development. By contrast, it implies that compared to the friends who have openly had a bisexual fling, she is the immature one because she has been unwilling to fully explore her attractions and the multiple avenues of sexual arousal available to her. She hooks up with a friend precisely for this reason: 'в крайнем случае я пересплю с подружкой, чтобы решить этот вопрос раз и навсегда' [58]. Notably, the speaker has switched to the present tense [пересплю] – this hook-up is occurring right now. The previous pages were collaged with the thoughts racing through her head until this moment. Now the context has finally

been revealed, the final page is dominated by a block of lyrics. One song plays to completion before transitioning seamlessly into the next, marking the passing of time as she sleeps with her friend and confirms for herself what she has, for so long, been seeking and denying.

Only two fragments on this final page are written in the speaker's voice. In the top right, we see her resignation that suicide would be 'проще' if she does confirm the euphemistic "that" ['это'] about herself. Yet in the opposing bottom-left corner, after the music has played to completion and the deed is done, the two friends nuzzle close together, ready to have sex again [59]:

во второй раз с начала всего я включаю твой плейлист и меня мурашит вдоль и поперёк, потому что ты ещё не прошла. я ещё прижимаюсь щекой к твоей щеке, чувствую твою скулу изнутри, ты поёшь мне колыбельную и мне страшно мурашит от радости.

но теперь я многое знаю о себе, и хочу знать ещё больше.

As it turns out, the music woven throughout the collage has been coming from her friend's playlist—echoing a chapter of Luk'yanova's novel, which revolves around constructing the perfect playlist for casual sex without accidentally suggesting romantic attraction. The switch to second person involves the reader in the moment of intimacy, putting us in the position of the woman she has just slept with. She is no longer trapped in her own head but is able to engage with the other person in the moment (and by extension, us). Importantly, while the speaker's self-disgust has not totally dissipated and she in fact emphasizes that she feels creeped out by her joy ['меня страшно мурашит от радости'], she also states that she has learnt something meaningful about herself. Rather than this marking the end—as she was so certain it would—she resolves to learn more still ['хочу знать ещё больше']. The playlist restarts and Kossak concludes the text with the prospect of a new bisexual beginning.

The themes in the playlist throw into relief the sentiment that she is not loving other women in a way deemed appropriate by society [‘я бы хотела любить тебя как-то по-другому, но я не умею. я хотела бы любить тебя так, как принято любить в этой стране женщину женщине’, 56]. Gr. Polukhutenko’s *Lyubov’ moya* (2014), for instance, reinforces the theme of holding back your emotions to protect yourself and the one you love:

Так мне и надо – все грубость моя –
Быть одному, что я сделал плохого
Чтоб эту любовь свою уберечь от себя
Всю любовь твою защитить от себя
Ты мой ум, моя страсть, моя гордость
Любовь моя
Любовь моя
Любовь моя

At the same time, songs like Via Gra’s *Potselui* (2007) serve as a reminder that there is a way in which women are permitted in a heteronormative society to be intimate with other women—namely, for the male gaze. In the music video, the two skimpily dressed singers, Al’bina Dzhanabaev and Meseda Bagaudio, press close to each other and share near-kisses while looking intently at the camera, typical of the types of the homoerotic performance I discussed in Chapter III. Yet by including these lyrics, Kossak appropriates and queers the song as the backdrop for her own scene of same-sex intimacy:

Направляй меня своею рукой
Заслони собою от полнолуния
Я готова быть ведомой тобой
Чем выше любовь, тем ниже поцелуи

No longer a performance for a male viewer, the song becomes the soundtrack for a private encounter which we are not invited to watch—we can only experience its emotion second-hand. The imagery evoked by the lyrics simply gestures to what might be happening under the sheets: the obvious implication in this chorus being oral stimulation and hand-play.

Taboo thus depicts a complex, non-linear path to accepting one's sexuality. If we consider autobiography to be constructed from 'fragments of experience that change over time', then Kossak literalises this process through her collage technique.⁵³⁵ Readers usually think about life narrators 'as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity'.⁵³⁶ Kossak allows us to witness this myth being created. Her persona is constructed through the fragmented memories she is in the process of reinterpreting in her present, which is not the same present that she is experiencing at the time of writing/collaging. Indeed, although most fragments can easily be interpreted as reminiscences and/or reflections—as if her life is flashing before her eyes in the sexual encounter she feels to be a life-or-death moment—there is one recollection which disrupts the sense that this is all happening “now”:

я называла себя гомофобом, хотя по-настоящему им не была. теорико о людях, которых в других бесит то, что есть в них самих, точно можно подтвердить на мне. Саша однажды мне сказал: «Я удивлён, что ты такая консервативная. Я думал, у тебя был опыт с девушками, что ты бисексуальна». я стала отнекиваться. спустя годы незнания, когда я рассказала ему о новой себе, он очень гордился мной.

Here, Kossak's persona remembers how Sasha (her friend, or perhaps boyfriend) was surprised at her homophobic beliefs because he had assumed she was bisexual. Yet in the final line, the narrating-self gestures to a moment in the future of the narrated-self, i.e. a conversation which took place after the “conclusion” of the events in *Taboo*. This, of course, underscores the distance between the self in the moment and the self at the time of writing which is ever-present in autobiographical texts. Moreover, the break in the timeline highlights how identifications can change over the life course; while at first she rejected the idea she was bisexual and identified with the label 'homophobe', she later recognized that she had

⁵³⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c2010), 22; citing Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 9.

⁵³⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 22.

always had bisexual attractions. She resists the urge to rewrite her history and state straightforwardly that she has always been bisexual, avoiding telling the kind of falsely unified and coherent story of identity that LGBTQ+ autobiographies are often pushed towards.⁵³⁷ What she does is reinterpret, acknowledging that her homophobia likely came from a fear of something she was suppressing within herself.

