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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lesbian, feel, space, experience, middle school, lesbianism, queer, exist, college, class, queerness, school, peers, people, disability, understanding, person, question, talk, relationship

SPEAKERS

Olivia N

Olivia N 00:03

Today is March 1 2023. I'm Olivia Newsome interviewing Mishima here virtually over zoom. Do I have permission to record this interview?

00:11

Yes.

Olivia N 00:16

Do you know you can stop recording at any time? You Yes. Can you say your name agent pronouns?

00:25

rashie ma 23 Day them? How would you describe yourself

00:39

I would describe myself as a queer nerd diverse, disabled artists. I am Afro indigenous, which informs the ways that I move through the world. And I have a lot of love and hope for people and try to move with kindness, I would describe myself as a kind person.

Olivia N 01:15

Can you tell me where you're from where you grew up and what your childhood was like?

01:20

I am from Newark, New Jersey. I was born there and spent my life there until I went to college. Second question, part of that was what was my life like growing up? Okay, I grew up in a single parent home, it's just me and my mom. My dad was around earlier in my life, but he lives in a different state. So as I got older and had less time to back and forth make time for that, I saw him that I was a really inquisitive and curious channel, I would absorb almost any information I came in contact with, and asked so many questions. I'm really grateful that my family encouraged my like inquiries, and also were willing and able to answer my questions. Even if they weren't questions that most people would expect a child asking,

they would give me slightly modified answers for my level of understanding, but they would always answer my questions. It was never like, No, you can't know that. Or you're too young to know that. I really loved books. As a child, actually, the first word that I ever said was book, the first word, like, as a baby I ever said, was a book. And I think that's really funny. I found a lot of solace in books. As an only child, I spent a lot of time by myself. But in books, I could literally travel to so many worlds both real and imagined, and experience so many lifetimes of different people. And I think that's a really core part of how I understand the world is that I grew up with stories as a basis of my understanding. And so a lot of the way that I process the world now is very narrative.

Olivia N 03:57

Can you talk more about your relationship with your mother and what that was like growing up?

04:01

Yeah, my mom was also an only child. So it was an interesting dynamic to be an only child of an only child in this house with just the two of us. We spend a lot of time alone or not take out there. I remember when I was younger, we would play games, like we really liked word games, puzzles and things like that and had a variety of word games a surprising number of word games, and we would do those together. But as I got older, particularly when I started middle school, we spent less time together. I was really busy and had a lot of things. pressures that I was managing. But my mom was really, really, really working hard to make sure that I could have the most like full life experience possible, was always relatively supportive of the things that it was that I saw and that I wanted to do. I'm really grateful for that. I think it's fairly natural to develop tension and relationship with parents as you get older. I was somewhat struggling in that dynamic for a while. But having the time and space to process myself, in my own context, on my own terms, was really helpful for that. And we have like, really good conversation and dynamic now. You mentioned Middle School.

Olivia N 06:07

So can you talk about what middle school was like, if you liked it?

06:12

What was like how it affected you. I hated Middle School. For a number of reasons. I was really excited going into middle school because prior to that, the schools that I had been attending, were not challenging me. I was speeding through material faster than my teachers could keep up with, and was outperforming my peers in a way that made it hard for me to be in the same classrooms as them. Because I was often trying to do something totally different than what they were doing. I started middle school when I was 11 then at a charter school in the city that I lived in. And it was a horrific and awful experience. It was extremely draconian in the way that it enforced its rules and expectations for students, which were higher than reasonable for 11 year olds, generally. It was a no excuses Charter School. And because of how strict and punitive that school was, I honestly shut down for most of middle school, a lot of the things that I understood to be poor traits of myself, my creativity, my curiosity, my excitement for learning, were snuffed down during that time at that school. And even now, I'm in the process of unlearning a lot of those toxic narratives that were shared with me. And that I internalized during those really formative years, I think something in middle school. Beyond the context of the school that I attended, that was challenging, was that I did feel really isolated from my peers, even at

that school. Being such a high performing student, made me somewhat untouchable to my peers, I became less of a person and more of a standard or ideal of a person. And when I was doing so well, when other people were struggling, it made it really easy for me to be someone who wasn't seen as part of the general like peer community, I didn't feel like I had very many friends. And that the friends that I did have, I was a chameleon in the way that I was modifying myself to be with each group of people that I was with. So it was a relatively isolating experience. There are people that I really enjoyed dealing with, but Middle School was a time of a lot of confusion. So can you

Olivia N 09:47

talk a little bit more about what high school was like? Did you struggle with a transition from middle to high school? And also if you wanted to, if you could reflect on maybe what it was like Being disabled and neurodiverse at such a punitive charter school and middle school, so you can start with that, and then you can move to the high school question.

