

 Robyn Ochs Speaker Teacher Writer Activist
[Home](#)[About](#)[Speaking](#)[Writing](#)[Academia](#)[Resources](#)

[Biphobia and Binary Thinking](#)

Interview and book review by Mieke Stessens in [ZiZo: magazine voor holebi's and transgenders](#) 17 de jrg. Nr. 99 (Nov. 2009), pp. 22-24

ENGLISH TRANSLATION by Lauris Ledi

Robyn Ochs is a bi-activist from the United States. Her enthusiasm and engagement are impressive. Also, with pleasure, she granted ZiZo some time.

The American bi activist Robyn Ochs is very versatile: she writes, teaches, is constantly reminding les-bi-gays and heterosexuals that bisexuals existing too, fights for the well-being of animals and at the moment she is very active with the pro-marriage equality movement in the United States. Together with Sarah Rowley she edited the second edition of the book *Getting Bi. Voices of Bisexuals Around the World* (review on p. 24). It contains a subject that – even in the les-bi-gay-movement – often is underexposed.

You present *Getting Bi* as a 'grassroots' project. What do you mean by that and why did you choose this approach?

I am a big fan of grassroots-organizing. *Getting Bi* is the product of the work of volunteers all over the world. They realized that there is a need to clarify bisexuality and gave us the gift of their stories. I hope that they are now enjoying the results and using the book to explain bisexuality to other people. I want to stress that the book was published by the [Bisexual Resource Center](#). All proceeds from book sales go directly to the Center, and thus directly back into the bi movement. That is important for me. *Getting Bi* casts light on an identity all too often forgotten and ignored.

In most les-bi-gayT communities, bisexuality is an invisible identity. How come?

Bisexuality is an invisible identity. We don't see bisexuals, so we have no idea how many there are. We draw conclusions about a person's sexual orientation based upon the sex/gender of his/her current or very recent partner. Bisexuals who are in a long-term relationships or who are single, are usually assumed to be straight or gay. And we do love our binaries. Man or woman, gay or straight, black or white, friend or foe... We have a hard time letting go of them.

How do you live with that? You have already lived for so long with a woman. How do you tackle the assumption that you must be a lesbian?

By publicly adopting a bisexual identity, I possess and claim all my experiences: past, present and future. I claim the potential experiences that still could come. My identity is not determined only by my behaviour of the moment (such as my current relationship), but it takes into account who I am, have been and could still become. This is how I try to explain bisexuality.

How do you explain the existence of 'biphobia' within les-bi-gay communities? Les-bi-gays do think of themselves as tolerant and progressive. Are they?

It's true that les-bi-gays see themselves as quite open-minded. Perhaps they are on average more tolerant than the average heterosexual. But keep in mind that les-bi-gays grow up in the same world as heterosexuals. We reproduce the same mistakes and wrong opinions. We hold the same prejudices, we participate in hierarchies and we tend to binary thinking.

There exists a sociological concept that calls 'horizontal hostility.' That means that people from oppressed groups, because of we feel powerless, direct the pain caused by our oppression towards other oppressed people, instead of striking it back at the oppressors. My friend [Warren Blumenfeld](#), a brilliant teacher, has described the concept to me like this: "the abused child hits his younger brother, who in turn kicks the family dog". This dynamic I see also in our own community. Think for example about our attitude towards transgender people, effeminate gays, butches and of course bisexuals. We really have to challenge ourselves to rise above this, to think for ourselves and avoid hurting others in ways in which we ourselves have been hurt. As Audre Lorde wrote: "*The masters' tools will never dismantle the masters' house.*"

How is biphobia within les-bi-gay communities different from biphobia elsewhere? Have both the same roots?

There is both overlap and difference. One manifestation of biphobia is denying our very existence. This is common both within our own community and in the general society. And even some who are willing to allow that there may be some bisexuals may believe "true bisexuals" are in fact very rare. They are maintaining that most people who identify as bi are actually les-bi-gay or straight in some form of denial.

In addition, bisexuals are sometimes (and often falsely – if we happen to be partnered with someone of our own sex) seen as having access to heterosexual privilege that lesbians and gay men do not have. For heterosexuals we may be threatening, because we are not different enough. We challenge the false us/them binary and that makes heterosexuals upset.

Many of the people who participated in the book tell that they don't like to be 'put in boxes.' Is bisexuality as identity not just another 'box'? Which are the advantages and disadvantages of this separate identity?