Journals

As mentioned above, Kossak's poem was published in a LGBTQ+ literary journal. The queer journal experienced a revival in Russia in the 2020s in the digital form. These publications again had different priorities in bisexual literary representation to those which came before. Chapter I of this thesis explored the "factual" pieces (reportage, personal ads, history and theory) of the print press, and while not as prominent, bisexual themes were nonetheless present in the "fictional" sections too. This thesis cannot capture the entirety of bi themes in those literary sections (this deserves a study of its own), but in this section I give a brief overview and contrast the style with bi content in the recent wave of online journals.

Amateur Bi Lit in the Print Press

When bisexuality did feature in fiction in the alternative print press, it was rarely the focus of the story. Instead, it seems to have been more often used for shock factor or to interrogate the nature and origins of queerness. Though there are infrequent examples of bisexual-

⁵³⁷ Esther Saxey, 'Writing the Homoplot Differently: Autobiographies by Queers of Color and Bisexuals', in *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 117–38; Juliet Jacques, 'Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing', *Life Writing* 14, no. 3 (2017): 357–70.

identified narrators or characters—such as in a story about ephhebophilia which begins ‘Сам я бисексуал и принимаю в сексе все, кроме мазохизма и садизма. Все, что приносит сладостное чувство оргазма, считаю нормальным и естественным явлением.’ [*Veselyi chelovek*, 1995, No.4, 2-4]—most used bi-coded characters or plots. Heterosexual-seeming individuals were depicted experiencing same-sex desire. Bisexuality was also implied in tales of extra-marital affairs, taboo fantasies, and the inhibition-lowering powers of alcohol. The 1994 issue of *1/10* exemplifies this tendency as it includes both a short story about a bisexual-coded mother being pushed into an incestuous relationship by her daughter after a night out drinking, and, a few pages later, a poem written from the perspective of a man so drunk that he cannot remember the kind of person he had sex with last night [No.14, 20-1 and 23].

The short story *Intsest* by Olya Levina begins with the premise that ‘голубые» мальчики» and девочки-софистики are likelier to understand and sympathise with incest than ‘натуралов». The narrator questions whether the bounds of sexual acceptability are truly where we think—stating that Tchaikovsky’s diaries prove he was infatuated with his male relatives—before introducing the main character, a seventeen-year-old girl named Lenka. She falls in love with her mother Marina, who has gone through a string of lovers before finally finding “the one”, Sergei. When he is away for the weekend, Marina goes out and returns drunk and upset, so Lena comforts her mother by undressing her and getting into bed: Marina ‘испугалась вначале, но ей, видно, так сладко стало, что не смогла она оттолкнуть дочь.’ Marina ‘не сопротивлялась’ her daughter’s advances, and even after Lenka tells Sergei about the affair and he leaves her, the mother and daughter remain together for another year until Marina suffers a sudden heart attack with complications. This health scare functions not only symbolically as a sign that Marina’s heart and the supposed pureness of love between mother and child has been corrupted, but as an intervention in Lenka’s desire. Her mother now looks old, grey, and off-putting.

Contrasted briefly to a case of heterosexual incest which birthed disgusting and unsuccessful sons, the bisexual positioning of Marina is designed to parallel same-sex desire with same-family desire and interrogate a failure of parenthood—much like *Zakrytye prostranstva* (2008). Not only are the women unable to distinguish parental love from the sexual and romantic kind, but their backstory draws on misguided stereotypes about how dysfunctional family dynamics can lead to queerness: Lenka, the instigator of the relationship, was born when Marina was barely seventeen herself and needed to rely on her own parents to raise her daughter, as the father was nowhere in the picture. Through her relative youth and active dating life, Marina's roles as a woman (a sexual object) and a mother (a feminine yet sexless carer) have been separated out in her broken (i.e. not nuclear) family, confusing her daughter and making 'Марина-женщина, а не Марина-мать' the recipient of Lenka's affection. Marina's bisexuality implicates her, locating the "fault" and its root in her own body and behaviours as she unknowingly fosters same-sex attraction in her daughter too.

The poem a few pages later, *Govorili mne...* by Artem Mukhaev, adopts a vastly different tone and theme: that alcohol leads to reckless and gender-blind desire. The refrain 'ГОВОРИ МНЕ... НЕ ПЕЙ!' punctuates the end of each stanza, as the masculine-gendered first-person speaker tries to remember who he slept with the night before. Were they young or old? Male or female? He remembers androgynous body parts (shoulders, arms, legs) and that they were wearing trousers, but not what they did in bed. The poem turns towards the didactic as its speaker panics about forgetting the threat posed by AIDS, thinking he should have protected himself better. Mukhaev's poem thus first jokingly, and then seriously, correlates indiscriminate drinking with indiscriminate sexual practices—bisexuality and a lack precautions for safe sex are two sides of the same intoxicated coin. As explained in Chapter

I, bisexual men were often demonized during the HIV/AIDS crisis and blamed for transmissions between gay and straight communities.

In the poem, the intangible yet embodied threat of AIDS is wrapped up in myth and fantasy: Mukhaev's speaker feels the devil of doubt consuming him [‘Бес сомнения меня гложет’]; he compares himself to Aladdin rubbing the lamp, suggesting he is unsure what rubbing this phallic object will have conjured up; and mentions that one of the people he may have slept with is Pushkin's Queen of Shamakhi, a beautiful temptress who leads the Tsar and his sons to their death before disappearing as if she never existed. Just as *Intsest* referred to Tchaikovsky, the literary references in Mukhaev's poem, especially to Pushkin, use bisexuality to bridge the imagined divide between mainstream Russian culture and depictions of stigmatized topics. Positioning these themes within an intertextual framework lends authorial authority and aims to retroactively forge a space for same-sex sexuality within Russian cultural history via association with some of its most prolific figures.

