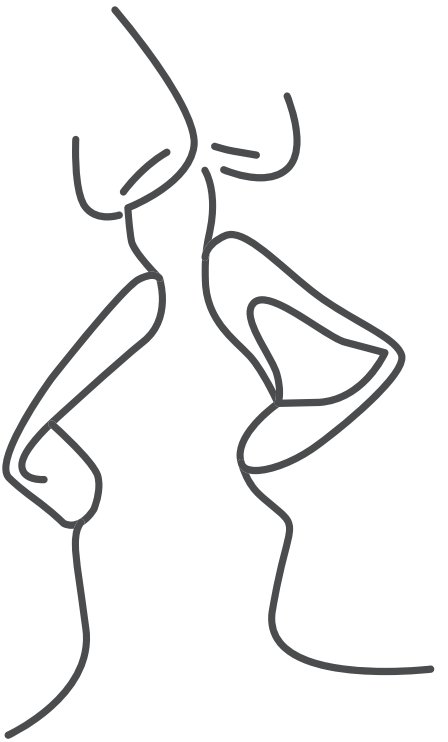
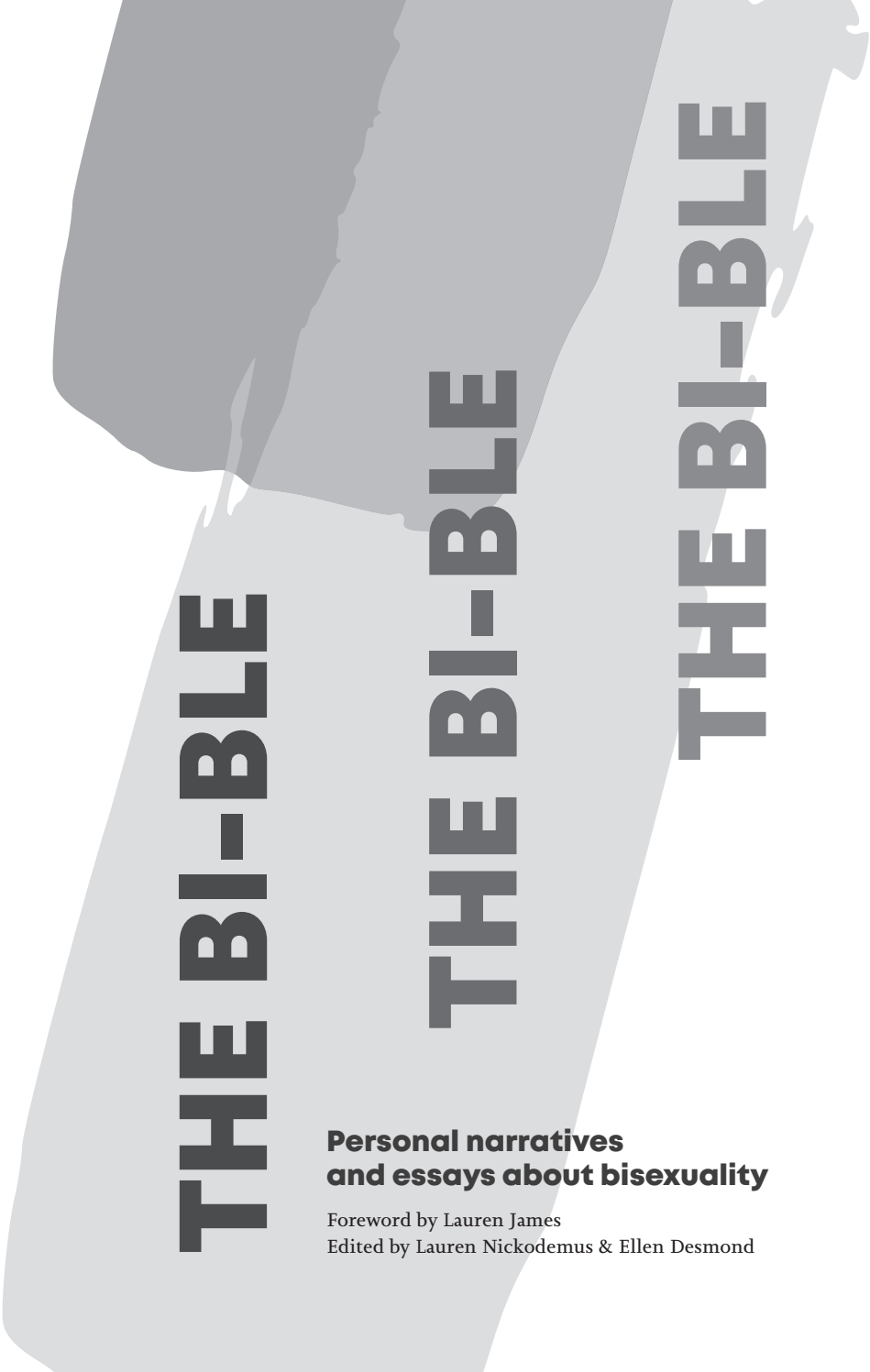


‘I DIDN’T PICK A SIDE. I PICKED A PERSON’

– Lisa-Marie Ferla, page 9



Personal narratives and essays about bisexuality

Foreword by Lauren James
Edited by Lauren Nickodemus & Ellen Desmond

EDITORS' NOTE

The Bi-ble: An Anthology of Personal Narratives and Essays about Bisexuality was crowdfunded on Kickstarter by 200 people who believe in the importance of this work and its contribution to wider social conversation. It consists of essays, carefully selected from a pool of submissions, by authors who pitched topics they feel are relevant to a discussion on bisexuality. While compiling the anthology, we made best efforts to provide an intersectional, original and varied spread of narratives and experiences from people based in transatlantic locations. However, there are limitations to any work of this size, and reach always needs to be expanded upon.

While self-identifying bisexuals are the focus of this anthology, it also includes some experiences from people of other identifications. For example, it includes outlooks from pansexuals, homosexual panromantics, people who once identified as bisexual but no longer do, and many who identify simply as queer. As editors, we believe it is important not to exclude the voice of anyone who feels

they relate to the marginalisation of bisexuality within the LGBTQ+ community.

For consistency, throughout the book we use the term LGBTQ+ when referring to the vibrant queer community. We know this isn't the only label that fits, and it might not be your label, but we have used it following many conversations with LGBTQ+ people in the hope of maximum inclusion, and minimum exclusion.

This anthology is simply a selection of 20 voices – a mere line in a story that is nowhere near completely documented yet. But we hope it will, at the very least, inspire more people to speak, and even more people to listen.

Ellen Desmond
Lauren Nickodemus
November 2017

FOREWORD

by Lauren James

When I was asked to write a foreword for this anthology, I was unsure at first. What did I have to say about bisexuality? I've not studied gender and sexuality, nor read many books on the subject. I didn't feel like I had the experience necessary to contribute, beyond being bisexual myself. I felt like I needed some way to justify my decision to stand up and represent an identity. And on reading the essays in this collection, I think that's something a lot of bisexual people face: the feeling that you're not quite allowed this. That you have to be willing to fight for your place in the LGBTQ+ community.

Bisexual people don't live passively: they work to be seen, heard and noticed every day. It takes confidence, determination, bravery and belief to be able to out yourself not only to straight people but also to other LGBTQ+ people. To provide proof that you are both: not just one or the other, straight or gay.

This community is one of strength, and that strength is visible on every page of this collection. LGBTQ+ people are often denied a history of happy endings, of people like us living full and rich lives. Role models are vital in showing children and adults alike the path forward. As Chitra Ramaswamy says in her essay, 'sometimes, because there are so few role models, so little understanding and so much bafflement, you don't really know who you love'. Autobiographical accounts like the ones in this book help to fill the dearth of heroes available to LGBTQ+ people. By providing examples of real

people, it reassures readers that your experiences are valid and you are not alone. You matter. You can stand proud amongst a whole community of people just like you.

The range and breadth of experiences in this book prove that there's no 'right' way to be bisexual – that you don't need to have a list of past and present relationships ready to offer as evidence of your identity. This book doesn't represent every bisexual experience, because, of course, that would be impossible. But it does highlight significant moments in the journeys of real bisexual people in ways that apply to the few as well as the many. Whether you see yourself reflected in these pages, or only catch a glimpse of your own experiences in the stories told, I hope that you find something reassuring in hearing the outspoken voices of a people who so often live silently.

Bisexuality is a diverse identity that can so often stay invisible, or pass as straight in the real world. But as this book shows, bisexual people are here. We aren't going anywhere. And we've got quite a lot to say.

Authors, write us into your stories. Queer communities, represent us with more than just the 'B' in LGBTQ+. Schools, teach us in your classes. Employers, make safe spaces for your workers.

We need it: bisexual people have the highest levels of depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide of any sexual identity, are the least likely to come out at work, and experience more identity confusion as teenagers than gay and lesbian peers.[1] These essays go a long way toward explaining why that might be the case – as well as showing the joys and positive side of being bisexual in the 21st century.

