



The Bi's of Colour History Survey Report

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Introduction

There is currently no research on bisexual people of colour. What little information on bisexuality that exists, tends to minimise or ignore the intersections of ethnicity, class and sexuality. I know that I am not alone in my situation; I've met countless bisexuals of colour in my travels across Europe and the U.S. So where is the information on our lives, on our stories? Will we be written out of LGBT history?

When I co-founded Bisexuals of Colour in 2010, it was an act of defiance; against bisexual people who thought it was all right to make racist and Islamophobic remarks to others. As a British, black, bisexual mostly-woman, there was nothing I could obtain that represented anyone remotely like me. The only two books I could find on black sexuality in the U.K was on the subject of black gay men and lesbians. The occasional book on bisexuality hardly mentioned People of Colour at all.

In creating Bi's of Colour, I had little to base my hopes of success on, except the conversations I had with other bisexuals of colour I had met at BiCon. They gave me the encouragement and strength to create this group, and to speak up when many white bisexuals didn't want it to exist. Since that time I have found connection that support bisexuals of colour in their own parts of the world: Bi Women of Color in the U.S being especially helpful and encouraging.

As is often the case, I knew that if I wanted something, I would have to create it myself. The survey was supposed to be only the start of a bisexual history project I wanted to curate. History, when it comes to both People of Colour, and Bisexuals, has one thing in common: it is denied that we existed in the past. Projects such as *Medieval People Of Colour**¹ has shown art portraying non-white people in Europe for over 800 years. However the art is still often dismissed by die-hard racists, who do not want to believe we have always been here on this continent. When it comes to bisexual people, a similar thing happens: we are written out LGBT history, erased as either straight or gay. LGBT history has a much shorter timeline; our definitions of any part of the acronym has only been used for just over a hundred years. We can debate whether Sappho was bisexual or a lesbian, but those words would not have any meaning in the time period when she lived and died. I have attempted to combine the two strands in recording the histories of people who identify as non-white and non-monosexual.

People of Colour have a long tradition of oral history; when literacy was something denied to People of Colour, passing on history through stories and songs was a way to remember those who may easily be forgotten.

I wanted to know who made up the different communities of bisexuals of colour; I didn't want my personal worldview to be the only thing that shaped the history project. Upon reflection of this survey, I can see how many new things I have learned, and how my assumptions were not always correct. It has been an education for me!

The survey

128 people took part in the survey over the course of two months in 2015. The survey was generated on a free Survey Monkey site. It was publicised online on Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook.

Limitations

- The Survey Monkey site only offered ten questions for free. This hindered the scope of the survey. I had no funding, so I had to make the best of it, and sometimes merge two questions together.
- Some of the questions were poorly worded, causing either offence, or unhelpful responses.

Question 1: Do you consider yourself to have a disability? (physical or mental)

According to the *Bisexuality Report*1*, bisexuals are more likely to live with disabilities than gay, lesbian and straight people. I wanted to know if this is also the case for bi's of colour. In the survey, 36% of people said Yes. 56% of respondents said No. 8% of respondents were unsure. The Yes results are in keeping with the BiCon survey, which is used in the Bisexuality Report. For example,

From the *Bisexuality Report*:

"BME and trans bisexual people (see glossary) are particularly at risk of mental health difficulties due to the multiple marginalisations that they face."

Question 2: How would you describe your ethnic origin?

Different cultures have different names for non-white people, so I wanted to be clear about who was responding to this survey. I had to remove four respondent's answers when they stated they were white. I was surprised at the word "Mulatto," being used twice in the survey: to my knowledge, it is a term used to describe descendants of enslaved people in a derogatory way.

Black: 31

All mixed heritages: 38

Latino/Hispanic: 10

Asian: 9

African American: 9

Caribbean: 3

Indian: 3

Bengali: 2

Chinese: 2

Middle Eastern: 2

Mulatto: 2

Javanese: 1

Indonesian: 1

Malay: 1

Mexican: 1

Brown: 1

Aboriginal: 1

Some of the responses were more vague than I would have liked; Asian could mean anywhere on the continent. However when respondents used specific countries as their origin, I wanted to use it.

Question 3: How do you define your sex or gender?

Initially I had problems with wording of this question, which was brought to my attention before I changed it. I asked this question because it has been my experience that many of the bisexual spaces I've seen are dominated by cisgender women. I wanted to know if this was true in places I'd never been.