In a critique of LGBTQ+ Russian language poetry, the writer Dmitrii Kuz'min ends with a note on the absence of bisexual poems in the journals of this time.⁵³⁸ He recalls that in his role as editor of RISK, he only once came across poetry expressly for the letter “Б”. This happened in 1995, when two poems were sent in under the likely pseudonym Liya Abelyar. Kuz'min observes that ‘бисексуальность в них ... трактуется как неуверенность, неопределенность’. As I have argued, this state of uncertainty and indeterminacy can be integral to depictions of bisexuality:

Когда вы обнимаетесь
у меня на глазах,
Я не могу решить,
на чем месте хотела бы оказаться.

⁵³⁸ Dmitrii Kuz'min, “‘Chto eto za zver' takoi?’: Dmitrii Kuz'min - o russkoi LGBT-poezii”, Gei Al'yans Ukraina, 23 May 2015, https://upogau.org/ru/ourview/ourview_2264.html.

As the speaker’s mind flicks back and forth between imagining being each person in the couple, and imagining kissing them, the versification oscillates too. The poem flows between lines beginning with capitalized or lower-case letters. A mirrored shape is created through the changing line lengths, and the caesurae of the two middle commas force the reader to mimic the speaker’s hesitation [‘Я не могу решить’]. While there are no rhymes, the stress pattern on the final word could be classed as feminine, masculine, masculine, feminine if we consider it to occupy a space halfway to a rhyme scheme, much like how bisexuality is thought to occupy a halfway point between homosexuality and heterosexuality or between binary gender, given its association with androgyny. Similar strategies were adopted by Zinaida Gippius in the Silver Age, whose poetry reflected a belief that androgynous bisexuality was the most divine form of being.

That connection of bisexuality to androgynous gender expression is the central theme of the second poem by Abelyar. Kuz’min ends his critique with the open-ended question of whether it should be classified as belonging to “Б” or “Т”:

Как мне узнать –
Кто я?
Он говорит, что я женщина.
Она говорит, что я мужчина,
А Бог помалкивает.

Trans and bisexual subjectivities are conflated as the speaker confuses expected binaries of gender and sexual attraction. Crucially, the speaker struggles to assert or even locate their own sense of identity, and their voice—hidden in the shortest, two-word line of the poem [‘Кто я?’]—is not only riddled with doubt but immediately drowned out by the voices of others who project their own understandings onto them. The bisexual angle sees these other voices as belonging to partners who each see elements of the “opposing” gender in their

lover, reframing their relationship heteronormatively. The transgender (or non-binary) bisexual is all too easily inscribed with gendered meanings, losing agency in inscrutability.

Digital Zine Culture

As we saw in Chapter II, the independent print press did not survive long past the dawn of the internet age. Yet the culture of journal-making has recently been updated for the digital world, taken up by LGBTQ+ writers who have gravitated towards independent publishing in the wake of censorship and worsening repressions. One example is the initiative *Vykhod*, which has created its own digital library of PDF booklets encompassing reports, resources, and autobiographical pieces submitted by community members.⁵³⁹ Unable to continue publishing and exhibiting work through mainstream routes, artist groups have similarly banded together to create crowdsourced anthologies and discovered that internet distribution provides possibilities for a far wider reach.

During the pandemic in 2020, the strategy proved particularly beneficial to a Siberian queer-feminist initiative run by anonymous activists who wanted to find a way to continue their work despite quarantine measures. Where usually they would organise ‘оффлайн-пространства’ with the aims of ‘обмена опытом, взаимоподдержки и солидарности’, they for the first time attempted to make an online ‘imagined space’ [‘место’; ‘создать воображаемое пространство – зин’] with these same goals: to provide a sense of community and mutual support for people who felt increasingly isolated in already isolated geographical locations and conservative social milieus. The result was *Kvir' Sibir'* (2020), an open-access, PDF-only publication shared on the Academia.edu website. While not all the

⁵³⁹ Dowling, ‘Russian Trans* Stories’.

contributors adopt an identity label, five pieces explicitly mention identification with the bisexual spectrum.⁵⁴⁰ Two are illustrations promoting visions of (self-)acceptance inclusive not only of bisexuality and pansexuality but of trans and non-binary bodies [20-1; 162-3]. The others are short autobiographical essays in which, as might be expected for a digital zine following the analysis of Chapter II, online community constitutes an important theme.

The bisexual Serafima Gatkina proposes that the closest queer parallel she has found to her experience of the Jewish diaspora is the internet—although the content she consumes by LGBTQ+ activists, bloggers, and influencers can still leave her feeling disconnected given that they showcase the metropolitan queer life of Western/European Russia [32-5].⁵⁴¹ She believes more publications/community projects like *Kvir' Sibir'* are needed to strengthen the sense of provincial community in Siberia.⁵⁴² Lada Bigun and Bonya Martov's stories echo similar sentiments of trying to feel virtually connected, but falling short either due to biphobia on lesbian websites or because the posts on Deti-404 did not match their own coming-out experience as bisexual and non-binary [respectively: 164-178; 46-50]. Moreover, Bigun emphasizes that in the network of bisexual/queer people she knows personally, almost all, including herself, have resolved to strategically hide their sexuality for reasons of personal safety, as they are operating in a different context to other activists such as those posting more openly on social media from the two capitals.

⁵⁴⁰ This mix of identification and non-identification is what one might expect given the project's title; *kvir* became popular in Russian for its vagueness and ability to ambiguously signal gender and/or sexual difference from mainstream cis- and heteronormativity. See the podcast episode *Russkii kvir - eto chto voobshche takoe?*, Naraspashku, 2021. This mix of identification and non-identification is what one might expect given the project's title; *kvir* became popular in Russian for its vagueness and ability to ambiguously signal gender and/or sexual difference from mainstream cis- and heteronormativity.

⁵⁴¹ For analysis of another instance where the “placeless” bisexual community was dubbed diasporic, and the problematisation of this comparison, see Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces*, 190–95.