10:07

Okay, so the first question, what was it like being neurodiverse? And competitive environments? Yeah. Okay. So it's a really interesting question, because I didn't know that I was disabled or have any type of neurodiversity until partway through college. So I definitely think that not knowing made it really, really hard to navigate that space. Because the narrative that was being pushed in that I was receiving was that there's no reason why someone shouldn't be able to succeed, anything that would get in the way of like someone performing their best was just an excuse, and they just needed to try harder. And it's really painful to think about that now having the understanding of disability that I do, because as amazing as the things that I have done, am doing and will continue to do our there are things that I couldn't and can't do without accommodation. And there wasn't room for that. My school, I went to the same school for middle school in high school. And even if I had been aware of the disabilities that I manage, now, I don't know how much it would have changed my experience of the school, because I don't think they really would have cared. But I do think it would have been different in that I would have had a sense of self that was other and outside of the school. And so when I was struggling, rather than going back to the narrative, that there was something wrong with me, or I wasn't trying hard enough, I would have had some solace and knowing like, oh, there's there's a reason why this is particularly hard for me. And it's not my fault that this was particularly hard for me. My school really demanded extreme degree of accountability and responsibility from its students, to the point where I was apologizing and taking on responsibility for things that were not my fault at all. Because if they were a problem that was affecting my ability to perform, inherently, it was noted to be my fault. So that's been a process of unlearning, and navigating how to take accountability without taking more responsibility than is mine to take. And it didn't set me up well, for college and adult life. The transition from middle school to high school was both difficult and not. It was difficult in that some of the norms of the middle school were not the same as the norms and the high school. In the middle school, you could read after you had finished your work, most of the time. When you're in class at that school, the work that you were expected to do was like, time down to the minute and the second. Like we would have a timer on the board like counting down the time where it's like, okay, you have like 10 minutes for this worksheet or whatever, like this independent practice. Like things were that level of like, micromanaged and typically, I would finish work a lot earlier than my my peers would my other classmates would. In the middle school, you could use that time to read your independent reading book because like, Oh, you're reading or doing

something productive with this extra time. And while I was challenged even with that, in middle school, they wouldn't let me take certain books out of the library because they said they were above my reading level, regardless of me having already read them. And when I did finish work early, I would start reading and teachers would come over and look for errors in my work, like intentionally search for something that I had done, like incorrectly or not done completely, so that I could go back and fix it because they didn't understand how I could do it that fast. And then, like, have time to read afterwards. And then the high school, you weren't allowed to read during class. You weren't allowed. I remember really specifically like on first day of school, maybe like pulling out a book and getting in trouble for it and being like, okay, that's okay. Our school did a two day sort of boot camp for all of the new students entering the high school. So like, there's one before the start of the middle school, and there's one before the start of the high school. So going into fifth and ninth grade, called induction, which is a terrifying name for that to be called. In for those two days, students were expected to show up in uniform for like the full school day. And during those two days, you were learning the rules, regulations and expectations of the school, so that on the first day of the school year, there would be no excuse for you not like showing up and following the rules. Because you were made aware of them, you have to sign the student code of conduct and whatnot. So it was expected for you to be all in from from day one to hit the ground running. There were no breaks, no pauses, no moments for breath. You just had to go our school days were longer than typical Public Schools school started at 740 and ended at 345, which is a nine hour school day. And that doesn't even begin to factor in the amount of homework daily that we had, because homework was daily, at least two to four hours a night of homework. And if you had any after school or extracurricular commitments, those were extra. In addition to all that you were doing so I didn't have much time to just like exist as a person. In high school, I was really invested in going to college partly because my school was a college prep school, that's their whole thing is that everybody gets accepted to a college. But for me, college was a vision of freedom that I clung to, during my time at that high school because it it meant something different, anything different than what I was dealing with would be better. I I was just trying to make it to graduation to get to college. Like I felt like if I could be somewhere else things wouldn't be as bad. And while it's true that things have never been as bad as they were during middle and high school, that's less because things got easier and more because my middle and high school were especially abusive. And so in comparison, the hard things seem less extreme than that. But to navigate the aftermath of going to that school, with the additional challenges and struggles that come with being a college student, especially a low income college student of color, a large PWI jarring I had no real expectation of what college would be and almost everything that my school told me about college was wrong As I was expecting the same level of

20:05

non compassion, non consideration and inhumanity and while I definitely did encounter professors and admin at school who were less than accommodating never was anything as dire as I was made to feel during middle and high school during middle and high school. Being late to school by a few seconds, or forgetting to do a homework assignment, or falling asleep in class, they all felt like death sentences.

