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Switch Archives: Negotiating Digital Interfaces for Historical Research on Bisexual Media

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Although, digital technologies have facilitated an unprecedented level of access to historical archives of pornography, conventional methods of navigating these archives prove inadequate for researching bisexual cultural histories. Due to bisexual erasure, the indicators of bisexual cultures, practices, and identities often go unmarked in digital cataloguing methods, such as metadata tags. Additionally, existing methods of querying digital archives, such as keyword or subject searches, often return massive amounts of material that are not specifically pertinent to bisexuality. I conceptualize "switch," historically a bisexual slang, to articulate an archival navigation method derived from bisexual practices of identificatory promiscuity and refusal. To engage this method, I proceed by examining a digital archive of underground adult media from the 1960s and 1970s.

Ironically, intentions of inclusivity have produced conditions that make it increasingly difficult to recover bisexual history. In a move to build solidarity amongst sexually marginalized identity factions by the early 1980s lesbian and gay periodicals, organizational caucuses, and community groups began to include bisexuals as a third term when self-referencing their intended public. This incorporation of the term "bisexual" alongside gay and lesbian produced a massive amount of materials that include the keyword "bisexual," but do not speak specifically to the identity. On the other hand, archives specializing in gay or lesbian history are often explicitly designated as such. Thus, two major hurdles to the study of bisexual history are, first, the fact that basic keyword searches for bisexual materials return massive amounts of nondescript "LGBT" content, and second, that there are a minimal number of archives specifically labelled as bisexual.

In order to counter these archival hurdles, I propose an archival navigation method inspired by a historical synonym for bisexual, "switch." The grammatical flexibility and multiple interpretive horizons of switch are in many ways akin to the mobilization of the word "queer" by both activists and scholars in the late 20th century. While having different connotations today, in the 1960s and 1970s "switch," or sometimes "switch hitter," was a slang term for referring to a bisexual person. Even in its noun form, the term also has an active and shifty connotation that reflects its verbal association with movement, change, or transference.

I engage the phrase "switch archives" to designate both the kinds of archives that contain bisexual ephemera and as a call for an archival method informed by an ethic of bisexual promiscuity. In the first sense, items of value for the history of bisexuality exist in "switch archives," or in other words, are not confined solely to archives of heterosexuality or under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Thus, in the second sense, as historians of bisexuality we should be compelled to "switch archives," or be open to consider and peruse collections that might seemingly be absent of bisexual traces. This call to "switch archives" is also informed by the bisexual ethic of identificatory refusal where historically bisexuals have consistently had to reject monosexual identity categorizations, and because by definition bisexuals refuse gender-identity-of-object-choice as a defining factor of our desires.

As an introductory example, I want to consider Independent Voices the open access digital archive of underground and alternative press publications that is housed at reveal digital.com . Due to the fact that many of the publications in this collection predate the inclusionary language of the LGBTQ+ umbrella, the method of keyword search is relatively successful in returning hits that are specifically relevant to bisexuality. I limited the search within, arguably, the two primary underground newspapers in California during the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the Los Angeles Free Press and the Berkeley Barb. I constricted this search to 1967-1972 to focus on the years directly before and after Stonewall. Several observations become apparent when querying the digital archives of these papers (detailed data are visualized below in the figure). First, the majority of all hits arise from personals ads the earliest of which appear in 1967, before both gay liberation and the "bisexual chic" accorded to the 1970s. Second, the bisexual slang "AC/DC" makes up a substantial proportion of the keyword search hits. While "bisexual" makes up the dominant share of hits for Berkeley Barb, for the Los Angeles Free Press "AC/DC" is a more frequently used term. Notably, many of the search hits reference bisexual media in some form, ranging from casting calls for bisexuals to bisexual themed film programs at nearby theaters.

In this preliminary talk, I argue that historical research on bisexual media calls out for research methods derived from lived bisexual experience. I offer "switch archives" as both a name for such a method and as a broader umbrella for expanding the archives that bisexual historians explore.

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