As I had predicted, the majority of respondents were Women. I am glad that I left the answer box blank, instead of using a drop-down box with possible choices, as there was a variety of responses used. There were thirteen different categories used in the answers:

Female/Woman: 74

Male: 25

Non binary: 6

Genderqueer/Genderfluid: 5

Agender: 3

Demi boy/Demi male: 2

Bigender: 2

Mostly Female: 2

Androgynous: 1

Trans masculine: 1

Two-spirit: 1

Unsure: 1

Great!: 1

Question 4: How do you describe your sexual orientation, and how long have you identified that way?

Bisexual is a word that I use to describe myself, but I am aware that other non-monosexual people use other words they are comfortable with. This question came in two parts because the free Survey Monkey facility only allowed ten questions, and I had run out of space. I was also aware that these questions were closely related: bisexual people are often presumed to be on their way to becoming gay or straight, that their sexual orientation is a temporary thing, or "Just a phase."

I assumed that the majority of respondents would answer, "bisexual," to this question. I was however, surprised at how few people used the word, "Pansexual," as an answer, as I thought it was growing in popularity. I didn't expect so many people to use the word, "Queer," which I suspected was becoming less common, and only a UK-based word.

Sexual orientation:

Bisexual: 90

Queer/bi: 9

Queer: 8

Bi curious/Bi-ish: 6

Grey/asexual bi: 4

Pansexual: 3

Fluid: 2

Bi Romantic: 1

Quoiromantic: 1

Bi lesbian: 1

Unsure: 1

Trisexual: 1

Polysexual: 1

I realise now that the wording of the second part of the question led to some confusion: some respondents answered in terms of years, whilst others responded with, "since I was sixteen." Without knowing their present age, this type of answer did not yield the information needed.

Less than 1 year: 14

1-3 years: 36

4-7 years: 26

8-12 years: 12

13-17 years: 5

More than 18 years: 4

It is interesting to see that the largest grouping of ages have defined as bisexual for 1-3 years. In my personal experience, the bisexual people I know have identified as such for a much longer period, although most of these people are also white. This raises some questions as to how bisexuals of colour identify to themselves and others, how bisexuality (like many non-heterosexual sexualities) may be seen as something only white people embrace. The results of this question makes me think about an unforeseen difficulty in recording the history of bisexuals of colour.

Question 5: Are you aware of any bisexual communities where you are located? This includes an online community, if it is specific to your geographic location.

The answers to the this question were as follows:

Yes: 41%

No: 59%

This was a simple Yes/No question. I was surprised that the majority of respondents didn't know of any bisexual communities, especially as the question included online ones. I am aware of how isolation is often a factor for bisexual people, but I have found that going online helps to alleviate a little of this. The reality is often online spaces can be just as biphobic and racist as offline spaces. It may often feel like bisexuals of colour have no places to inhabit where they will feel welcomed. Most bisexual communities are white dominated; even if they are not intrinsically racist or biphobic, the fear of being visible as a bisexual person of colour may be a factor to not attempting to seek out these communities.

Question 6: Do you consider yourself a part of any of these

This question was a follow-on from question 5. The answers were as follows:

Yes: 35%

No: 47%

Don't Know: 18%

I was unsurprised by the results of this question; feeling unwelcome in bisexual communities is a common experience for me. Activities such as research, organising, facilitating and publicising in bisexual communities, is dominated by white people. The opinions, points of views and experiences of people of colour are often ignored or dismissed as unimportant. Class, along with racism can be a factor in this. White people in bi communities are used to hearing particular types of language and arguments; they may not trust people of colour, or see them only as 'exotic novelties' who have no understanding of LGBT history. Some examples of this is hyper sexualisation of bisexuals of colour, discounting educational or life experiences, or an over reliance on stereotypes regarding our interests and abilities. People of colour may be tired of such things used against them, or as was my experience, only being actively courted when white bisexuals want to show how diverse their communities are. All of these factors can lead to people of colour not feeling a part of their bisexual community.

Question 7: What is your overall view of the LGBTIQA communities. Please go into as much or as little detail as you're comfortable sharing.

This open-ended question resulted in a variety of answers. Some common themes arose:

Dominated by white people

"Less focus on white cis men would be nice."

"They tend to be majority white, a lot of them catered to gay, cis men, and generally not as inclusive as I'd have imagined."

"Most white, focused on L&G"

"Many of them are trans exclusionary, also very white. the ace communities especially."