20:51

So

Olivia N 20:52

did you like feel any, like building anxiety and stuff when you were in

20:56

school? Absolutely. Absolutely. I. In sixth grade, I would say by sixth grade, so after one year at that school, I was very aware that things were not good, and that I was not okay. And I brought it up to my teachers and people who theoretically should care. And I was gaslit. I was told it was just growing pains or teenage angst and like, it's not that big of a deal. And why can't you just like, suck it up and do the thing, nobody else is complaining and crying like you are. So even though I was really aware of, and in tune with my nervous system, and my like physiological reactions to that space, I was taught to ignore it and override it for the sake of getting things done. And it's still something that I struggle with having a sense of where my limits are, and what the line between well and unwell is, I stopped asking for help. And I stopped telling people things, because I was consistently met with responses that diminished my experience, or that indicated that I was smart and should be able to figure it out on my own. And it led to a paranoia similar to that which I've heard people who grew up Catholic describe of always being watched, like constantly being on edge and fearful that you could do something wrong and somehow ruin everything, you ruin your life over very small things that are quite normal for a 13 year olds to be challenged with. And I shut down a lot. I couldn't have named it as such at the time, but I dissociated through most of sixth and seventh grade, I have very, very few memories of sixth and seventh grade beyond the 2014 side of Tumblr that no person should be on very enabling of the very dark and scary feelings that I was already having. And I think sixth grade was the first time I recognized myself to be suicidal. I never had any actual attempts. And for the most part, it was ideation more than anything, just like that would be easier than this. Like this is so hard. And I don't want this to be hard in this way. There were a couple of times, I think, in seventh grade, where it went slightly beyond ideation to like thinking about potential plans and never went through with any of them. And I'm really grateful for that, but that was the state I was in at 12 and 13 In, which was a very drastic and dramatic shift from my demeanor prior to starting that school, I was so outgoing, so sociable. I loved interacting with people and new places, they were so interesting, there was so much to learn. And not only was I being confined in this box, but the things that the school was claiming that they wanted from me, which is like, Oh, we want you to be smart and high achieving and critical thinking and all that I would be punished for critical thinking that challenge the authority or paradigm of the school. So in, I think, sixth or seventh grade, we read Animal Farm. And we also read the autobiography of Frederick Douglass. And I remember being like a middle school child in that classroom and being like, Hi, this, this feels familiar. This, this feels familiar. I know that this feels familiar, because I'm experiencing it. And I'm reading it, and I'm seeing my experience reflected in events and the immediate shutdown was overwhelming. Now I understand that they were scared. They were scared that such a young kid had that level of perception and analysis to see that they were doing really terrible things, and didn't want me to jeopardize that but even asking why was a bad question. It wasn't really about my understanding, it was about compliance. When I wanted to understand more, or ask questions that were tangentially related that would help develop my understanding. I was told now, all I needed to do was do what they said, and perform on the standardized tests. And it's really a shame because through those eight years that I spent at that school, I learned to distrust myself, devalue my creativity, P value. Curiosity about things like wanting to understand how things work, and it's something that has treated additional disability, and a way that is really hard to navigate as an adult, because I'm having to relearn really fundamental life skills in an entirely new way that isn't based in threat and punishment.

28:24

So

Olivia N 28:26

we spent a little bit of time talking about school and your experience in school. But could you talk a little bit more about class, like Charter School? Were you on scholarship?

28:39

No. So it was technically a public school. Charter schools are technically public schools. They are partially funded by the state by the district. The thing that makes charter schools unique to your typical neighborhood public school is that they can have outside additional funders, and they are not held to the same expectations standards or regulations of neighborhood schools. So essentially, it's an

Olivia N 29:15

it's free rein. Yeah, it's free rein. It's like private school where you get free rein, except it's state funded. Yes, but worse, because they have to prove that they

29:24

need the state funding. And they have a lot of big money people on their financial board. So it was free. And also, and also, we had to wear uniforms and we're only able to wear like a very specific uniform. And the uniform policy was like, so obnoxious down to, like the pants had to have Have a little star above the like, back pocket, because it wasn't enough to just have the light pants in the uniform color, they had to be sure that you were getting them from the right place. The uniform shirts, I think cost 23 to \$25. apiece, the sweaters were in the like 3040 range. And there were like, some different skirt styles. But like that was expensive to have to buy uniforms. And like that was the only thing you could wear in the school. And so it wasn't a private school, but it was an unreasonable ask for them to be knowingly serving a population of low income students, I honestly don't know how much there is to say about the experience of being in class. It was a lesson, you did your work, there was no opportunity for talking or social interaction. And the middle school aside from lunch. And even lunch was like relatively monitored by teachers. So I didn't spend a lot of time with people outside of school, I didn't really have like, time or opportunity to do that. So I didn't have much engagement with my peers at all. Unfortunately, in class, even when I was interacting with peers during like group work and stuff. I wasn't seen as appear by a lot of people, I was like, a tool to be used. And because I was such like a seemingly straight laced goody two shoes, teacher's pet kind of kid, other students didn't pass me, which makes a lot of sense because proximity to the teachers and that system is like social pariah territory. And I didn't know what to do about it. And I was too scared to break rules on purpose. And I wasn't going to fail on purpose. So class was a really weird dynamic, I often ended up like helping my peers or being like a an assistant to my teachers, in terms of like, if people had questions, there would be some times where they would be like, Oh, I have to like work with a couple of students like individually, but you like you can help people if they need help. So it was just like a really weird social dynamic to be in. And it was intentional on the part of the school to isolate the intelligent and high performing students from the rest of the student population very much divide and conquer sort of dynamic. In the high school, there was a bit more freedom, in terms of how we engage with each other.