Labels are tricky things. People can use them to box you in and limit your imagination, but on the other side they can really improve communication. I find that people in a heterosexist society must come out in order to inform and to help others. Bisexuals must come out to illuminate the space between the binaries of gay and straight. I'd like to be able to say, for instance: "I'm left-handed, I'm Jewish and I'm bisexual," without any of these three things being seen as a big deal. Labels are great tools for communication. We just have to use them thoughtfully.

Various definitions of bisexuality are presented in this book. What is your definition?

I call myself bisexual because I have the potential to be attracted, sexually and romantically, to people of more than one sex or gender. Not necessarily at the same time, to the same degree, or in the same way. My bisexuality is not really about my actual behavior at a specific moment in time, but it is about who I am at a deeper level, and that has stayed constant for more than 33 years. For the past 13 years I have been in a monogamous relationship with a woman, and today I experience myself just as bisexual I was 33 years ago.

I wonder how biphobia in the heterosexual world is connected to sexism. I think about bi women portrayed as sexual objects to please the fantasies of heterosexual men. I also think about the idea that a bi woman in a relation with a man will finally find the true love, 'the real thing.' What do you think about that?

When I was in my early 20s, I came out to my then boyfriend. He replied, "Cool. I'd like to watch!" I quickly responded: "That was information, not an invitation." Men can indeed get excited about the idea of being part of a threesome with two women. On the other hand they may feel threatened by a woman who doesn't necessarily need a man to feel 'complete' or to be fulfilled, even not if she chooses to be in a relationship with a man.

In our process of socialization, women still learn that we need a man to be complete. We learn how to seduce a man and how we, once we succeed, how to 'keep' him. Patriarchy requires keeping tight control over women, and regulates our behavior (and that of men too, by the way). Unleashed, free sexuality in general, and homosexuality and bisexuality in particular, all challenge this control.

Do you see a strong connection between transgender and bi people? Both transgress boundaries: of sex or gender and of sexual identity.

Bi and transgender people do indeed have a lot in common. And some transgender people identify also as bi. Both groups challenge binaries and transgress boundaries. In addition the trans and the bi people represent often-forgotten and sometimes discriminated against groups in the LGBT world: the 'B' and the 'T'. In some parts of the United States, I see a high level of collaboration and alliance between these communities, and I welcome this.

In the Flemish les-bi-gay and trans community, bisexuals are not so visible as well. We have some bi groups and an occasional bi event now and then, but never something big. What advice can you give us?

When there is a bi event, place some lesbians, gay men, and non-bi trans people in the spotlight. When there are les-bi-gay events, then invite a bisexual to be on the panel. This makes bisexuality visible. This way we can strengthen each other and educate ourselves. We have to be allies to one another.

Furthermore we can make a commitment to try not to assume that every person in a same-sex relationship necessarily identifies as gay or lesbian, or that everyone in a mixed-sex relationship identifies as straight. And we need to broaden the space within these categories as well: one person's definition of "lesbian," for example, may not be exactly the same as another's.

Book review: *Getting Bi. Voices of bisexuals around the world* / Robyn Ochs and Sarah E. Rowley

Getting Bi is a book with personal stories from bisexuals around the world. It has been published by the Bisexual Resource Centre in Boston, where Robyn Ochs, one of the authors, works. Ochs is a well-known bi-activist with a lot of publications about the subject to her name.

The stories in *Getting Bi* are arranged in 10 chapters about different bi topics, like coming out, relations, the bi-community, and sexual desire. Each chapter has an introduction with a short reflection by the editors that gives the reader an idea about the dilemmas of bisexuals. The introductions are written in a sober style and never become too theoretical. Afterwards the topics are illustrated by personal stories.

The book offers a clear and interesting overview of what bisexuals are concerned about. How do bisexuals cope with relations that are perceived by other people as heterosexual? How do partners of bisexuals cope with that? Is the desire of a bisexual man towards a woman the same as his desire towards a man? Is bi identity constantly changing or does someone stay constantly and without hesitation bisexual? Why do even lesbians and homosexuals feel sometimes aversion towards bisexuals?

The book's contents are simultaneously strong and light, the tone is optimistic. Many of the writers see their bisexuality as equal to flexibility, creativity and 'the unlimited possibility to love.' It doesn't mean that the book is not realistic. Also, the problems often related to the intolerant government of a certain country, are addressed.

The bisexuals that have written are quite varied. Some of them are activists, others totally not. Some of them are trans, others are man, woman or gender queer. There are monogamous, polyamorous, confirmed-single and married bisexuals. *Getting Bi* is recommended for everybody who wants to get to know more about the invisible bisexual identity. The book is informative and clarifying, without being pedantic. (MSt)

Note: *Getting Bi* is available from the [Bisexual Resource Center](#) and from [Amazon](#).