As a writer, I try to make sure that all of my books accurately represent the rich diversity of the real world I live in, because those are the books I am most interested in reading. I write for a teenage audience, and I'm always aware that my books

might be the first time a reader has seen a character of a certain identity in fiction, or that they might have only read examples of stereotypical, thinly drawn characters before. As Sarah Barnard says in her essay, 'I had to "decide" that characters from my favourite works of fiction were bi, because otherwise, my sexuality wouldn't be represented at all'. Non-fiction books like this essay collection, which show the varied and intersectional lives of real LGBTQ+ people, can only help fiction to become more diverse – and give those characters fulfilling lives and stories beyond a tragic coming out narrative.

You'll find a huge variety of experiences in these pages, whether that's related to fiction (Sarah Barnard, page 85, Mel Reeve, page 127, and Lauren Vevers, page 43), activism (Laura Clay, page 97, and Viola Orson, page 103), health (Eleanor Reid, page 23, and Alice T, page 57), religion (Dany Carter, page 147) or intersectionality (Naomi Carroll, page 82, Joseph Guthrie, page 137, and Jayna Tavarez, page 113). Whether you're a long-time student of gender and sexuality, or an amateur, like me, I guarantee you'll learn something from the experiences discussed within this book.

If you are just entering the often confusing world of LGBTQ+ identities, I encourage you to visit the websites, articles and books cited in these essays, to continue your journey by exploring all of the varied and wonderful areas of this community. I promise you will find the place you belong, even if right now it feels like you never will.

Lauren James
October 2017

GOING EITHER WAY

by Chitra Ramaswamy

YOU ARE 25 years old. Slap bang in the middle of your twenties, in the whirling middle of life it seems, though really adulthood is still only just beginning. You live alone in Glasgow, renting a flat from a friend of a friend in Woodlands; an area of faded grandeur like so many in that great and deprived city. Mostly occupied by students and Scottish-Pakistani families (you are neither but could be mistaken for both), it's a place where abandoned and soon sodden sofas line the streets and the sandstone tenements are bedeviled with cracks. Living alone is both a thrill and a fright. You revel in being the only person with a set of keys and worry about how you will remove spiders all by yourself. (You won't: on one shameful occasion you will see one in the bathroom, hurl your old *Norton Anthology of Literature* from your Glasgow University days at it, miss, and end up washing at the kitchen sink for three days.)

It is the first time you have lived alone and though you do not know it, you have not lived alone again since. And so this period has taken on the shimmering and slightly

warped patina that comes with being a one-off in life so far. To you, more than a decade later, it seems like a charmed life, a hallowed moment in which all the things that have not yet happened are waiting, quietly, to materialise. Whenever you picture this little flat with its pocked and poorly painted white floors and the radiators that get too hot, too quick, you are reminded of that time. Of late night takeaways eaten alone in bed while watching back to back episodes of *Sex and the City*. Of the neighbour, whom you never met, practising his saxophone on weekend mornings. Of the reassuring yet melancholy feeling, familiar to those who live alone, of arriving home and finding everything precisely as you left it. And of the unexpected metamorphosis that takes place within you while you live there: from loving a man to loving a woman. From being a straight woman to a bisexual woman, though really in hindsight you were always the latter. From inhabiting two minority statuses – Indian in Britain, English in Scotland – to three. A change that, like so many of the most profound transformations in life, was there all along. Not really a change at all, then, it's just that it went unnamed before.

For now, you are in a long-distance relationship with a man. You met during university, fell madly in love, and were inseparable for five years. He has moved to London and soon he will move further still, to China. Already you both sense the relationship is in its last throes, though you do not speak of it. Instead you spend heady, slightly edgy weekends together in the city where you met, then see him off on the train to London, where you (not he) are from, and weep alone on the platform under the glorious glass roof of Central Station. This life suits you. Even the pining has its pleasures.

Then there is your boss at work, with whom you go drinking on Tuesday nights after putting to bed the weekly

magazine you edit together. You talk for hours while drinking Peroni straight from the bottle in a Glasgow bar with scuffed black and white chequered floors and tarnished mirrors on the walls. Your boss, a lesbian, is in a long-term relationship with another woman. You privately think how nice it must be to not have to always put the toilet seat down, a minor battle constantly and wordlessly fought in so many hetero homes. You have never been with a woman before. You imagine it to be soft, sympathetic, fun.

And so it happens. You begin to realise on weekends that you can't wait for Monday to come around again and that this is curious, unexpected, the wrong way round. Tuesday nights become the highlight of your week: talking to this small bright woman so different from you, witnessing your beliefs, interests, senses of humour, and lives become entwined. You are dreamy, distracted. You feel constantly furtive and amused as though you are harbouring a secret from yourself. Indeed, you are, for you are falling in love. You would recognise the signs immediately if the object of your desire were a man.

You are 30 years old and have moved 50 miles east to Edinburgh with your partner of five years. The same woman, the only one you have loved. You share a mortgage, a dying profession (journalism), and a passion for Pedro Almodovar films and the ancient widescreen landscapes of northwest Scotland. Your lives are thickly interwoven now; your CD doubles (The Gotan Project, Ella Fitzgerald) tucked next to each other in the sideboard you spotted together in a secondhand shop. Your parents, friends, and colleagues all know and love your partner. You have come out and, like all LGBTQ+ people, will do so continuously, haphazardly, proudly, and painfully for the rest of your life. You are bisexual, but everyone who knows you assumes you are a lesbian and those who don't assume you are straight. One gay

male friend confesses that he came out as bi to cushion the blow for his family 'because that's what we do, isn't it?' and you say nothing about his assumption that you must be the same. Another friend, telling you about a mutual acquaintance who has begun a romance with another woman after a long-term relationship with a man, describes her as a lesbian. 'Maybe she's bisexual,' you suggest, in hope, because it would be nice on occasion to find someone, somewhere who identifies as you do. 'Does it really matter?' the friend replies. Yes, it does, to you. When you do take the trouble to point out that you are, in fact, bisexual – that no matter whether you are with a man or a woman you will always have the potential to go either way – people look at you with scepticism, confusion, disbelief, or perhaps even envy. Their faces say this: you're lying to yourself, it's just a phase, you don't know what you want, you're letting the side down, you're greedy, you don't exist. But you do exist. Here you are.

You start to understand that this is what bi-erasure, an ironically conspicuous term in every article and discussion you come across about bisexuality, means. This is what it feels like to be invisible: the B lurking in the shadows between the G and the T, the one sexuality in whom few seem to believe but which, surely, is the one silently, even unknowingly, inhabited by the most. You voice this sense of fitting in nowhere, of being a kind of sexual nomad, to no one. You barely even notice it yourself, because this, too, is the consequence of inhabiting an identity deemed untrustworthy, unsafe. The kind that results in long pieces in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled 'The Scientific Quest to Prove Bisexuality Exists'. The kind that leads to an episode of *Girls* in which it's remarked that bisexuals are one of two groups that 'you can still make fun of' (the other being Germans). Or, back to *Sex and the City* again – that equally adored and derided cornerstone of noughties female sexuality – in

which bisexuality is described (by Carrie) as a 'layover on the way to Gaytown' or (by Miranda) as nothing more than 'greedy double-dipping'. Even Samantha, that blonde bastion of sexual liberation, writes bisexuality off as mere youthful sexual experimentation.

For you, though, it is not experimentation. It is a choice, a capacity, a state of ever-present potentiality: to love people for themselves. It is not a 50/50 split but a constantly moving, evasive target. Bisexuality, for you, is not about loving men and women the same, but about loving difference: because men and women are different just as each man or woman is different from the next man or woman. But sometimes, because there are so few role models, so little understanding and so much bafflement, you don't really know who you love. You find yourself thinking you ought to choose: society wants you to pick a side. But you can't. You don't want to. Why should anyone have to choose?

You are 38. You have two children and a dog with your partner of 13 years. The same woman, the only one you have ever loved. Your mortgage is ever so slightly smaller now. You have whittled down your CDs and acquired, as parents are wont to do, an offensive collection of battery operated plastic toys. You have replaced travel with family visits to London and culture with box-sets. Your partner has seen you give birth and you have seen her grieve the death of her father. You have had a civil partnership in the same draughty old building in Leith where your children's births have been registered. Equal marriage has come in but you have chosen not to 'upgrade'.

You are still and will always be bisexual, but like all long-worn and slightly frayed identities, you say it out loud less now. And bisexuality, too, has changed: the moving target shifted again. There are other identities, which were always there but had not been named, jostling for space and

recognition. In an era of sexual fluidity, bisexuality seems anachronistic: defined by dualism in a world where there are now multiplicities. Its very existence is still debated nonetheless. And you are still perceived as a lesbian, as though your past has been written off, as though loving men was the exception, as though the present is all that ever counts.