And the teachers depending on like, who the teacher was. That being said, there was still a really clear divide between students and how they interacted with each other. And I spent a lot of time at that school, both anxious and paranoid about meeting the expectations and standards of the school and meeting the social expectations and standards of my peers. So my time in class was just always really extreme masking, trying to do the right thing. And being really challenged when the things that were the right thing in any given instance, were in contradiction with each other, where I would have to pick like, do I want to be a good student? Or do I want to be a real person that like my peers see me as a real person? And that was a pretty shitty place to be put in and to be made to feel powerless like in that place. Classes to like you couldn't talk during class. You couldn't talk during class. I don't know what else to say other than that class was just class. If you were talking during class, out of turn, or off topic, we had a quaint space behavior system, it was a weekly record. So each week, you started with a certain number of points, everybody started with a certain number of points, and you could earn or lose points throughout the week based on your behavior. Except it was at the discretion of the teachers and it was a lot easier to lose points than it was to gain points. But things like talking during class could lose you points, things like being off task during class could lose you points. Being on the uniform could lose you points, not paying attention could lose you points. So being scared of the punitive system as I was, I didn't do anything other than class.

Olivia N 36:19

Can you talk a little bit about you mentioned growing up low income or class disadvantage?

36:26

What was that like? Um, didn't really have a sense of what it was to be low income until I got to college. Really, I knew that I had less money than my peers. But I thought wealthy was being able to have an X box and a couple of pair of Jordans that was rich, in my mind. Um, a lot of my clothes were secondhand, either from thrift shops, or from him hand me downs from like family members and stuff. And I remember that being not a distinct point of tension, but something that was an additional challenge and navigating with my peers. Because I wasn't trendy and I couldn't really be trendy. And I remember feeling left out because of that. We like me and my mom were always fine. We, like fell into the category of low income. But we were always find the most extreme things I can remember is sometimes like our lights will get cut off because a bill was late or something. But my grandparents also lived in the city. So if that happened, when I had school, I would just go to their house for a couple of days until the situation got fixed at home. When I got to college, though, especially the college that I attended, having such a, a wide class range. The people that I considered wealthy as a child would be poor at my school at my college. And that was a really jarring culture shock. Me I was expecting the culture shock of oh, wait, people are gonna wait people. But I didn't realize how tangible last difference was, how clearly it was marked. And for a while. I tried to play in the gray zone because through a scholarship, I had a Mac as my computer college. I gotten to do travel grandmother's she had been saving up for us to do a travel in the summer. And so I had pics pictures from abroad. And I could mask for at least a little while as not a questbridge kid not a low income kid. But after a while I was like there's I don't want to do that. There's no need to do that. But the class disadvantage definitely became more relevant in college I think. Not necessarily because it was more impactful but because I was more consciously aware of it.

Olivia N 39:56

Can you talk about gender and how gender norms suspected you.