⁵⁴² This perhaps mirror the appearance of *Sibirskii variant* and *Sib-10* in the 1990s.

These crowd-sourced micronarratives are brief, to-the-point, and prioritise simply evidencing the existence of bisexual and pansexual people Siberia. The editors' introductory comments call into question how we should define online LGBTQ+ 'spaces' – should we think of *Kvir' Sibir'*, and other PDF zines like it, purely as literary products of digital publishing? Or need we adopt a broader understanding of what is felt to be an online community 'space' in a context where public meeting places and events for LGBTQ+ people are so limited offline? *Kvir' Sibir'* creates a sense of community not only through its nature as collective autobiography, but through its online distribution, with links to personal social media profiles and email addresses when contributors were willing to share them (as We-Accept.online had also envisioned). It offers these as avenues of further connection between readers to tie the stories to their authors' digital footprints, grounding them in proof of existence offline too.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated a trajectory from the legacy of a male-dominated canon of late Soviet postmodernism featuring bisexual women (Erofeev, Sorokin) to texts largely written by bisexual women prioritising representations which are grounded in lived experience and promote therapeutic self-acceptance (Ra, Kossak, Luk'ynaova, Gatkina, Bigun). The late 1990s and early 2000s saw sexually explicit, Soviet-themed satire (Kalinin, Malatov), as well as amateur literature printed in the alternative press (Levina, Mukhaev), similarly dramatizing the hypersexual bisexual's supposed attraction to "anything that moves", provocatively and often violently crossing lines of acceptability and dissidence. Importantly, Kalin and Malatov's stories, in conjunction with Grimberg's high-brow literature, used bisexuality to interrogate late-Soviet geopolitics. This body of work underscored the instability of those years through the perception of bisexuality as unstable

and unsustainable. Even as Kalinin and Maltov openly drew on their own bisexuality in crafting characters and plots, their texts were written not to speak to the topic of bisexuality itself, but to deconstruct tropes of late-Soviet life.

By contrast, Trifonov's *Setka* was a significant milestone in the evolution of the bisexual literary canon toward works *about* bisexuality. The novel marked a post-Soviet reflection on his experience of the Gulag and the sexual intimacy and violence he witnessed there, appealing to the emergent language of bisexual identities in 1990s Russia (as evidenced in Chapter I) to make sense of the phenomenon of "situational homosexuality". The way the protagonists discuss their bisexuality is an attempt to depict a viable alternative for at least some of the relationships which formed between prisoners. While circumstances may have driven the men together, the protagonists' identification with bisexuality helps frame their connection, emotions and attraction as genuine, while preventing their experience from being seen as an exception to the trajectory of their lives before and after imprisonment. His novel is particularly important in the context of a severely limited body of work which scholars can draw on to research same-sex desires in the Zone, and notable as a projection of possible bisexual identity onto the past which eroticises a space so entangled with traumatic histories.

Luk'yanova's *Ya nichego plokhotogo ne delayu* is the culmination of the trend, starkly contrasting with Malatov's novel written almost two decades earlier in, superficially, the same genre of autofiction. Her experiments with form, switching between prose narrated from first, second, and third person, as well as integrating text message history and a script for an unstageable play, reflect and explore the idea of uniting a bisexual having a "split" self who needs to navigate different social and sexual contexts while retaining a core sense of self. This invitation to 'wander with "uncertainty and doubt" that is the bisexual psyche' operates

similarly to how Snezhana Ra and Olivia Kossak encode bisexuality into the poetic form.⁵⁴³ While their approaches are distinct, the two share several key features. Each details their romantic and sexual relationships through a first-person persona, lending a sense of autobiographical authenticity to their vignettes. That drive toward “authentic” representations responds to a feeling that bisexuality is often omitted in discussions of sexuality and in popular or literary culture, which instead reinforces a binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality (as we saw in the audio-visual media of Chapter III, the calls for bisexual media representation discussed online in Chapter II, and the bi/pan contributions to the online journal *Kvir’ Sibir’* during the Covid-19 pandemic).

Luk’yanova, Ra, and Kossak all depict themselves alternating not only between “opposite-” and “same-”sex attractions, but between self-acceptance and denial, as well as between the conventions of the written form. Within this sense of confusion, they depict sex or pornography as the most verifiable medium of knowledge about the self (as did Malatov). Even as Ra and Kossak compare their attractions to men and women, they ultimately conclude that it is not gender but something else which is most important in their relationships and pleasure. In so doing, they draw on the cultural unintelligibility of bisexuality to reinscribe the poems with a sense of obscurity, such as through Ra’s strategy of breaking apart words into their constituent syllables to throw into relief their multiplicities of meaning. When words and logic fail, it is the senses which successfully make sense of these internal worlds—such as in *Taboo*, where the lyrics flow across the artificially drawn border, uniting her two halves in a transcendent multi-sensory moment during intercourse. It is perhaps through such ambiguities and confusions, and the moments where these dissolve, that bisexuality ironically becomes clearest.

⁵⁴³ Wells, “Uncertainty and Doubt”, 135.

Conclusion: Is there a Bisexual Russian Culture?

The bisexual writer Vadim Kalinin suggested that ‘никакой бисексуальной культуры быть не может. Бисексуал – всегда одинокий человек.’⁵⁴⁴ When I began the research for this thesis, I too was unsure how much of a bisexual Russian culture I would be able to locate, or how disparate any bisexual material that I found would be. Would there only be isolated sources and voices? Tenuously bisexual texts? The odd threesome scene here and there? By contrast, this thesis has uncovered a substantial undercurrent of bisexual themes and voices within LGBTQ+ Russian media. It did so with a two-pronged structure, searching first for the “facts”—those non-fictional traces of bisexuality in print and digital outlets—and then for the “fiction”—characters, plots, and poetic devices which say something about bisexuality, or use bisexuality to say something else.