Over the years, as you have grown into yourself, the beauty of bisexuality has dawned on you. Your sexuality, slowly, marvellously, has begun to suit you. Bisexuality, you now realise, is a permanent state of flux, a liminal space where you can be either/or, but you can also be neither/nor. It is not about sexual curiosity or whose genitals you prefer: rather it is a commitment to open-mindedness. You now feel there is an intoxicating liberty and privilege in ricocheting between the sexes, particularly now that parenting has anchored you more to your partner, your children, your home, dog, a certain way of life that you're not sure you entirely chose, and this small piece of land that is constantly debating its independence. You have discovered that the middle is a surprisingly edgy place to be. Living here requires bravery, which is why research shows that 80% of bisexuals end up in straight relationships. Sometimes the desire to conform can outstrip all others.

You are struck by the comparison with the unsettled way you have always inhabited your race: that same sense of being simultaneously too brown and not brown enough. In India too British, in Britain too Indian. Perhaps this is why you, a Londoner born of first-generation Indian immigrants, have ended up in Scotland. You seem to thrive in places where you are even more of an outsider. The truth is, you have never really fitted in anywhere, neither in gay bars nor Hindu temples, and this is both as it is and, increasingly with age, as you like it. So this is what it means for you, at 38, to be bisexual. You have chosen (or, if you prefer, been chosen by)

an unfixed, untitled, and shape-shifting identity. One that by definition resists categorisation. Instead it commands flexibility, restlessness, the endless possibility of change. It is about who you are – racially, politically, socially, and personally – as much as who you love. Bisexuality may be the most invisible of the sexual identities, and invisibility is toxic in almost every way, but it has a single advantage. It means you can forge your own path, be whatever you want, love whoever you choose, exist in the shadows. For you, right now, bisexuality means freedom.

DECLINE TO ANSWER

Why I'm making my 'invisible' bisexuality your business

by Lisa-Marie Ferla

It is June 2011. I've been in my new job for three months – a return, after two and a half years, to the profession I was made redundant from when the crash came in 2008. There's a company-wide email: an annual diversity monitoring survey, done in conjunction with a trade publication. The usual stuff. Age bracket. Marital status. Gender identity. Disability. Educational background. Sexual orientation.

25-34
Married
Female
Not that you'd notice
State school
Decline to answer

I have, at this point, been married to my husband for almost a year. I tell myself that nobody wants to hear it.

I met my best friend in our first week of university. We bonded over having left school a year earlier than anybody

else, and over our hatred of Catholic education. She had sung Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' until she got thrown out of Religious Education class, and had had an abortion. I would never have been so bold.

'I have something to tell you,' I called through a graffiti-covered bathroom stall door. We had been day-drinking again, because nobody ever checked your ID in the student union. 'I think I like girls, maybe.' It was the first time I had ever said it out loud.

My best friend dropped out of university; moved to London with a woman she had met on the internet. When I went to visit, my mum made me take my own towels.

I think my mum spent most of my time between boyfriends waiting for me to come out when I was a teenager. 'Is there anything you want to tell me?' she would say. I would look at her blankly, confused by the tremble in her voice. Then I would find a new boyfriend, and the tension – or that particular tension, at least; Catholic, remember? – would pass, and it was back to calling me downstairs whenever my 'pin-up' Courtney Love was on the telly.

My first TV crush… actually, no. My first TV crush was the appropriately-named Wesley Crusher, Will Wheaton's character in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. He had floppy hair and cherry-coloured lips. Pre-pubescent cheekbones. He looked a little bit like me.

Eliza Dushku, Faith to Buffy's Vampire Slayer, was my second TV crush. She was also my boyfriend's. I'd go over to his house after work and we'd look at pictures of her online, me sitting squirming on his lap while we perched on his computer chair. We'd take late-afternoon naps, and I'd pretend to have sex dreams and let him touch me.

When I dumped him for my Friend Who Was a Boy, he made me take the vibrators and thong underwear he had

bought me and that I had always refused to take home. 'I thought we'd get married,' he said. I threw the toys in the wheelie bin behind my mum's house on my way back in.

Months later, after I had twisted my Friend Who Was a Boy's arm long and hard enough to let me call him 'boyfriend', I asked him if he would see it as cheating if I kissed a woman.

'Of course,' he said. 'It is cheating.'

His answer genuinely surprised me.

There was never a defining moment of my bisexuality: no quiet realisation over the few fictional portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters around in the 1990s, no drunken kisses during which something fell into place. In retrospect, when you were raised to believe that 'sex is for a loving relationship in marriage', it didn't matter what gender you were fantasising about. It was still wrong.

There was at least one bumbling conversation in which I tried to explain to my mother that I wasn't bothered about whether I ended up with a man or a woman. 'Have you ever kissed a woman?' she gasped, terrified. 'Well, no,' I replied, as was the truth then. 'Then you're not gay,' she replied. I never tried again.

I never tried with anybody, honestly. I've never denied my sexuality, but I've never particularly performed it either. At its worst, it was the MySpace profile I set up shortly after my Friend Who Was a Boy broke up with me. I ticked 'divorced lesbian', because 'broken-hearted bisexual' felt too much like giving myself away and you didn't just… not tick the boxes, not in those days. (Curiously enough, that MySpace profile was where I struck up a correspondence with the man who would become my husband.) More often, it was those diversity monitoring forms. 'None of your business,' I thought, furiously, as I filled in the 'decline to answer' box.

Why the reluctance? Because I have friends who have fought to have their relationships recognised by the law, by the state and by its institutions. The job centre and the NHS have looked through my friends' wives and partners. Nobody has ever attempted to undermine my marriage. Nobody has ever made me feel unsafe holding my husband's hand in the street, or resting my head on his shoulder on the night bus home.

Nobody needs to hear me boosting my social justice credentials while I don't have to live it.

There were a couple of reasons why that changed. The first came in June 2016, when the Iranian-American comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh came out on the first episode of her podcast, *#GoodMuslimBadMuslim*, that followed the murder of 49 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando by the terrorist Omar Mateen. For Noorbakhsh, coming out felt vital against a backdrop of right-wing American media eulogising one of its traditional bogeymen, LGBTQ+ people, as an opportunity to score points against radical Islam. And while my heart broke for one of my favourite comedians, I realised that for the first time I was listening to a woman of a similar age and whose relationship status was similar to my own stand up and say that she was part of a community in mourning.

Pulse was not my tragedy. I missed the 'nightclub' stage of young adulthood, so I never had that moment of clarity rubbing up against strangers in a dark, sweaty room where for the first time I felt that I was truly myself. At just-turned 34, I had never been able to be truly myself.

The second was a turning of the tide in bisexual visibility, specifically on social media. Critiques that the hashtag campaigns around Pride and National Coming Out Day allow allies to feel good about themselves while avoiding the physical and emotional labour of activism are often valid.

But they've also provided me with the proof it turned out I needed that I'm not the only person wrestling with the conflict between her outwardly heteronormative life and her bisexual identity. Marrying my husband might appear, to those who seek to minimise bisexuality, as the ultimate in 'picking a side' – but I didn't pick a side. I picked a person.

Among the tired critiques of bi and pan-identifying people – that we're greedy, that we're hypersexualised, that we're feckless, that we're letting down one side or the other, that we're usurping queer identities in order to appear more interesting – the one that's always stung the most is this idea that we're not allowed to settle down. That my sexual attraction towards women in the abstract means that I will never feel completely fulfilled. It ignores the fact that people in heterosexual and homosexual couplings of all shapes and alignments experience sexual desire towards others all the time – that's just human nature. It doesn't mean you're going to jump on that other person on the bus or in the stationery cupboard, and it doesn't mean you love your partner any less.

It is June 2017, and I have just ticked the 'bisexual' orientation box on the annual diversity monitoring survey for the second year in a row.

Last year, when I self-identified as bisexual for the first time, I was a little nervous. But here are some things that didn't happen:

– the sky did not fall in;

– nobody from my work's HR turned up at my elbow for a quiet word;

– my computer cursor did not turn into a rainbow and start dancing around on the screen;

– the LGBTQ+ Police did not show up at my front door to arrest me for not being 'queer enough'.

Of course, ticking a box on an anonymous form is not

the same as coming out, but those opportunities are tougher to find. I came out to my hairdresser as the Pride parade passed us last year. I humorously, but firmly, corrected a friend when the punchline of a joke he made turned on my attraction to men. My people are of the sympathetic sort for whom queerness is not a competition, and my sex life has never been the topic of family Christmas dinner chat.

I wrote this essay because my sexual orientation is as much a part of me as my gender identity, my blue eyes, my love of cats and my generalised anxiety disorder, and it's never been worth my while to hide any of those things either.

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND GENDER

Reflections on a double standard

by Codi Coday

Usually when we discuss sexual assault, the conversation begins and ends with examples of men assaulting women. However, sexual assault often happens in other gender combinations, and leaving these out of the central discussion is detrimental – especially to bisexual people.

Bisexuals are at the highest risk of sexual assault of any sexual orientation. In fact, one study in the US found that 61% of bisexual women and 47% of bisexual men have experienced some sort of intimate partner violence.[1] Unfortunately, bisexual people are in the unique position of being both more likely to experience sexual assault overall and more likely to experience 'unconventional' sexual assault* due to the fact that they often date more than one gender. I am one of the unlucky bisexual women who has experienced sexual assault by both a man and a woman on

* *Unconventional sexual assault is any sexual assault that is not done by a man to a woman or that does not involve penile penetration into a vagina.*

separate occasions. The actual moments of sexual assault were not all that different, but the aftermath of each deviated greatly. Sexual assault is dealt with completely differently when perpetrated by different genders: misogyny, biphobia, and the traditional ways in which sexual assault is discussed all play their part in this double standard.