40:02

Yeah, it's actually a really funny question that I think about now, because as a child, I was pretty unrendered. Um, I remember getting asked all the time, all the time, when I would be like out on a playground or something, or just like doing things with other kids. Are you a boy or girl? And my response was usually like, doesn't matter. It wasn't that I wouldn't like tell them the answer. I was just like, oh, is it like, irrelevant? Does it matter? And I don't think I really felt gendered until I started a second grade. Not the charter school that I went to for middle school, but a school that did like require uniforms, and the girls uniform how to skirt. I don't know if there was a pants option, honestly. But my mom didn't dress me and like dresses and skirts as a kid because I was really active. I was climbing trees and running and getting scuffed up. And so it just wasn't feasible or realistic for me to be in dresses and skirts most of the time. And the way that my mom responded to the concept of gender and relationship to me and other people. When I was really, really young, when I was a baby, I don't remember those people would see like, oh, a baby, like, is it a boy or girl? And my mom would be like, Why do you want to know my child's genitalia? It's a baby. That's all you need to know is that it's a baby. And I would say that I noticed as I started, like later elementary school into high school, and to middle school in high school that I understood that I was in the category of girl. But it never felt like something that was a real thing. It's like, oh, I'm performing a role in a show or something like this is the character description. This is like the costume that you wear this is this is how you show up. This is just what everyone's doing. I don't think I noted it as much of a performance I was like, nine or 10 year old. But looking back at it, it definitely was because so few of those things and markers felt natural and organic to me. I definitely had a pretty aggressive not like other girls phase in middle school, which I now understand to be a gender thing. But I couldn't have told you the least bit of the L G, D, T OR Q when I was in middle school just wasn't the most relevant or topical thing. And it wasn't like other people were talking about it. Especially not in a way that was positive or inclusive. So I never really considered queerness or gender in relationship to myself. I was just like, Oh no, this is just like, what I'm doing. And I know that this feels different. But everyone feels that way. And they still show up in the way that they're supposed to show up. I think this was especially exacerbated in middle school because there were so many like expectations and demands being put on me by my school, that the role of being a girl became something else that I was scared to fuck up. It was also a contributor to me feeling isolated from my peers, because I could never quite seem to be a girl correctly. And I couldn't understand what I was doing wrong because I was like I'm doing things. But I could tell that I was being treated differently or like reacted to differently. And through trial and error. I would do things and see what got the type of response I was looking for and would do those things more often. In high school I I don't think I had that much question about my gender. I would say the first time I started questioning my gender was like, summer 2020. But I was ally TM. I was just like, Okay, but why does it matter? Like, why is gender consideration in this thing, and whenever it was brought up in a binary way of like, boys can do this and girls can't or girls can do this. And boys can't I was always just like, why? What is stopped, like a genuine, why I didn't understand what lines were being drawn. Because like, I mean, a guy can wear makeup if he wants to, and have long hair, if he wants to a girl can have shirt like, these are things that were just really obvious in my brain that didn't seem to be obvious for everyone else. And I think getting to college and meeting people who were gender queer, really, was the first time I

understood that that was a thing that was possible. And from then I started asking myself more questions. But yeah, I don't think I was ever super queer out loud, and middle school or high school. There wasn't really space for that. As a kid, though, I remember distinctly being really on gendered. I really enjoyed that, actually. And even looking at pictures of myself as a toddler. I'm like, Yeah, that's a fucking child. That's a good gender for a child as child. That's it, I was just there. And that was really nice. I feel like gender was a very learned concept. Not something that was innate or natural for me. Well, no, I

Olivia N 47:15

don't wanna ask you that that right now oscillator is. So can you talk a little bit about how race affected you growing up?

47:27

Yeah,

Olivia N 47:28

I have an afro indigenous person. Yeah,

47:31

I didn't have a concept of race until I got to college, because everyone around me was black and brown. I think the demographic breakdown of my school was like 84%, black and 16% Latin a, I think there was a less than 1%. Other. And I remember, specifically, the three students who were not black, or Hispanic, um, it was a relatively homogenous community. Newark is pretty segregated, which I don't know how apparent that would be to someone who doesn't live there. But North Ward has a lot of Hispanic people. Whereas like the West, southwards, more black people. And then there's an area near downtown that has a lot of immigrant population. immigrant population of people who became grouped with whiteness after getting here, but still had relatively recent or direct, like generational ties to a non American culture. One of the other kids was Italian, and I remember him being like, I mean, he, it was something that was like prevalent about him. It wasn't just Oh, my family comes from Italy. It was part of his lived experience. Um, race definitely played a part in my understanding of self and my life. Because I knew I was black. I didn't really understand what that meant. But I knew it was true in the same way. I know that I have brown eyes, and I have 10 fingers and whatever else. It was never in contrast, in a way that needed Top of Mind relevant for me growing up, I was more aware of the social gaps between me and my peers that were related to race, but race wasn't at the source of it. That being said, I do specifically remember feeling not black enough for a lot of middle school, I didn't listen to the right music, I didn't enjoy a rap and I wasn't listening to Beyonce constantly, I really didn't care about Super culture, because I couldn't afford the sneakers that people were talking about. The stuff I did like and was interested in were associated with whiteness, by proximity, I really enjoyed reading and words. And I often got Why do you talk white? Or, like, that's white people stuff? Like, why are you doing that? And I couldn't understand because I was like, Well, I'm not white. So therefore, it's, it was confusing for me. And I don't think it was frequent that the term Oreo came up, but it was enough that I was insecure about it. It definitely influenced the college that I decided to go to. Because growing up in such a homogenous group of people, I also was Miss attributing negative aspects of my experience with the demographic of people rather than kids just being fucking mean. And because so much of the things

that I did find interest in and did enjoy, were associated with whiteness, I was like, Fine, then I'll go to a white people school, and then I'll have friends, because people will like the same thing that I like. And that's when race became a thing of friction. Because that was the first time where intersectionality was a relevant experience for me. Up until college, I think only one of my identities was ever in challenge or conflict at a time. And when I got to college, it was like, Oh, we can be the same but different. So different. And that was, like my understanding of race as a social construct.