Part I established the print and digital spaces where Russian bisexuals congregated. It analysed the ways in which bisexuality was conceptualised on these platforms, finding ample evidence of a lively bisexual dating scene, ambiguously genuine bi life writing, and scientific theorisation over the nature of bisexuality. I then investigated in Part II how the bisexual themes found in those information environments—such as universal bisexuality, infidelity, and the uneasy role of bisexuality as an imported fashion—similarly cropped up in cultural images of bisexuality over the period. Below, I give an overview of the major findings that this thesis has offered, how it has contributed to the field, and how I hope that this research can be expanded upon in the future.

⁵⁴⁴ Mishin and Bulavin, ‘Vadim Kalinin’.

Summary of Findings

Even in the earliest materials, there was evidence that queer Russians quickly adopted bisexuality as a viable subject position and identity. Reader surveys, letters, and personal ads in the alternative press testify to this. Those traces of bisexual voices allow us to pick out the nuances of bisexual experiences and (self-)representations in the Russian context, which was, for instance, shaped by pressures to marry young. Not everyone identified as bisexual for the same reasons or expressed bisexual attraction in the same way. Neither did all reporters and interviewers treat bisexual respondents equally. Sometimes, bi interlocutors had their narratives reframed and filtered to support a predetermined moral message; for instance, about women's failure to emotionally or sexually connect with their husbands. The lively bi dating scene of the press excitedly moved online with the introduction of discussion boards, forums, and chat rooms. Later, social media and dating apps continued to revolutionise possibilities for expressing same-sex desire by normalising bisexuality, at least to some extent, outside the metropolises in places like Siberia.⁵⁴⁵

As information environments and technologies evolved, this catalysed a parallel evolution in the Russian bisexual lexicon: bisexuality grew to be perceived as meaningfully distinct from the *zhenatyi gei*, and the concept of *polugolubizna* was translated to an equally more SEO-friendly and politicised globalised identity label. Indeed, at the turn of the twenty-first century, when conservatives became emboldened under Putin and LGBTQ+ identities were targeted as symptomatic of societal decline under increasing foreign influence, bisexuality provided a phantasmic space onto which such anxieties about the status of Russia could be projected. In fiction, bisexual characters proved useful stand-ins for Russia itself as they

⁵⁴⁵ Barchunova, 'Shift-F2'.

navigated opposing influences and struggled to maintain a seemingly unsustainable balance, putting their futures in jeopardy. Russian Heterosexuality was pitted against “foreign” Homosexuality in these texts.⁵⁴⁶ Reeling from political and economic crises, from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to an influx of sexualised commerce in the new market, bisexual plots offered a means of dramatizing or satirising these pivotal shifts.

This thesis has further tackled the difficult question of whether the bi (in)visibility paradigm was felt to be relevant to Russia. The content collected by BiPanRussia.com, as well as bisexual YouTube videos, autobiographical contributions to We-Accept.online, and the short essays in queer digital journals, all suggested that a lack of “positive” representation and sense of bisexual community was sorely felt. While these examples drew on globalised discourses, many of these, and others, also reflected on lived experiences of being rejected from local gay and lesbian spaces. An interactive map of bi resources provided at LGBTQ+ community centres across Russia was one means through which BiPanRussia.com sought to rectify that sense of exclusion. The initiative Illuminator Info similarly commissioned the animation *Pogovorim?* (2020) to underscore the difficulties bisexuals faced when coming out in Russia, and how parents could learn to support their children. Some artists also contributed towards rectifying the imbalance, like the indie singer Volua through her song *Biseksualka* (2021).

Notably, each chapter of the thesis also traced a gradual shift in focus from bisexual men to bisexual women. This brings the Russian bisexual canon more and more in line with the gender imbalance observed in Anglophone media as we move through the period. At first, bi men dominated the discussion of the alternative press because these journals were for the

⁵⁴⁶ Kondakov and Essig, ‘A Cold War for the Twenty-First Century’.

most part made by and for men who have sex with men. Bi men were unsurprisingly the focus of Gay.ru's bisexual content, given the site's name and origins. It was also bi men who were subject to particular demonisation in the early-mid 2000s films that used bisexuality to contend with Russia's apparent crisis of masculinity. Most of the early literary case studies were also penned by men, either depicting bisexual dissident women submitting to abusive relationships with patriarchal power, or focusing on male characters impacted by the criminalisation of sodomy in the Soviet Union. Roughly following the first gay propaganda law, the prominence of bisexual men in all these genres declined and bisexual women took up a more prominent position in the culture.

This was likely due to the combined factors of state homophobia that was directed towards queer men especially, and the normalisation of certain forms of female same-sex intimacy. Women's bisexual desire was somewhat acceptable, provided it occurred in such a way that it could be viewed as a performance for heterosexual men. The song *Akt.Love* had already stated this irony outright in 2002, calling the act of two women together hot and two men together not (and not just "not", but actively repulsive). That hypocritical dynamic persisted across the decades, being satirised in the short film *Cheh pakhnut britvy* (2013) and enacted in the hypersexual, hypercapitalist success fantasy of Nastya Rybka's song *Bi* (2020). Kossak's collage poem appropriated the lyrics of Via Gra's similarly fetishising portrayal of female bisexuality, using the sexually suggestive lyrics as a backdrop to a private sexual encounter that allowed her to learn more about herself and accept her desires. Beyond performance, some of the life stories shared in the print press and online materials in fact evidenced real instances where bisexual women were affected by the discrepancy of attitudes toward bisexuality depending on gender—these women were able to discover their enjoyment of sex with women through threesomes that occurred under pressure from their male partners.