At 18, I had been dating my college boyfriend for nine months. He was the first person I really fell for, and we were infatuated with each other. Around this time I had developed a blood clot in my lung and my legs; I had an extremely close near death experience, and even on the brink of dying, all I could think about was seeing him again. So when a week later I was released from the hospital, I was ecstatic to hear that he was coming to visit me.

I left the hospital with a whopping dose of pain medication and stayed with my family to recover. At first, my boyfriend was wonderful and the fear I felt about my medical situation dissipated. But after my family went to bed that night, his behaviour shifted. He began to insist that now was the moment for us to have sex for the first time. It didn't matter that I said I didn't want to, that I was in too much pain, or that my parents were upstairs. He decided it was time, and what I wanted didn't matter.

It took a few months for it to click that I had been raped by someone I loved so dearly, and the timing could not have been worse. Dealing with nearly dying, severe medical issues, horrific pain, and now rape was too much to bear. The confusion didn't help either: how could I be raped by someone I sometimes wanted to have sex with, who I loved, who I thought loved me? To me, rape had always been something big scary men did to women who walked alone in dark alleys in the middle of the night. Naively, I had no clue it was something that could happen in a seemingly loving relationship.

Confused and heartbroken, I sought support from our friends. When I finally gained the courage to speak out, my friends did believe it had happened, but they determined it was somehow my fault. Even though I had been massively medicated to the point where I couldn't consent, and had clearly said no to boot, I 'must have sent the wrong signals'. They assumed I 'led him on', or equivocated, 'Well, you did say you wanted to have sex with him earlier in your relationship'. I ended up losing the majority of my friends; they all sided with him. He just seemed too nice to do something like that. I, in turn, was too dramatic because I refused to go to the same social gatherings as him, because I called it rape, because I insisted I had a right to be upset. I didn't bother reporting him. If I couldn't get my closest friends in the world to believe me and take me seriously, there was no way I could convince the police. I couldn't handle more people insisting it was my fault. I eventually had to transfer schools; my campus was notorious for siding with rapists and expecting victims to attend classes with them.

In the case of a man sexually assaulting a woman, our misogynistic society tends to believe that the assault occurred (as opposed to assaults between other genders, whose sexual activity is perceived as less legitimate) but often insists that it must have been the woman's fault. Victim blaming – that is, the view that assault is warranted or even deserved by the actions of the victim – is pervasive in today's culture. When we hear about cases of rape, the focus is put on the victim's appearance and behaviour, juxtaposed with concern over how a rape allegation could ruin the rapist's future. For example, take Brock Turner, a swimmer from Stanford who raped an unconscious woman.[2] The general public's reaction – as well as that of the designated judge – was to worry about his swimming career and future rather than condemn him for raping someone. The

victim of his rape was criticised for what she was wearing, for drinking beforehand, and for not being more careful on a night out. Turner was released after only three months in jail, while the victim will deal with a lifetime of trauma. To see how common victim blaming is, all someone has to do is look at the comment section on any online article about sexual assault. In fact, in the comment section of news articles about sexual assault, one in four comments contain victim blaming.[3] It is also easy to find examples of this attitude in cases of sexual assault with high public visibility such as the Harvey Weinstein,[4] Bill Cosby,[5] or Donald Trump allegations.[6]

Three years after my first experience of assault, I came out as bisexual to my best friend of the time. When I did, she began to realise that she was bisexual as well, and that she was in love with me. I didn't share her feelings, but she claimed that we would still be able to remain close friends. Our friendship had some awkward road bumps, but mostly proceeded as normal. About a month later, we went to a party together, but left early because I was exhausted from cramming for midterms the week before. I fell asleep quickly in her spare bed when we got back to her place. Soon afterward, I was jolted awake. This time, it clicked automatically: I was being sexually assaulted by my cis female best friend. I shouted for her to stop, tried to get her off of me without getting violent; she was much smaller than I was, and even while she was hurting me I was still acutely aware that I didn't want to hurt *her*.

Her roommate was awake in the room adjacent. I screamed, over and over, but the roommate ignored me. She had hated me ever since I came out, and thought I was a bad influence on my best friend and had somehow turned her bisexual. She could have walked in and stopped the assault, but chose not to. Biphobia beat out human decency.

Again, after this, my ideas about sexual assault were deeply shaken. I understood that sexual assault could happen between people who were in a relationship, but I still never expected it to come from my best friend. I was even more shocked by the fact that I was raped by a woman. I never considered that women could rape people, or that being raped by a woman was a possible danger to consider.

Since this wasn't my first sexual assault, I knew how important it was to reach out for support. However, my biggest fear proved true: there was little support to be found. Overwhelmingly, when I told people I was raped by a woman, they insisted that it wasn't possible. Even my therapist wasn't helpful, as she had been when I was sexually assaulted by a man. In that instance, my therapist had acknowledged it wasn't my fault and worked with me on recovering from the trauma, never blaming me for what happened. This time, she chose to focus on the 'sexual dysfunction' of being bisexual rather than helping me recover from a similar trauma. I continued to try to find people to talk to among my friend group. Some refused to listen to me when I opened up because they 'didn't want to hear about my sex life with women'. Others I told claimed that if I had really been raped, I would have fought her enough to hurt her. Desperate, I turned to an online rape victims' support group. There, I had other sexual assault victims laugh at me or claim that my sexual assault was 'hot' – just because the gender of my rapist was different from that of theirs.

Sex between women is seen as less legitimate than sex that involves a penis and a vagina, while it is simultaneously hypersexualised and fetishised. Additionally, a disturbing number of people don't understand how sex between two cis women could work, which in turn leads to dangerous misconceptions about how sexual assault would work. Some people, like my best friend's roommate, don't fetishise sex

between women, but see women who have sex with other women as either unable to be raped or deserving of rape.

These attitudes lead laypeople, police, and even therapists to refuse to acknowledge and recognise rape unless it includes a penis and penetration – which is a big problem for bisexuals. For me, these misconceptions certainly made it extremely difficult to get any support, even though the trauma endured was nearly the same when being raped by a woman as it was by a man. In both situations, I felt betrayed, violated, and guilty. I needed the same support, reassurance, and validation after both sexual assaults. However, support fell short in both situations – just for different reasons.

This problem doesn't just apply to my situation. A lot of people don't think it is possible for a woman to rape anyone or for a man to be raped. Non-binary and trans people are often left out of the conversation altogether. But the thing is, any gender can be sexually assaulted, and any gender can commit sexual assault. What people fail to comprehend is that *rape is about power, not sex*, and the power struggle is not dependant on what genders the sexual assault occurs between.

Being left out of the discussion about sexual assault has real repercussions for victims. 'Unconventional' sexual assault victims have trouble getting support from medical professionals, loved ones, lawyers, and therapists. That support is sometimes the only thing that gets victims through each day. Without adequate support, there is a real danger of PTSD, medical problems due to untreated injuries, depression, anxiety, and suicide. I suspect it is no coincidence that bisexuals have higher rates of all of the above considering how likely it is for them to experience sexual assault.

I didn't understand that rape could come from any gender, and from any type of relationship, until these two experiences happened to me – as they do to so many

other bisexuals. But people shouldn't have to go through a sexual assault to understand that the victims of it, raped by any gender, all need to be unequivocally supported and believed. The first step to solving this problem is to believe survivors before blaming them; very little progress can be made when there is an environment in which rapists are protected and victims villainised. Another solution would be to start education programs for extremely young children that focus on consent – not necessarily in the context of sex, but in talking about bodily autonomy, and once they are older, rape culture. More focus on awareness campaigns such as Bisexual Health Month, which takes place in March, will also generate change. These campaigns are beneficial in helping to spread awareness about how rape disproportionately affects bisexuals.

Sexual assault is an issue affecting all of society, but it is especially important to discuss its nuances in relation to gender when talking about bisexuals. Because bisexuals often date more than one gender, and most sexual assault is done by someone the victim knows,[7] it is important to include unconventional sexual assault in our discussions of this topic in order to help bisexuals. The prevalence of sexual assault for bisexuals is a dire issue that needs to be addressed; the first steps are to rethink how we see it in terms of gender, to stop blaming victims, and to promote understanding by raising awareness.

‘NOT LIKE THAT, LIKE THIS’

Bisexuality, sex, and chronic illness

by Alice T

My ex-girlfriend and I had a joke that we loved, that we saved up to use on unsuspecting idiots who asked ‘that question’. We’d look them in the eye, assume a highly unlikely physical pose, gesture to ourselves and laugh: ‘this is how lesbians have sex’. Because that is what people want to know, isn’t it? How two women share intimacy. It didn’t matter that I was bisexual, or that sex and sexuality are complicated. It all boiled down to that ever-mysterious, behind-closed-doors, soft-focus moment. It all came down to fucking.