52:55

Yeah. So who are what influenced you the most growing up? I would say, my mom, because I spent a lot of time with her directly.

53:16

Also thinking about it, my mom is not a very, like, traditional woman. She, I mean, in the time that I've known her, she's always had short hair, like really close cropped short hair. And she also, was not socially correct. And putting air quotes around socially correct. She was a sex educator. And so really, early on, I had a pretty comprehensive understanding of sexual education beyond what most of my peers had, especially like, at 678. And I think having that be a somewhat neutralized thing, definitely influenced my understanding of how I moved through the world. Because it wasn't something that was a secret. It wasn't something that wasn't unknown. And I never felt a super huge desire to, like seek information because I felt it was being kept from me. I would say books, another huge influence in my life. There are stories that I remember reading that I had to have been so young when I read them. I don't remember the names of the books, but like I remember the story is I remember all of these stories. And even now, I understand my life in the context of story narrative. So like the hero's journey arc, or the fool's journey, and the Major Arcana of tarot cards, the ebbs and flows and build and climax and resolution of stories became a language that I was very fluent in, simply because of the sheer number of stories that I was engaging with. I didn't have any sense of count of how many books I was reading until I started middle school, and they had like a little scholastic tracker system. During my fifth grade year, my first year at that middle school, I read 54 books, which is in a school year, from August to early June, I read 54 books, and more than a million words. Every year subsequent, I think I read at least two to 3 million words. I was never not reading. And they were such a heavy influence, because I wasn't getting much social interaction from peers in a way that I felt like I connected with them. But I felt understood in the books that I was reading. And so I would look to books for answers, I got my understanding of social cues from books and interpersonal dynamics from books. And think that it also gave me a level of perception that most people my age didn't have, which also made people uncomfortable, like notice noticeably uncomfortable that I was recognizing parallels between stories that I was reading in real life. Outside of that, I would say some pretty significant influences. I'm fast forwarding to college, I think, because the concept of growing up in relationship to queerness is really complex for me, because I feel like I as a person, I'm at a farther developmental point than I as a queer person, am, because I didn't start living or engaging with my queerness until partway through college. So some of the things that were really influential during that was queer community, generally, having people and spaces where it wasn't weird or notable to be queer. Because everybody in the space was queer. I also would say that my relationships in college, both of which work peer relationships were really fundamental, and like my understanding of self, particularly because I have been so introspective growing up, and I had spent so much time with myself, that learning with someone else experiencing

with someone else was really new and eye opening and revelatory in a way that I hadn't had access to before. So I would also add that as like an influence

Olivia N 59:03

can you talk about when you started realizing that your sexuality was different?

59:09

Yeah, I have screenshots I had to go back through really old Google Photos for a project that I was doing in college. And I have screenshots of me looking up the word demisexual on like, Urban Dictionary. And I remember being on tumblr and looking at like, these words that sort of explained like, things that I was feeling, but I was like, not that's, that's out there. But also so there was a question there. I don't think I was equally in consideration of it because Again, not the most prevalent or top of mind, issue in my life, but I would say around high school was when I started understanding that I might have a relationship to queerness. Which is so funny in hindsight, because I'm pretty sure my first kiss was a girl. I'm pretty sure a lot of my like intimate interactions were with girls, but I didn't think anything of it. Because it felt like oh, this was like, Haha, slumber party stuff. You know, it didn't feel like something distinct. Especially because I wasn't super attracted to any of the guys who are going to my school. And I didn't have any sense of a reference point of like, this is this versus this, it was just like, pretty blank. Um, so I didn't really start exploring exploring it until college. But I do remember having a high school boyfriend, who was really homophobic, and it was really potentially more than someone who has no, no stake in the argument. being upset. And I remember that. I don't remember what it was. He says, I really wanted to, like, dump him and start dating a girl just to like, prove a point. Like, that would be so cool. That would be so great, too bad. I'm straight. And I can't do that. That was the that was the thought. When I got to college, I don't think there was a shift or a realization or anything different that happened. I think it just became an option that wasn't available before. The first time I think somebody directly asked me about my sexuality in college, I was like, Oh, I'm bi. And I said it. And that was the first time I'd set it. But I was like, okay, yeah, I mean, like, not know that. Yeah, that makes sense. And I was still very hesitant and lacking a lot of information about what Safak queerness looks like, or could be beyond the media portrayals generally, that existed. And even though I was biased, like, I mean, but like, either better, right? Yeah, cuz that's the right because. And it was more a sense of like, oh, this is familiar. And that, like, this is the story that I am familiar with being told. And so it's a story, I feel comfortable playing out. I had a boyfriend. And like the summer between my like, first and sophomore year of college, we started dating at the end of my first year, and our relationship ended at the start towards the start of sophomore year, that semester. And it was a clear relationship, because he was also by and the fact that we were both clear was irrelevant in the dynamic of the relationship. And that was the first time that was even within my realm of understanding of experience. And I really struggled with that breakup, and particularly for lots of different reasons. But after that breakup, I was like, Hmm, do I like question mark? Because I don't know if that's true. And I also hadn't had that many queer encounters with non men up until that point. So the summer after sophomore year, I moved into an apartment and the city that I was going into college and and that was the first time that I wasn't in my mom's home, and also not doing school, and it was the first time that I had a level of independence and agency where I could just do whatever I wanted, with my time. And it was still in the early stages of the pandemic. I was spending a lot more time inside than really ever before. And I noticed that a lot of the ways that I had been performing gender I wasn't doing because I didn't have to go anywhere where