Violence (Trigger Warning: assault)

"I live in Brighton, so all the LGBTIQA communities are dominated by white people. I find that I am often presumed straight; they think that there's no way I could ever be a part of this community and that I am currently or intend to discriminate against them for being LGBTIQA. That, or if the whites find out I am queer or if they read me that way, I am almost always fetishised, for example in the form of backhanded racialised 'compliments' and being grabbed at and groped by strangers. There is a lot of queer and trans activism within Brighton, but again, this is dominated by whites. They seem to think the main issues that should be addressed first are gay marriage and 'those horrible Africans who kill their gays'. Racism is rampant in all aspects of Brighton life, but especially within LGBTIQA communities."

Racism and Islamophobia

"The queer community offline aren't intersectional, and are often racist and Islamophobic. As a queer Muslim who wears a hijab, I feel isolated by the mainstream queer movement. I find solidarity within the online queer community, where I talk to other queer POC."

"Racist, misogynistic, anti Black, trans exclusionary at best, biphobic, classist."

Isolation

"Very, very lonely."

"I would like to be more involved but many community meetups seem to involve alcohol and/or the main gathering places are bars and i'm not comfortable in those environments.

"They are only centred in the city, and far away from the suburbs where I live."

"As I am still a teenager, I know that a huge majority of LGBT hangouts are at nightclubs or gay bars. there are not really any LGBTQIA hangouts/safe spaces in london and if there are they are either to far away for me to get to as I there are none where I live or they are only for adults and start late into the night. I also feel like even if was a fully grown adult (im 17), I still would only want to go to a safe space/hangout/meetup only during the day."

Acceptance

"I think they're great! They're accepting and we all need that in our lives!"

"In the Bi community however, there is a greater socio-economic, racial, ethnic, age, and gender diversity and no one shames another for not fitting into a "mold" because there is no mold for us. That's quite relieving and refreshing in contrast to gay/lesbian culture with its boxes and labels."

"There is a small group called QTIPOC Brighton that brings respite from the sea of white faces. They mostly do activism and social meetups, but unfortunately have gone a bit quiet lately."

"Mainstream LGBTQ communities I've encountered in Singapore and London are very lacking in ethnic minorities, overwhelmingly middle-class and privileged However intersectional/POC LGBTQ communities are much more inclusive and welcoming in my experience."

Question 8: Have you had any negative responses or experiences for identifying as you are?

This question was a simple closed, drop-down box. The results were as follows:

Yes: 68%

No: 15%

Don't know: 17%

I was unsurprised that such a high percentage had received negative responses. However I was puzzled that 17% didn't know; it could be a case of microaggressions being difficult to spot, or that incidents happen so often it becomes hard to track.

Question 9: If you answered Yes, please give one or two examples that you feel comfortable sharing.

Common themes were:

Violence and threats. (Trigger warning: Suicide and Self harm)

"A group of straight men at university beat me up."

"I was homophobically bullied at school when I was 13"

"Lesbians saying I'm not queer cause I like dick. Lost all my straight friends when I came publicly out. Folks dont engage with my bi positive facebook posts or tweets. Im ignored and neglected alot. The bi community makes the isolation worse since most of them in my local area have social anxiety and fear to be out in public with me. Iv experienced serious suicidal thoughts because of this."

Hyper sexualisation (Trigger warning - sexual violence)

"I don't like assumptions that bi, poly women, especially femme ones are basically a sexual fetish for men. Men will assume you want a threesome and bring that up as soon as you mention you are bi. I feel like how identify is really sexualised in an uncomfortable way. I've also had a gay women act like dating me was an "open- minded" thing for her to do because everyone was warring her not to date bisexual women"

"I was told that I can't be asexual because Latinas are all hypersexual. I was also told I can't be Latina because I'm not "sexy enough." I've had asexual communities try to use me as their "PoC spokesperson" while ignoring the way ace communities can be super racist. My first boyfriend tried to correctively rape me. I don't know if that was because of my biness or my aceness, but it was probably a combination of both."

"I have an OKC (Ok Cupid) profile in which I specifically mention that I'm looking for friendship with the potential of a romantic relationship forming from that (with no mention of casual sex), and I got propositioned by a couple looking for someone to engage in a threesome with them. I blocked them instantly, but I assume they figured because I'm bisexual I'd be down for that. Months ago at the LGBT community center where I volunteer, I walked in for my shift to a conversation by a group of older gay men about whether or not bisexuality existed and was tasked by one of them (once I told them my orientation) to prove that bisexuality isn't just about sex and sleeping with more than one person at once."

Mislabelling and Denial

"People mislabel me as gay. They assume I'm in denial or going through a phase."

"People don't really believe I am bi, I have been in long term relationships with men, and only casual things with women, but people don't think it matters."