It was my first relationship with another woman, and I loved the powerful feeling it gave me. I had penetrated the mystery, I was a ‘proper queer person’ now, because I was having queer sex. I’d gained membership to a secret club, a club people asked questions about, and now I could look sage and give advice. Of course, it never occurred to me to stop and ask questions. What was queer sex? What did that mean? Was I happy? All I could do was bask in that rosy, new-love glow, and allude to this glamorous, wonderful world I had now

entered. And it was wonderful. We were both supposed to be doing masters degrees, and in those first months, very, very little got done. We did work out, however, where it was best to have sex in the University Library. The big, cool building was a warren of passageways and spiral stairs, and nobody ever came into the Early European History stacks. Except us. A delicious secret, smelling of sunshine and old books.

Around the same time, my vulva began to hurt. At the beginning, I thought I'd been scratched 'down there' by a hang-nail. It stung, but that had happened before. That's what happened, I thought, a risk of the territory. Queer sex begetting queer injury, the sort you can't talk about in polite company. On the phone, I regaled my friend with news of my 'sex injury'. As if a sore vulva were handcuff bruises or spanking marks, I was proud of it. But the scratch didn't heal. Instead, it ran from a sharp pain to a dull, throbbing ache. Over the next six or seven weeks, it became steadily more difficult to walk, or to cycle, or to sit comfortably for very long. Eventually, I was left sleepless and in agony, sent back and forth by the local A&E department. They weren't unsympathetic, just baffled. Eventually, in desperation, tired of me turning up crying in the middle of the night, they referred me to a gynaecological dermatologist. Out of interest, there aren't very many of those. Dermatological gynaecology is the unfashionable end of the vagina business – there is no pregnancy, no babies, no glory of a safe delivery. The gynaecologist, who I vaguely remember was nice, and young, took less than five minutes to diagnose me. 'A textbook case,' she said. A textbook case of Lichen Sclerosus.

You probably haven't heard of LS. I am sorry if you have, because that probably means that you, or someone you know, suffers from it. It is a chronic, relapsing and remitting skin condition that primarily affects the genital skin, most usually the mucus membrane of the vulva of women. Lichen

Sclerosus is an autoimmune condition, not contracted through or affected by earlier sexual activity. It can affect anyone, at any age, although it is uncommon in menstruating women.

That's a lot of information, really, to take in. Basically, in cis women and girls, Lichen Sclerosus tends to affect the vulva (the skin around the entrance to the vagina) and the skin around the anus (back passage). The vulva changes, and shrinks. This can make penetration impossible, and in some cases, orgasm becomes impossible when the clitoris disappears. The bad news about all of this is that it is a lifelong condition, rather than an illness. Because it primarily affects post-menopausal women, it is usually considered a chronic illness of later life, but it can affect women of any age. The good news is that there are simple, effective treatments which, in most cases, lead to remission. The treatment is a topical steroid, which suppresses the immune response in the body, and stops your body attacking the vulval skin.

After my diagnosis and treatment, our sex life changed. I couldn't have sex the way I usually did, couldn't be penetrated, often couldn't orgasm. Especially in the early days of the illness, I was often in far too much pain to even imagine having sex. There was another side effect: the steroids meant that I gained weight. So, not only was I in pain, but my body was changing in ways I couldn't control. I could feel, throughout this process, the heavy weight of my girlfriend's disappointment. However, I needed the treatment, needed to get better: there was nothing I could do.

At the time that all of this was going on, I was 21. I didn't know then what I know now, about sex, and how it can change, evolve and grow. I didn't know how to ask for what I wanted. I didn't realise that I had as much right to be having a good time, to be safe, and happy, as everyone else. I thought, essentially, that my right to a good sex life was

already in jeopardy: I was bisexual. I was already a shadow-creature, living between the worlds of 'straight' and 'gay' sex, whatever that meant. I presumed that any kind of sex life at all ended upon diagnosis with a chronic illness.

The doctors did nothing to dispel this myth: most of them told me how difficult my predicament was, and how unusual. No useful information was given about sex or how to have it, let alone queer sex. Sex, it was implied, was off the table for me for the rest of my life. Dutifully, I relayed this information back to my girlfriend. It sat on the table between us, slowly growing, until eventually it obscured our view of each other. After I told her, we never had sex again. I felt that I had killed something accidentally, like breaking the stem off a plant. We never spoke about sex, never tried, never so much as kissed after that. There was no broaching the subject. Two long, platonic years later, we broke up.

It wasn't surprising to me that the medical staff who I frequently saw weren't able to help with questions about sex, and especially about queer sex. After all, it was a joke, wasn't it? A question to which nobody knew the answer. A party trick: 'this is how lesbians have sex'. Except that I wasn't even a lesbian, and I certainly wasn't sure how to have sex again. I was a bisexual woman with a strange illness, steroidal weight gain, and chronic pain. Nobody knew what do to with me.

But this isn't actually a hopeless story. Most of us grow into our sexual identities gradually, during our teenage years, led by gut feeling, minimal education, and peer pressure. I had been taught things, shown things in bedrooms at house parties, figured things out using the dial-up internet in my parent's house, desperate not to be discovered. At twenty-one, I was given the unusual opportunity to reshape and redesign my sexual identity, from the bottom up. I felt lost, of course, but hopeful. Not only was I going to have sex again, comfortable, pleasurable sex; I was going to learn as

much about sex and sexuality as I possibly could.

The world of sex education, revisited as an adult, is absolutely fascinating. It is also largely horrifying. For example, in 26 US states, abstinence is required to be emphasised as part of school sex education.[1] And that is just education pertaining to heterosexual sex and sexuality. Eight states in the US prohibit entirely the teaching of homosexuality, with at least two states legally requiring that homosexuality be portrayed negatively, in relation to HIV.[2] In the UK, Section 28, designed to stop schools teaching pupils about homosexuality, stipulated that they should 'not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.[3] This was only repealed in 2000, too late for me: my sex education contained very little information about even heterosexual sex and sexuality, and this was a common experience amongst my peers. Mostly, it was an introduction to human reproduction, in biological terms, and a day of being separated by perceived gender and taught about menstruation. Children and young teenagers are not adequately prepared to encounter their own bodies, let alone other people's – it is not unsurprising that when faced with a crisis in sex or sexuality, people suddenly realise how little they actually know.

There are, however, so many people and organisations doing excellent work around sex and sexuality, and when I took my first nervous steps towards re-educating myself about intimacy and pleasure, I was delighted to find such brilliant resources. I wanted, in particular, information about queer sex, or sex as a queer person. Or, I suppose, more broadly, any sex that wasn't 'penis-in-vagina' sex, traditionally perceived as 'straight'. There is an extensive and ongoing debate about whether or not, as a bisexual person, you inhabit a 'straight'

relationship when you are dating a person of the opposite sex, or whether you, by dint of being bisexual, queer that relationship. I do not have the answer, but I did know that however my future partners might define their gender, the sex we would be having would be traditionally considered queer.

The first port of call was, perhaps because I am a millennial, YouTube. Sex education on this platform is largely unregulated, and alongside the good stuff, I also found plenty of non-intersectional feminism, transphobia, biphobia, and straightforward misinformation: enter at your own risk. Perhaps the best resource I discovered was Dr Lindsey Doe's channel *Sexplanations*. The channel is under the umbrella of educational entertainment channels produced by brothers Hank and John Green. These aim to offer curriculum-standard educational videos on a wide range of topics, from algebra to ancient history. The *Sexplanations* channel is an outlier, as it is not incorporated into curriculum, but it aims to be educational and shame-free. Doe is a doctor of human sexuality, and the channel covers everything from masturbation to safe anal sex, from pregnancy to trans health. Watching the channel, I realised I was not only learning a huge amount, but I was altering the way I thought about sex entirely. Freed from shame or an agenda other than education, the channel dealt frankly and joyfully with the messy, curious, untaught aspects of sexuality. Perhaps most vitally, Dr Doe's channel introduced me to ideas of consent which went far beyond what I had previously understood consent to contain. Most useful was her 'Will/Want/Won't' list.

This idea is extremely simple: in three columns, list every act associated with sex that you can imagine, and categorise it by the three preferences. This allows you to understand your preferences, as well as things you might be new to, but wish to try. I have used this technique with subsequent

partners before intimacy and it has been an excellent ice-breaker, allowing both of us to frankly discuss what we do and don't like in bed. It's also a good way for me to bring up my illness: if a partner requires regular penetrative sex for them to feel comfortable in a relationship, for example, this issue can be raised early. It sometimes feels a little clinical, disrupts the drunk rush for the bedroom, the giddiness of that first undressing. For me, however, the exchange is worth it. There are, in fact, bonuses: in reading other peoples' lists, I learn about things I have never thought about, and get to try them. It decentres my illness, allowing it to be discussed alongside restraints or fancy underwear, giving it a lesser significance, which makes me feel more comfortable.