Opportunities for Future Research

This thesis has therefore demonstrated that Russia has a rich history of bisexual art and lives. It has begun the project of disentangling how differently motivated representations intersect or diverge from that diversity of lived experience on the bisexual spectrum. However, this thesis alone could not hope to account for every instance of bisexuality in Russian culture. The most obvious limitation is that of chronology—though I have gestured at times to bisexuality in the Soviet Union or in the Silver Age, I focussed on the period 1993-2023. This leaves much to be done to unearth and reinterpret bisexual inflections of earlier sources. Even within the same time period, there are still many other directions that future research could take to further develop my findings. Below, I outline possibilities in relation to each of my chapters, pointing to possible sources and opportunities for comparative work.

Chapter I drew out previously overlooked bisexual materials in the alternative print press in the 1990s and early 2000s. This involved analysis of editorial reflections on bisexuality, reportage on metrosexuals and straight models with stated bi potential, and a deep dive into reader demographics and the wealth of bisexual voices located within the personal ads of the dating services. The chapter also teased out attitudes towards bisexuality in relation to HIV/AIDS and extra-marital affairs. Yet one area which I could not fully engage with either here or in Chapter IV was the literary rubrics of the press. More sustained analysis of the amateur erotic literature and poetry contained within these pages would build on the arguments I have made about bisexual fantasies, and from what I have gleaned so far, likely mirror the strategies I found in reportage and photography. That is to say, the literary sections likely feature narratives wherein universal bisexual potential is used alongside a heterosexual backstory to generate a sense of excitement and exclusivity, a virgin experience of same-sex sex and desire. This might look like more explicitly fictional versions of the first-person

“account” of “becoming bisexual” which we saw shared in *1/10* in 1992, where a student graduated from passively receiving a dildo handled by a woman to crying out in pleasure from a real penis. More work also remains to be done on the connection of the alternative press to other queer printing cultures. As the history of queer zines produced in Central and Eastern Europe continues to attract researchers, situating the Russian alternative press and its bisexual content in a transnational history of late twentieth century queer self-publishing could bring to light further flows of information and inspiration beyond what I have captured here.⁵⁴⁷

In Chapter II, this thesis made strides in finding bisexual online spaces and signalling the importance of now defunct websites and rubrics or (self-)censored projects. But of course, a single chapter could not account for the entirety of Russophone bisexual subjectivities online. Bisexual internet use in Russia and globally deserves more study. For, as Clare Hemmings writes, ‘it is small wonder that bisexuals are often avid science fiction or Internet enthusiasts [...] the Internet functions [...] as a "world" without circumference, a potential space for a bisexual Utopia and for home to be created without exclusion’.⁵⁴⁸ Certainly, Russian bisexual voices can be found beyond the RuNet and the scope of this thesis. One direction for future research would be to work with the data set from a project like *QueeringTheMap.com*, to which Russian speakers have pinned details of queer experiences they have had to specific locations on an interactive world map. Interview work with Russian bisexuals about their experiences of the internet would also help illuminate, or perhaps contradict, the findings of this chapter, as this research was limited to sites captured by the Internet Archive being analysed in conjunction with bisexual perspectives teased out from previously published interview work. As more research is conducted on bisexual experiences

⁵⁴⁷ Glyn Davis and Laura Guy, eds., *Queer Print in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022).

⁵⁴⁸ Hemmings, *Bisexual Spaces*, 188-9.

of the internet globally, I hope that the findings of this chapter will also prove beneficial to comparative studies especially of bisexual online communities in non-Anglophone contexts.

My contributions to the realm of audio-visual culture in Chapter III focused on self-contained narratives in film and music videos. It brought the concept of bi-textuality into academic discussions of the geopolitics in *Ya lyublyu tebya* (2004), considered the connection of emo aesthetics and non-normative masculinity to bisexuality in *Zakrytie prostranstva* (2008), and untangled the intertwined strands of bisexuality and fauxmosexuality in music videos through analysis not only of lyrics, but of embodied performances. With these texts predicated to differing degrees on national anxieties (e.g. commercialisation), the spectre of bisexuality haunted plots and impeded expected narrative progress. Nowhere was this more evident than in *Kholodnyi Front* (2015), where the bisexual double took the form of a monstrous cryptid masquerading as a normal Russian woman in a foreign setting where time does not flow the way it should. Finally, the chapter questioned assumptions in bisexual theory that naming the elusive “B Word” in a narrative is a meaningful first step in improving bisexual representation. To name just one example, we saw in the film *Zhestokost'* (2007) that the half-blue-haired, “half-blue” bisexual character was used to instigate a moment of change for the protagonist, serving symbolically as someone bordering on acceptability yet whose polyamorous potential is ultimately self-serving and dissident. Though in this section I did address individual episodes of *Shestnadsat'* (2021), as well as the structuring effects of the brief bisexual scenes from the web series *Ya idu iskat'* (2020), serialised dramas remain open as an avenue of research. Scholars might look to KvirKlub’s categorisations to determine those series with potentially viable bisexual readings. Considering how bisexual subjectivity gets generated on screen in modern films might additionally benefit from analysis in tandem

with earlier cinema in the Russian or Soviet canon, like the films of bisexual directors Sergei Eisenstein and Sergei Parajanov.⁵⁴⁹

Chapter IV offered the first academic survey of bisexual literature in Russian. It drew out key themes, narrative devices, and linguistic styles that had been used to articulate bisexual subjectivity in Russian. Snezhana Ra, for instance, consciously adopted a strategy of ambiguity and semi-concealment to represent the apparent elusiveness and (in)visibility of bisexuality. The bisexual poetics she developed in tandem with an influence from *z'aum'* probed at the boundaries between lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual identities. This emphasised points of overlap and suggested an ability to move through multiple identifications over the life course, which Sveta Luk'yanova's *Ya nichego plokhogo ne delayu* (2023) later dramatized. Indeed, more remains to be done to disentangle specifically bisexual thematization and its motivations from depictions of homosexuality and queerness more broadly. There are, of course, also bisexual readings to be offered of texts previously classified as lesbian or gay, such as Margarita Sharapova's *Moskva. Stantsiya Lesbos* (2004), which Aleksandr Chantsev argues 'cannot be labeled a manifesto of the LGBT community' because it contains 'not only cases of heterosexuals becoming gay or lesbian but also of the reverse'.⁵⁵⁰ Bisexual contributions are found in other digital journals too: in *Vslukh*, for instance, Katerina Pansek's autobiographical story *Pod narom i pod parusom* (2023) consciously reverses the trajectory of fictional transnational encounters between heterosexual Russians and queer Europeans identified by Connor Doak, instead framing herself as a lesbian uninterested in Russian masculinity who travelled to Europe and 'вернулась в Москву бисексуальной'.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Cf. Garcia, 'The Queer Legacy of Ivan the Terrible'; James Steffen, *The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 238.