"People have said I'm gay and just lying, or I'm using the label bisexual to have casual sex with guys and will just end up marrying a woman."

Fear of rejection from family and friends

"Im not out to many people but I am aware that If I was to come out to them as ANYTHING other than straight, I'd be disowned and kicked out of the house. My dad also randomly said during an argument that I cannot live a lesbian/gay "lifestyle" because it is a satanic lifestyle ,which I know is not is completely untrue but wierdly he said all of this after he forcefully said when im older I HAVE to get married and I HAVE to have a male partner and that I HAVE to have children and I said I not sure that I want to be married or have children but I never outed myself and said I was bisexual."

"Being told I'll never get married and have a family as no Muslim would want to marry a genderqueer bisexual."

"Lost opportunities for friends."

"It's hard to admit who you really are because your friends cannot accept you."

All of the answers to this question were very sad to read. It made me think of the lack of resources for bisexual people who are homeless due to being rejected by their family; the poor understanding of professionals helping bisexual people who have survived rape, and the biphobia that everyday people seem able to perpetuate without a second thought. When these aggressions are placed in the lives of bisexuals of colour, an extra layer of oppression comes with it.

Question 10: What are some of the positive things you have experienced with identifying as your sexual orientation? Please give one or two examples you feel comfortable sharing.

New friendships and communities

"I have found a lot of community with other bisexual people (not through bi-specific programs, though) and through the LGBTQ community in general, and my identity as a bi woman of color has strengthened my relationships with other bi women of color in my life."

"Meeting lots of amazing people with the same politics, creating a family where one can be who they are and loved. Being queer is the best thing, but often fighting to be heard and standing together in the fight hurts and is tiring, but knowing you have people who you trust. We always have the best parties. Meeting other qtipoc disabled people was very important to me. I was struggling alot before meeting people of colour, and struggling alot with being disabled... so those things mattered. Just being queer - made me feel really out of place with the white queer friends I had...It was a steep journey of discovery."

"I feel less alone. I have a community now and vocabulary to talk about my experiences and feelings. I can't imagine I would be where I am right now if I hadn't found the asexual and bi communities."

"First and foremost, the NYC Bi community itself: When I was contemplating suicide and living with an abusive family member, friends I had met through that community helped me. I had never received such support from gays/lesbians. As a student in Columbia University, I've been trying to become more involved with the queer community on campus, but so far I've made positive strides with the queer POC group Proud Colors and the GS Alliance which represents queer students from the School of General Studies (my school, which was founded for non-traditional students.)"

Helping others to be self-accepting

"Being able to share things with friends who later on have opened up about their own sexualities."

"I've had a friend be comfortable telling me she was bi after she knew that I was, now we can support each other"

"Found out it brought out other people due to my braveness."

Self acceptance

"I don't feel like i'm lying to myself anymore. I'm at peace with myself now. I've met some amazing queer WOC after coming out, so I now have friends who are supportive of my identity and decisions."

"I feel more at ease with myself. I previously identified as a lesbian, only having been attracted to one or two men, but those few 'exceptions' made me feel like a fake and it is more comfortable now that I don't consider them exceptions but just generally accept that I'm attracted to people of various genders."

"I was closeted to the straight and gay world. Once I identified I was accepted by my queer brothers and sisters, particularly in the 12 step program to which I belong. Feeling a part of is an important part of my recovery"

"I've always felt that I'm not straight since I was in the kindergarten. Growing up in homophobic neighborhood, I used to hate myself for liking girls. But now I feel comfortable with my sexual orientation and don't feel weird for that."

"I have found great context in the stories, struggles and culture of bisexual communities which can include dozens of labels and identifiers. Stories just like mine are celebrated with bi community which feels wonderful. At times I'm grateful that I'm not gay or straight, simple because it's something that makes total sense and it's how my mind works. I'm happy to be me I guess."

Conclusion

As stated previously, the aim of this survey was to start off a history project. I had certain assumptions of what that project may look like, but the survey has given me a more solid perspective of where the project will go. It is undeniable that bisexuals of colour face multiple oppressions, but the positive aspects of their sexuality is vital ammunition in fighting a battle to stay alive and whole, in a sometimes brutal world.

I will now use the common themes to carry forward in my future research and interviews

- Isolation
- Racism/Islamaphobia
- Hypersexual assumptions
- Violence
- White-domination of LGBT communities
- Fear of family rejection and homelessness

I am honoured that so many people chose to be honest and open with me in completing this survey.

Jacq Applebee

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Bibliography

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