Another really brilliant way of re-learning sex has, for me, been de-stigmatising non-penetrative sex. Non-penetrative sex is often understood as something preliminary, foreplay, perhaps, or just 'fooling around'. A lot of people (many under the LGBTQ+ umbrella) will discuss sex acts and dismiss them as 'not real sex' if there was no penetration. This myth is so common that it has been investigated, most recently in *'You Can Tell Just By Looking' and 20 Other Myths about LGBT Life and People*.[4] Beacon, Pellegrini and Amico discuss this myth in relation to ideas of virginity: 'culturally, we refer to a very particular sexual act – penis in vagina – as, simply, sex. Consider the expression 'losing your virginity'. This commonly means the first experience of heterosexual genital intercourse.[5] This, they argue, robs us all of important linguistic nuance. By implicitly designating non-penetrative sex as 'not sex', we lose ways of expressing our desires, legitimising our experience, and discussing our pleasure. This has ramifications outside the bedroom: the questions one is asked in a health check-up, for example, can make assumptions about what sex is, or is not. Before I developed Lichen Sclerosus, I didn't have a lot of language for sex. I certainly found talking

about its nuances and boundaries tricky. Additionally, I counted as sexual partners only people I had 'proper sex' with, and counted my virginity loss as my first instance of heterosexual, penetrative sex. Part of re-negotiating my sexual identity in the wake of chronic illness has been giving space to my queer sexual experiences, re-contextualising my sex with women, and re-thinking sex with future partners of any gender.

This has been a fascinating process, and one that has certainly enlarged my vocabulary. As Bronski et al argue: 'sexual minorities – people whose sexual desires, identities, and practices differ from the norm – do a better job talking about sex, precisely because they are constantly asked to explain and justify their love and their lust to a wider culture and, even, to themselves'.[6] This has certainly been my experience. As I became slowly more confident that Lichen Sclerosus would not disbar me from a sexual future, I learnt the vocabulary to communicate this to partners. As a bisexual, I benefitted from this process enormously – I felt I was reclaiming a vocabulary that was mine by right, that I had never previously had access to. It was liberating, and a huge boost to my confidence. Learning vocabulary was fun, too, and gave me license to investigate things I had always previously felt nervous or ashamed of. I joined communities online, from FetLife to the Vulval Pain Society.[7] I listened to podcasts, from the Dan Savage Lovecast to Chase Ross and Aaron Ansuini's 'You're So Brave' podcast. I learned about different types of orgasm, and about types of intimate experience that could extend and heighten sex without even stimulating the primary sex organs, from hot wax to feathers, from massage techniques to spanking. I learned about genitals, mine and other people's, outside the gloom of the hospital. For the first time in my life I explored parts of my body that could bring me pleasure in other ways: my breasts, my neck, my

ears, my ankles, my inner thighs. First by myself, then with other people. Most fun, perhaps, was buying toys I could use: I listened to the knowledgeable advice of Sh! London, the first women's sex shop in the UK.[8] About three years after diagnosis, single, and feeling as if an entirely new world had opened up, I was able to date again. It was an incredible feeling. Partners have had differing responses, but even when these have been bewildered, they've been almost entirely positive. This is, I think, partly because I'm a little more discerning now, in who I choose to be intimate with, but partly because I now have the vocabulary and knowledge to discuss sex and intimacy in ways that accurately describe my wants and needs, and acknowledge my identity as both queer and chronically ill.

It isn't, of course, plain sailing. I am not in stable remission, and haven't been for three years. My parents are still somewhat homophobic. I am often not able to bring myself pleasure, and I haven't had penetrative sex in over a year. However, I have a brilliant, kind partner, who understands the kinds of sex I have, and who loves me for my entirety, not for the bits of me that can bring them pleasure. I am able to advocate better for the care I need in the hospital, and for the sex I want in the bedroom. I have an encyclopaedic knowledge of pleasure centres, and an impressive collection of nipple clamps. I have a good community of friends around me who are loving and supportive, and who I can talk openly with about my illness. I still, however, do not know anyone else who suffers from LS: I wonder if I ever will. Understanding sex and sexuality as a bisexual, chronically ill woman is difficult, but empowering. Allowing myself to be seen, to be 'out' in both my sexuality and my illness is scary, but it is also increasingly important. If I want to advocate for good sex and good treatment, then I want to help others to do that as well. It's an ongoing process, and I'm learning more

every day. I'm hoping for remission. I'm hoping to be queer and visible and happy. I'm glad that I am as I am, because it has given me a unique opportunity to understand my body, my sexuality, myself.

ON BEING BLACK AND BI-FURIOUS

by Jayna Tavarez

I HADN'T GIVEN much thought to dating or relationships or love, until I started dating my first boyfriend my freshman year of high school. I was straight, I guess. I mean… Sure, if I thought someone was cute, then they were cute, but it's not like anyone caught my eye enough to cause me to push back against my heteronormative socialisation. That was true, at least, until I finally challenged myself to leave my then-boyfriend, and with that, opened my sexuality up to be challenged by others.

'Jay… You're either straight or you're a lesbian. You gotta pick a side eventually.'

'I mean –'

'Are you straight?'

'No, you know I'm not, but –'

'So you're a lesbian?'

'No, but I –'

'You know you can't play both sides forever, right?'

This was conversation was one of many that I had with a close friend of mine, who happens to identify as a Black, masculine-presenting, lesbian woman. It was my senior year of college, and I had just ended a long-term relationship with another Black, masculine-presenting, lesbian woman. We made each other pretty happy, with the exception of one question that would always start a massive argument that ultimately led to our breakup:

'If you're as committed to spending the rest of your life with me as you say you are, why is it so hard to tell people you're a lesbian?'

Apparently, 'because I'm not a lesbian' wasn't sufficient. Upset, I went to my close friend, who I hoped would provide me with some post-breakup comfort. Yikes. Bad idea.

'I just don't understand. It's like she doesn't trust me…'

'Can you really blame her though? I mean, you could never understand the shit that straight girls put us through…'

'What? How can I be straight? I'm bisexual, at the least, even though I don't like that term.'

'There's no such thing as bisexual – well, there is, but it's usually just a phase for girls who either aren't ready to come out yet or are just waiting for the right dude. Either way, you need to figure it out sooner than later. You can't just lead people on. This is why I hate dating girls who aren't lesbians.'

I had never been so angry. Out of all of my conversations with her, this was it. This was the one that did it. This was the conversation that drove me to interrogate my sexuality, and more importantly, my relationship with bisexuality. After I removed myself from that conversation, I grappled with so many thoughts that for years, I had refused to unpack. I craved a sense of community within LGBTQ+ spaces, but I was still very uncomfortable identifying as bisexual, and a little part of me knew that it was probably for the best that I didn't. I couldn't put my finger on why that was. When I was asked about my sexuality, I let people make assumptions about it

based on who I was dating at the time, and I was very selective about who and how I corrected. I needed to ask myself: why am I so opposed to being bisexual? Am I opposed to *being* bisexual – or am I opposed to 'bisexual' as a label? Maybe I don't like labels? Maybe it's *that* label, but why?

I buried myself in the literature: blogs, opinion pieces, Twitter rants, anything I could find. There were so many conversations happening. What is bisexuality? Is it the same as pansexuality? Is bisexuality transphobic? Is 'bisexual privilege' a thing? I was learning so much about other bisexual people's experiences, and it was incredibly validating, knowing that I wasn't alone in my frustration. I had just entered my first semester of graduate school, and decided that I wanted to commit the next two years to doing my thesis research on bisexuality. Next stop: JSTOR.

From the research that I gathered, I found that bisexual people experience a unique type of marginalisation within the LGBTQ+ community. Bisexual women in particular were reported to experience elevated levels of stress, isolation and exclusion, and mental health concerns.[1] Bisexual activists and researchers coined the term biphobia, a word I had never heard before, for the prejudice against people who identify as bisexual or do not identify within the gay/straight binary.[2] Bisexuality as a sexual orientation is unique because it challenges mainstream heteronormative ideas, while also creating a rift in LGBTQ+ communities by challenging standards of a 'right' or 'ideal' type of LGBTQ+ identity.[3] While heterosexism impacts all LGBTQ+-identified people, biphobia is rooted in both heteronormativity and monosexism, which impacts bisexual people specifically.[4] Once I understood the difference between homophobia and biphobia, it suddenly made sense why bisexual people held such a complicated position within the community.

I stumbled on a very interesting case study that helped me understand the complicated relationship between bisexual and lesbian women specifically. Between 1989 and 1993, the Northampton Pride March Steering Committee debated whether 'bisexual' should be included in the march title. While there was already existing tension between bisexual and lesbian women, this tension was exacerbated when, for the first year ever, 'bisexual' was included in the march's title, and there were no lesbian speakers at the march. Those who were pro-inclusion felt that 'bisexual' deserved to be included in the name of the march. They saw the name change as an opportunity for coalition building across a wide range of sexual identities.