that performance was expected. And so the initial quarantine period, I think, was when I first started questioning just why I remember specifically looking at a picture of myself, and pondering what about the person in this picture makes them a girl. And everything that I thought of, I had a counterpoint to, like everything that I thought I had a counterpoint to. And I think the thing that I ended up getting most stuck on was the fact that I had breast and I was like, there are men with cities. And these don't have to be here. And so I think that was when I started using she's a pronouns. And I was still pretty hyper femme at that time. But the nuance that I felt had been added to it was so interesting, it was really playful. It was a really playful time. And in that play and exploration, I think I learned a lot more about myself, because I hadn't given myself space or time to have unstructured time like that. And since I was in New Haven, not living with my family, or in a dorm. That was the first time that I had started dating people again after that breakup at the start of sophomore year. And I realized, I don't ever have to date a man again, if I don't want to, like that is an option. And so I wasn't dating them. I was doing a lot of really cute sapphic socially distance picnic dates, in parks, with all kinds of cool careers. And not necessarily looking for anything but just having a really good time interacting with queer women who were interacting with me in a shared context of queerness, because that was new for me at the time. And think that summers when a lot of things shifted pretty dramatically, I came out as non binary. The extent of coming out being Hi, I use they them pronouns. That was about it. Um, and my understanding of gender as the trans non binary person has evolved since then. But that was the time where I started to settle into myself and an understanding of this feels more true than what I have been doing, even if not necessarily the most true or the most precise. So

Olivia N 1:09:12

can you talk about your first exposure to lesbianism?

1:09:16

Yeah, um, my first exposure to lesbianism like specifically, I think, was in high school, there were, there was this couple and they were both girls and it was not taboo. But they were also like, the only gay couples. And they did still fall into relatively heterosexual couple days. namics in that one was super super. But like athletic, short hair, wore basketball shorts all the time. And the other was farther to the fan side of that spectrum. And so even though it was clear, because it wasn't something that was super familiar and the social context of that school, it rather than being a thing of Whoa, this is really different. It was something that I think I especially but kind of collectively based on, like the social groups that I understood, were able to fit them into their understanding, rather than developing or expanding their understanding to fit this queer relationship. If that makes sense, I'm not sure how clear that is. But I would say after that. College was the first time. And I think my first distinct interaction with it was that summer of 2020, because that was the first time I was a staff person seeking out other stuff like people. And I was like, huh, this is kind of nice. Definitely better than boys be treating me. So this is kind of nice. This definitely feels different. And I think my understanding of my sexuality has always been relatively complicated, because I am on the asexuality spectrum. And so how I am attracted to people is not necessarily romantic, or sexually, at least not at first. And so it was confusing to feel the same about almost everyone. With that same being zero, it wasn't like, one was more than the other. They were different. But it was the same level of like, okay, you're a cool person, and I enjoy spending time with you. I think lesbianism came to a forefront during that summer and that fall, because I was actually

asking more specific questions of Okay. Am I a lesbian? Do I like men? What does that look like? What does that mean? How do I understand this concept? Just a lot of questions.

1:13:06

So,

Olivia N 1:13:07

can you talk a little bit about

1:13:16

why

Olivia N 1:13:17

or how let's be in a, or deich ever felt like a scary identity for you? And if you ever struggled with those identities in