⁵⁵⁰ Chantsev, 'Our Attitude Toward This Passion', 82.

⁵⁵¹ Doak, 'Queer Transnational Encounters in Russian Literature'.

Finally, the use of bisexuality in genre fiction such as science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction could prove a particularly productive avenue for future research given the context of the “traditional values” rhetoric, which seeks to “return” to utopian vision of an imagined past in the future. In *fantastika*, scholars might look to Maks Dalin’s *Ubit’ nekromanta* (2007) or Oksana Pankeeva’s series *Khroniki strannogo korolevstva* (2004–2013). In historical fiction, metadata from the IHLIA and KvirKlub suggests that bisexual readings could illuminate Marta Merenberg’s *Zerkalo proshedshego vremeni* (2005)—a retelling of the relationships between George-Charles d’Anthès, Baron Louis Heeckeren, and Aleksandr Pushkin—and Anatolii Vishnevskii’s *Khrupkie fantazii oberbossierera Loisa* (2018), which eroticises the history of porcelain in the Duchy of Württemberg in the eighteenth century. Considering the applications of bisexuality to these historical contexts, and how they relate to the times in which they were written, would expand on my arguments about how bi-textuality was utilised to wrestle with the fallout post-USSR.

Contributions to the Field

I see this thesis contributing to the field in several respects. It is the first history of bisexuality in Russia, as well as the first project to explore bisexuality in contemporary Russian literature and film. It therefore brings bisexual reading practices into the field of queer Russian studies, updating older interpretations in the scholarship and offering new ones through a bisexual lens. It identifies the complex relationship of bisexuality to the Soviet queer argot and shows through autobiographical snippets in the press and online that bisexuals were not always clear on the extent to which they were included in the *tema*.

This thesis is also the first project to tell the history of the RuNet from a queer perspective, all the way from the earliest days of the internet in Russia to the removal of LGBTQ+ websites under Rozkomnadzor today. Within that retelling, it uniquely identifies online spaces where bisexuality could be read about, discussed, and explored. This provides crucial historical context for understanding the development and motivations of more recent bisexual web activity, such as Olga Andreevskikh's work on bisexual activism on Russian social media. The narrative told in this thesis in fact challenges Andreevskikh's portrayal of BiPanRussia.com (made in line with the website's marketing) as a contemporary project totally without precedent, given that I have demonstrated both overlaps and divergences from previous RuNet ventures which incorporated bisexual content.

Indeed, throughout this research, I have observed a consistent drive to archive relevant bisexual materials. In Chapter I, editorial teams collated as much material as possible on all matters sex and sexuality to compensate for decades of censorship. Bisexuality was part of the puzzle being worked out by editors, reporters, and readers, but there were calls for more, such as in the example of the request for *Gei dialog* to provide a bisexual-specific Contact Club. Feeling that bi content in the alternative press was not prioritised enough, Ed Mishin was motivated to create *Khorosho-to kak Masha...* and address the imbalance. Like this bisexual section of Gay.ru, the other bookending case study of Chapter II, BiPanRussia.com, copied over masses of bisexual content from a mass of other sources. Both websites reposted bisexual materials with urgency, creating digital libraries and helping people connect online or offline (either through discussion boards or in-person events). We-Accept.online also explicitly acted as an archive that attempted to ground discussions of LGBTQ+ people in Russia and other former Soviet contexts, responding to dehumanising rhetorics which cast queerness as intolerably foreign. The same motivation was reflected in Chapters III and IV, where sources from the 2020s— short films like *Pogovrim?* and the music video *Biseksualka*,

or the autobiographical works by Sveta Luk'yanova, Olivia Kossak, and the contributors to *Kvir' Sibir'*—offered artistic renditions of their bisexual subjectivities or identifications in real life. In these chapters, I also spotlighted the work of Biblioteka LGBTIK+, LGBT Muzei istorii v Rossii, and KvirKlub's impressive AirTable databases linking films and literature to extensive meta data (dates, cast, topics, content warnings, and whether or not bisexuality is featured).

This thesis, then, has continued the ever-necessary project of attempting to locate and collate bi voices. It has brought together a large volume of diverse content about bisexuality which has been posted and reposted across the years from print, screen, and digital media. I hope it will go some way to making a more stable bisexual canon possible and providing the kind of contextualised, intertextual narrative needed to show that bisexual Russians do have a shared cultural history after all.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