Meanwhile, those who were pro-exclusion believed that the march had a traditionally lesbian focus and should be dedicated specifically to lesbian feminist politics. Pro-exclusion lesbians argued that bisexual women should build and develop their own bisexual communities and politics, and pro-inclusion bisexual women argued that they were asking for formal inclusion in a history they had always been a part of. [5]

In 1991, the Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council conducted the first Bisexual Community Needs Assessment to compile a report listing the wants and needs of bisexual people involved in lesbian and gay activism in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. After interviewing 38 bisexual men and women, the assessment found that participants generally expected more acceptance from the gay and lesbian community than the heterosexual community, which made exclusion from lesbian and gay spaces more hurtful and isolating. Several of the bisexual women noted that they were condemned or excluded, asked to leave lesbian groups, and were discouraged or outright prohibited from speaking at women's conferences.[6]

And over twenty years later, the 2012 Bisexual Community Needs Assessment could easily be misidentified as the one from 1991. It found that bisexual people still felt a lack of solidarity and inclusion within lesbian and gay communities. One bisexual woman working at an LGBTQ+ organisation reported being consistently read as straight and was asked how she got a job for the organisation as an ally. Another reported that she was consistently referred to as Lesbian Lite™. There was also a significant gap between how closely bisexual people *wanted* to feel connected to the LGBTQ+ community, and how closely they *actually* felt connected to the LGBTQ+ community, solidifying the disconnect between bisexual needs and bisexual realities.[7]

After reading everything I could find, I was excited to finally conduct my own interviews. I reached out to bisexual Twitter and Facebook pages asking them to share and retweet my study. I was flooded with over 150 responses from bisexual and pansexual women, woman-aligned, and non-binary people who were interested in participating in my study. I felt so validated!... and then, suddenly, really discouraged. Out of 186 interested participants, only 46 identified as people of colour – and only 9 identified as Black. I went back to both of the assessments: 1991, 89% white. 2012, 91% white. Yikes, okay. How ironic was it that my experiences as a Black bisexual woman navigating these intersections drove me to conduct this entire study, just to feel isolated in my own work? Why do LGBTQ+ organisations struggle to find and include bisexual people of colour? Why is there no research on the ways that the intersection of race impacts the way bisexual people experience biphobia? We need to talk about the racialisation of biphobia.

LGBTQ+ organisations and activist groups being inclusive of bisexual people is critical for the success of the movement. Lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual people reportedly

make up only 3.5% of the United States population, and of that 3.5%, bisexual people lead at 52%.[8] Additionally, it is estimated that over one million African-American adults in the United States identify as LGBTQ+.[9] Black bisexual people exist, and our intersections make a difference.

One day, I'll do a Bisexual Community Needs Assessment that focuses specifically on bisexual people of colour, because I believe that understanding the intersections of our identities is critical in creating a more welcoming, supportive, and inclusive community for us. Until then, here are some of my recommendations:

1. Intersectional bisexual-specific research. The lack of research I found reinforced that the erasure I felt was indicative of a larger problem. Although there is limited data specifically on bisexual people, there are several studies that focus specifically on bisexual mental health. However, we also need research analysing the sociological conditions that allow for the marginalisation of bisexual people to even exist. Additionally, there is limited research on the experiences of being Black and bisexual outside of an HIV/AIDS context. Having data specifically on bisexual people of colour is necessary so that our experiences can be accurately represented, too.
2. Intentional outreach to bisexual people of colour. As hype as I was every time I found a journal article or book about bisexuality, I was disappointed at how overwhelmingly white the participants were. It was hard to feel holistically connected to those experiences when there was no conversation around the racialisation of biphobia and its impact on mental health, sense of community, and sense of identity. It's not enough to acknowledge that they wish they had bisexual people of colour in their study – bisexual organisations and researchers doing work

around bisexuality need to be intentional about including bisexual people of colour, and refuse to accept anything less.

3. Increased funding for both bisexual organisations and organisations that serve LGBTQ+ communities of colour. Bisexual organisations receive a significantly lower amount of funding compared to other LGBTQ+ organisations. According to the Funders for LGBTQ Issues' 2015 tracking report, LGBTQ+ communities of colour receive roughly 14 percent of total LGBTQ+ funding, and the bisexual community receives less than one percent.[10] Continuing to provide limited funding for LGBTQ+ organisations that serve LGBTQ+ communities of colour, and practically no funding for bisexual-specific organisations reinforces the limited support for bisexual people, and specifically bisexual people of colour. That's not okay, especially considering that bisexual people of colour are more likely to experience stressors, such as poverty and mental health issues.
4. Intersectional bisexual-specific resources, programming, and education. Bisexual people are consistently forced to rely on the gay and lesbian community for access to resources. In the 1991 assessment, participants noted that they had to validate their own identities with minimal outside support. As previously noted, biphobia is different from homophobia, and the experiences of bisexual people of colour are different from those of white bisexual people due to additional racial marginalisation. Bisexual-specific resources, programming, and education is necessary in affirming bisexual identities and encouraging bisexual people of colour to be involved in white lesbian- and gay-dominated spaces.
5. Increased visibility for bisexual people of colour. Bisexual people have always struggled with visibility. Bi women in

particular are portrayed as hypersexual, untrustworthy and incapable of staying committed in monogamous relationships. Bisexuality is also often portrayed as a transitional phase to being gay or lesbian, or a performance for the gaze of straight men. Bisexual people have combatted the invisibility by launching hashtags such as #BiTwitter to showcase the diversity of the bisexual community – yet even in that hashtag, bisexual people of colour are few and far between. In response, the hashtag #BlackBiBeauty was created to centre Black bisexual people and their experiences navigating both biphobia and racism within the LGBTQ+ community.[11] We need more spaces and opportunities for bisexual people of colour to amplify our unique experiences.

Bisexual people of colour are tasked with navigating both racism and biphobia in many LGBTQ+ spaces – spaces that are supposed to be safe for us to unapologetically exist. We are underrepresented, understudied, underfunded, and undervalued, yet we are critical to the success of the larger LGBTQ+ movement, and that's not okay. The B in LGBTQ+ isn't silent, and neither am I.

FML: FIX MY LIFE

by Joseph Guthrie

The night air up on that 14-storey building was eerily comforting. I stood atop a fire escape balcony looking hundreds of feet down to where I'd ascended from, tear ducts welling up not from a sense of sadness but purely from the brisk wind whipping my itchy eyes. I wanted to cry. I desperately wanted to break down into a blubbering, hysterical mess instead of deciding to take just one step forward.

One step and it'll all be over. No more pain. No more depression. No more pain. There'll be no more feeling a sense of abject worthlessness. No more pain.

No more.

I raised my head toward the skyline of the city of my birth. The Old Smoke. The Great Wen. Londinium. Immediately a flash of anger flooded my body, goosebumps prickling my weathered skin. I started to feel faint and then… then came the voice. My voice. 'Jump, you pussy.' I felt compelled to look down, so I did. I imagine it was because my sense of sound – my sonar, if you will – was so hypersensitive, I

didn't need to guess where the voice came from. It was my voice, after all. No sooner had I gazed upon the ground than I saw a ravaged, bloodied version of me. It was me as if I had already jumped. *This is it*, I thought. *This is what madness is. I've fucking lost my mind. I… I can't be fucking seeing this shit!* I looked away at the same time as I felt something in the pit of my gut sharply lurch upward toward my chest cavity. Dry heaving? No, no. I did not feel *that* physically ill, but the mirage of me standing and looking up, repeatedly saying 'Jump, you pussy. Jump, you pussy' wouldn't go away. He wouldn't – I wouldn't, instead, say anything else. Just egging me on to jump. I'm so… persistent. *How do you turn your goddamn brain off?!* I'm feeling thirstier by the second and my voice is getting more menacing in tone. I'm terrified to look down again, but I must. I must double check I'm not losing my sanity here.

It's not me I'm staring at anymore. It looks a lot like me. No, it's my father, and he looks just like he did the night he beat the shit out of me; wearing that same work uniform for the security installation firm where he once worked. It's happening *again*. Every single time I have a suicidal episode, I continually go back to that night. That awful, awful night. So, what if I brought a report card home with bad marks on it? Why react like this? Why treat me this way? Why clasp your hands around my neck? Why can't I breathe? Why does everything hurt so bad? Why is everything going white? Why Dad? Why?

I climbed back over the railing and backed away from the edge. I forced myself to walk right back down the fire escape steps that I had previously ascended for what I thought would be a one-way journey. I went back inside my office building, zombified and completely numb. My eyes were starting to glaze over, having stared at the monitoring software on my computer screen for so long. So I lifted my head up, only to see the same fire escape again. I quickly looked

back at the screen, and then I looked to my left, only to see the charred shell of Grenfell Tower in full panoramic view on the London horizon line. I then excused myself once more and went down to the breakout room. *Sleep*, I thought. *Just sleep now. Just relax. Sleep.*

Unless you're Christopher Nolan, telling any story with a fractured, idiosyncratic narrative won't automatically get you the kind of plaudits he got when *Memento* released to critical acclaim in 2000, but that's pretty much what my life has been like: a fractured, idiosyncratic, tangled web of anecdotes and anti-depressants. I find myself flashing back to moments like the aforementioned; ones synonymous with the feeling I get whenever I embrace the genuine possibility that today is going to be my last. Inextricably linked with the vivid and sometimes lucid recollection of traumatic moments from days gone by were all the things about who I am as a human being. Matters that I thought I was content keeping hidden away from plain view were eroding away at my soul and exacerbating a deep, clinical depression. To be Joseph Guthrie is to be a Black, pansexual, depressive dork; trapped inside your twisted mind, frantically trying to get out and by the time the opening credits to the latest suicidal episode have finished rolling, you realise you're never indeed escaping. My mind is akin to a demoralising MC Esher sketch: caught in an infinite looping of self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, and unresolved trauma from experiences past that continue to haunt me like some vengeful spectre.

I grew up convinced that I was the only person going through this. There was no one I could relate to, categorically not in my immediate or extended family. I knew of no one else in the numerous communities I had inhabited over the years apart from a few gay men, the odd trans woman, and some lesbians that could talk me through what life would be like as a bisexual/pansexual cis male. If anything, some

of them would make trite jokes about how bi people didn't exist and that we're just 'greedy', depraved, hypersexual perverts that love nothing more than to fuck anyone willing and without attachment. My sexuality, like my mental illness, was constantly bombarded with hot take after radioactive, speculative, and frankly unhelpful hot take. Between the other residents of the LGBTQ+ community making it seem bisexuality 'didn't exist' and the cis heterosexual folks making bi men out to be harbingers of doom, destruction, and disease, the safest place for me was incidentally the place that was killing me: inside the closet. I leant heavily on the tenet of 'It's no one's business who I sleep with apart from whom I'm sleeping with'. When asked 'What am I?' I relied on vague answers tantamount to 'I'm just me.' Sometimes, to throw people off my scent, I'd straight up lie about my sexuality. 'Nah, I'm straight,' I'd say, going on years later to start preambles to my rants or observations with 'As a cis hetero man', knowing full well that I'd just had sex with another cute guy the night before.

No one told me bisexual Black men experienced depression and anxiety at higher rates[1] than the rest of the general populace, and as an avid reader, I never found any reading material explaining what studies had already confirmed. No one told me that discrimination and harassment based on both racism and homophobia doubly contribute to the depression and anxiety bisexual Black men live and struggle with. No one told me bisexual men are more likely to conceal their sexual orientation[2] and less likely to disclose their sexuality than gay men. No one told me bisexual Black men were more likely to self-harm[3]. No one – not even those closest to me, who care about me profoundly – pointed me in the direction of any of these resources. What folks did tell me was that my mental illness was all in my head, completely contradicting the diagnoses from the doctors,

psychiatrists, and therapists that my mother brought me to. What folks did tell me was that bisexuality was a myth, a unicorn; that bi people were 'confused' because we didn't fit into the rigid sexual dichotomy that we are all forced into. I know it seems a bit annoying of me to keep mentioning depression and bisexuality in the same breath, but don't miss the point I'm trying to make here: poor mental health and living life as a closeted bi/pan Black man are inextricably linked. It is a treacherous tightrope walk because as society moves to ostracise you for what they can see in the colour of your skin, society is also waging war against you for what they fear and wilfully misunderstand regarding your sexuality. To be Black and part of the LGBTQ+ demographic is the physical manifestation of the turn of phrase 'Can't win for losing'. To be Black and bisexual/pansexual, precisely, is to intimately know what life is like from the intersection of erasure and discrimination. On the one hand, you're made out by non-Black people to be some subhuman, innately criminal monstrosity. On the other hand, you're made to feel like an imposter because people refuse to accept something as perfectly axiomatic as being sexually attracted to and capable of forming intimate, romantic relationships with people regardless of gender or sex.

No one told me my life would be anything like this, and that's why I'm speaking to you, whether you want to listen or not.

Life in the closet or 'on the down low' is a life fraught with immense pressure to hide a massive part of your humanity. It is not a comfortable existence at all, even though everything appears to be just fine on the surface. I handled my struggle with this almost identically as I did my battle with depression over the years. As time went by, I became increasingly jaded with the prospect of seeking any assistance at all; presuming I'd hear the same delegitimising

rubbish I'd heard before. Nevertheless, my very existence was under threat from forces seen and unseen, and while I was surrounded by people who tried their best to help me, they were just as clueless as I was in obtaining effective counsel. For years, I felt like an outsider no matter where I turned, and it didn't matter where I sought sanctuary because it was never safe enough for me to pull back the invisibility cloak I had draped over a significant part of who I am as a human being. The desire to liberate myself intensified, but the fear of being alienated by the few people I truly trusted in this world was utterly crippling. It's all well and good saying you don't give a fuck what anyone thinks of you, but the proof in the pudding is in the eating, and many of us just don't have the appetite for it.

Once the dead weight of 2016 was shed, and 2017 rolled in, I would cross paths with someone who would not only change my life forever, but in whom I found someone that I could sincerely relate to. Standing at five feet five inches tall with a booming voice and a bombastic personality, my ex-wife quote tweeted me about a band we mutually loved. That conversation went from the timeline into the direct messages and from there, our exchange moved to FaceTime. I was instantly taken by her laugh, her smile, and it was utterly breath-taking how much we had in common. Imagine it: here are two strangers on two different sides of the Atlantic Ocean having the time of their lives just… talking to one another. I couldn't recall a time when an eight-hour conversation felt like eight minutes. Just speaking to her wholly melted away any issues I knew I had to contend with once we disconnected. It was when she mentioned her ex-wife that I realised all this time, I had been looking in the wrong place for a kindred spirit to talk to about bisexuality and all of the unique foibles that come along with that part of a bi/pan person's self-discovery.

Coming out to my previous partners made me feel like I disgusted them by telling them what they never knew, but telling my ex-wife was as natural as breathing or walking. I didn't have to think about it. I knew I could trust her. Up to that moment, I had only ever divulged that information to people I thought I could confide in, or at the very least to whomever I felt wasn't a threat. Looking back on it, the bond that I forged with my ex-wife had to be of divine conception. There's no way you find this kind of camaraderie with someone on a social media application. Sure, you hear the stories, but the chances of it happening to someone like me were so slim, they might as well be non-existent. We became fast friends… and in the midst of all of the individual and collective chaos in our lives, we found love.

I'll never forget when she called me one morning and confessed to me that she had done something that was intended to be a surprise. She had spent money she didn't really have to buy a plane ticket to London from where she was based in Philidelphia. When she sent a screenshot of her boarding pass as proof, my first words were 'WHAT DID YOU DO?!' She laughed, as did I. I don't think I'll ever run up a flight of stairs as fast as I did the morning she arrived in London Heathrow. The initial embrace confirmed what I had previously been dismissive about: I fell in love with my ex-wife. She quickly became my best friend and was my trusted confidant for a time. By merely existing, she showed me how to be unapologetic about carrying yourself and who you are at your core. She had been 'out' for about as long as I had been 'in the closet'. When I told her that I wasn't exactly 'out', she responded with encouragement and compassion. There was no pressure placed on me. She said to me with a voice like hushed bells 'When you're ready, dude. When you're ready, you'll take that step'.

That all-consuming desire to liberate myself and finally

come out to the world reached a level of fervour that would make the fires of hell feel like a sauna session. I'd had enough. *It will happen this year.* No advance warnings to my mother, brothers, and sisters. I don't need their approval or blessing, anyway. This is who I am, and like the glorious melanin adorning my skin, my sexuality is axiomatic. I remember saying to my friends in our WhatsApp group that I'd use Bisexual Awareness Week as the perfect milieu for such an undertaking, but after my suicidal episode in June, I knew I couldn't wait any longer. I knew what I had to do. So the moment Pride in London got underway, I took to my platforms on social media and did it. I told my entire truth.

I am Bisexual. I am Pansexual.

And almost immediately after completing the thread on Twitter and hitting 'Post' on Facebook, the shackles loosened, and the chains fell at my feet. Tears of relief and joy streamed down my face. The phone rang. I answered, and the first words I heard were from a familiar source; the tone of voice like hushed bells.

'Baby, I'm so proud of you,' my ex-wife gushed.

I saved myself from myself. I just resolved one of the most significant and most protracted internal conflicts that I had going. In other words, coming out not only saved my life. It gave me a sense of renewed purpose, and that's part of the reason why you're reading this now. Chances are you're not Black. Chances are you're not bisexual or pansexual. Chances are you're not a cisgendered man. If you aren't any or only some of these things, then I humbly thank you for taking the time to read these scribings, and I hope my experience has imparted something of significant use to you going forward.

However, if you are a Black, bisexual/pansexual man – cisgender or transgender – then know this: you are beautiful. The world needs you. *You* need to be the best you possible. I

know it seems like there's not one drop of energy or courage left in the tank right now, but I need you to dig deep and find your last reserve if need be. The world wilfully misunderstands our existence, but that doesn't give them the right to erase us, because it was never a right of theirs in the first place. For this reason and more, we must stand. Stand and be as conspicuous as possible. Stand and show your true self.

When you're ready, dudes. When you're ready, you'll take that first step.