I. The Alternative Press

Title	Place of publication	First known issue date	Last known issue date	Editor(s)	Advertised circulation (in copies)	No. of issues digitised by MLGA
1/10	Moscow, later Prague	1991	1998	Dmitrii Lychev	10,000 – 50,000	22
"1/10" International	Moscow	1994	1994	Dmitrii Lychev	?	1
1/9: Literaturnoe prilozhenie k gazete "1/10"	Moscow	1992 (?)	1992	Dmitrii Lychev	200	2
Agens magazine: zhurnal o devushkakh dlya devushek*	Moscow	2013	2013	Milena Chernyavskaya	999	0
Apollon: informatsionnyi byulleten'	Saint Petersburg	?	2002	I. Koshelev, A. Kukharskii, A. Rumyantsev, K. Chistyakov	950	1
Arabeski: khudozhestvenno-literaturnyi al'manakh	Saint Petersburg	1993	1993	Margarita Bogdanova, Elena Golovina, Tat'yana Ivanova, Ol'ga Korkhonen	?	1
ARGO: illyustrirovanniy eroticheskii literaturno-publitsisticheskii i reklamnyi zhurnal dlya geev	Moscow	1994	1997	Vladislav Ortanov and Konstantin Evgen'ev (pseudonym of Dmitrii Kuz'min)	5,000 - 10,000	5

Dialog plus: erotichnaya pravozashchitnaya vserossiiskaya gazeta dlya gomoseksualistov	Nizhnii Tagil	1995	1996	Yurii Kruglov	?	2
Fialka: literaturnoe prilozhenie k chastnoi gazete "VCh"	Penza	1993	1994	Anri Gennad'evich Penzyak	?	2
GAY Newsletter	Saint Petersburg	1995	1995	?	?	1
Gay, slavyane!	Saint Petersburg	1993	1994	Sergei Shcherbakov, Gennadii Trifonov	5,000	1
GayTimes: Gazeta o zhizni seksual'nykh men'shinstv (later GayTimes: vse o zhizni LGBT- soobshchetsva)	Ekaterinburg	2003	2004	S. N. Dmirtiev	500	10
Gei dialog	Nizhnii Tagil	1993	1996	Valerii Klimov, Yurii Kruglov	2000	14
Golubok: laskovo- famil'yarnoe obrashchenie k muzhshchinam	Chita	1997	2001	Sergei Tyrbutsii	150-500	15
Hot Russian Soldiers	Moscow	1996	1996	Dmitrii Lychev	?	1
Impul's: AntiSPID, iskusstvo, publitsistika	Moscow	1992	1998	Vit Vladimirov	999	7

Kvir*	Moscow	2003	2012	Ed Mishin, Vladimir Voloshin	20,000-30,000	0
Labris: Informatsionnyi listok dlya lesbiiyanok	Saint Petersburg	1998	2000?	?	400-500	6
Organicheskaya ledi	Moscow	1998	2000	Svetlana Vol'naya	?	5
Ostrov: khudozhestvenno -publitsisticheskii radikal'no- feministskii zhurnal*	Moscow	1999	2013	Ol'ga Gert (Ol'gerta Kharitonova)	200-300	0
Partner(Sha): literaturnoe prilozhenie k gazete "Impul's"	Moscow	1993	1997	Mikhail Anikeev, Vit Vladimirov	999	1
Pinx: zhizn' v rozovom svete*	Moscow	2006	2011	?	999	0
Piramida: tematicheskii al'manakh	Ekaterinburg	2006?	2006?	?	?	1
Posidelki: informatsionnyi listok	Saint Petersburg	?	1998	Yulia Zhukova, Anna Kletsina	400	2
Prilozhenie k Adel'fe	Moscow	1995	1996?	Elena Tsertlikh, Mila Ugol'kova, Tat'ana Ivanova	?	5
Probuzhdenie	Saint Petersburg	1994	1996	Ol'ga Krauze	?	8

Raduga	Nizhnii Tagil	1996	1996	Valerii Klimov	?	1
RISK	Moscow	1991	2002	Vladislav Ortanov, Dmitrii Kuz'min, Egor Gorodetskii, Yaroslav Mogutin	999	11
Rozovye strasti: prilozheni k gazete "golubok"	Chita	2000	2000	Anita Snegireva	500	1
S-ekspress: informatsionnoe prilozhenie k IKhI "Spektral"	Tver'	1994	1996	Aleksei Tverskoi, Fedor Semenov	999	17
Shans: Kul'turno- prosvetitel'naya gazeta	Rostov-na- Donu	1992	1992	Yuri Pavlenko, Dima Vorontsov	10,000 - 20,000	2
Sib-10	Novosibirsk	1996	1998	Roman Grinev?, Andrei V. Grebenshchikov?	500	9
Sibirskii variant: The Altai Gay and Lesbian Press	Barnaul	1992	1992	Aleksandr Khorshev	2000	5
Spektral'	Tver'	1993	?	Aleksei Tverskoi, Fedor Semenov	999	1
Tema	Moscow	1989	1993	Roman Kalinin, Vladislav Ortanov, Anna Vetrova	25,000	13
Tsentr Treugol'nik: informatsionnyi byulleten'*	Moscow	1995	?	Vitalii Ramazanov, Vitalii Zhumagaliev, Elena Chernykh	900	0
Ty: illyustrirovannyi zhurnal dlya gomoseksualistov i lesbiyanok	Moscow	1992	1993	Gennady Krimenskoi	10,000	2

Uranus*	Moscow	1995	1995	Mikhail Anikeev	?	0
V temu	Arkhangelsk	2006 (?)	2007	Natal'ya Popova	100-200	4
Veselyi chelovek	Rostov-na-donu	1993	1999	Genrikh Aprikov	?	32
Vybor: Literaturnoe prilozhenie k gazete "1/10"	Moscow	1993	1993	Dmitrii Lychev, Sasha Dymov	50,000	1
Zerkalo: informatsionnyi byulleten' biblioteki lesbiyanok i geev (later Zerkalo: informatsionnyi byulleten' GenderDok)	Moscow	1995	1998	Viktor Oboin	200	25

* Publications marked with an asterisk are not contained within the collection from the MLGA which I have been working with. In these cases, the bibliographical data is taken from Kirill Tolpygo, 'LGBTQIA+ Studies Resources: Russian Federation: Periodical Press, 1990-2013', UNC Lib Guides, 2024, <https://guides.lib.unc.edu/russian-lgbt-press/journals>.

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