1:13:25

any way? Yeah, I think they were scary. Because they were different. I had a pretty narrow understanding of what success and like a good life look like. And that wasn't part of the narrative that I had constructed. And so it was something scary and that it was an unknown. And it was also scary and that I had seen both online but also like, in real life. Queer people be excommunicated from their family is and like, really facing such extreme rejection from community that it was scary and not something that I super wanted to be in proximity to. I remember in high school, the couple that I mentioned earlier, one of them referred to themselves as a dyke because my understanding of queerness generally, but specifically lesbianism was so Little at that time. I remember like asking or trying to understand that I had been told that that was a slur and that it wasn't appropriate to use. And I didn't want to, I don't know call somebody a slur on purpose if I knew it to be a slur. But also, how do you like tell someone not to call themselves a dialect, like that's not really something you can do either. And I remember sitting with that discomfort or a while. And I think I definitely had some trepidation around my family's response to me being gay. Um, it ended up being an entirely non issue. I was dating somebody who, to them was very clearly not a man. And they were just like, Okay. I don't think there was ever a conversation about it. They were just like, okay, cool. I was like, Alright, cool. But prior to that, I think, because of the stories that I had heard and seen with other people, I was really scared of another axis along which I could be rejected, or exiled, especially because I had been experiencing racism, and sexism, and classism, and several other isms that I didn't even know existed at that time. And so there was fear in the

1:17:01

social perception of like lesbianism that I had, at the time. But it got to a point where it was more scary and more painful to lie. Because that's what it was, after a certain point was lying, because I was like, I mean, these things are just like actually not true anymore. I feel uncomfortable, not only with the, like me saying them, and they're not true, but I feel uncomfortable with people perceiving them to be true when they're not. And that was a big shift. And in terms of like, how I was thinking about it, where I was less afraid, and more comfortable in the space of being queer of being lesbian. But there was definitely fear for a lot of the earlier stages of that.

Olivia N 1:18:06

So can you talk a little bit about sex? So what were your first encounters with lesbian sex both directly and indirectly? And how did you feel about it before and after the

1:18:15

encounters? I think my first encounter was probably in porn.

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And I remember thinking it was weird. Because a lot of lesbian porn is filmed by straight actors. And it's also for a male gaze, rather than like

1:18:45

queer people making queer content for other queer people. Especially on the mainstream porn sites that I had no knowledge of or access to.

1:19:03

I think

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there was a degree of social taboo about it that my brain struggled to wrap itself around my first direct encounter with lesbian sex was I think, your approach and it was something that was very new and the concept of Whoa, this is an option. And also not because bodies are bought Is I do remember having the like, Baby lesbian thing that I think a lot of people have, where it's like, oh my god, girls are so pretty, but I could never go down on a girl. That's weird. And now it's just like a funny thought it was such a socially conditioned thought that just doesn't exist in my mind anymore. But I do remember being, to a certain extent uncomfortable with my initial encounters. Because again, I was worried about doing something wrong or bad. It was so new to me.

Olivia N 1:20:45

So what are your thoughts about lesbian sex now? Like? How does it feel? Like how do you feel about it? What are your thoughts about

1:20:51

it? Um, I think one primary thought is that lesbian sex is a lot more attentive, and considerate of the people who are having sex, there's, in my experience, then a lot more communication, and checks that make me feel safe in the space, which are not true of non lesbians, like contenders. Again, being ace, the concept of sex is really not immediate or front of mind for me very often. And so I don't think about it when it's not relevant. And so last

Olivia N 1:21:48

time, we talked, we were discussing lesbian sex, and you were talking about a sexuality, that and being demisexual, and kind of what that means to you.

1:22:00

Yeah, I it's something that has been very top of mind lately of how a sexuality kind of skews the way that I see and understand sex in terms of like a connecting activity. And attraction, generally, because my attraction is very responsive, I would say, language that I have been exploring that feels true and accurate in this moment, is gray sexual, which is, I imagine seeing things in somewhat of a grayscale. And so sometimes the gray that I'm in is like, really light, it's, it's, there's, it's a lighter shade of gray. And it's not something that catches my attention is on my mind, or has that much weight. And other times, it can be like a super close to dark side of like a black side of the gray scale spectrum. And it's fairly contextual, as to like, when I experienced those things, and so my experience with sex is fairly neutral. And that like, Okay, this is sex, this is something that's happening, it's an activity that we're doing, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything or indicate anything. But in the context of like me also feeling affinity with queerness and knowing that I am attracted to people who identify outside of manhood there is like slightly more weight. So I would say the volume is really low in terms of how sex occupies my mind and thoughts space. And when in proximity to other people, sometimes the volume is a little louder, and that's where, like, sex even becomes something in my mind that is like, notable to pay attention to it's not something that like, I orient my life around. So most people are at the same neutral level of attraction for me on till there's like a specific reason or context that would change that. So did you always

Olivia N 1:24:53

feel this way about sex or has this understanding of sex developed?

1:24:57

Um, I kind of have a I always felt this way, I have a screenshot. And I think like Google Photos or something from when I was in high school of me looking up the word demisexual on Urban Dictionary, which I think is really funny, because I didn't start identifying as ace until a lot later than that. But I felt really confused in middle school in high school when I saw my peers doing like hormonal teenager things. And I just like, didn't understand what people were going on about, I had no desire or interest, and like kissing other people having sex. It was it was something that existed totally, like outside of me, like, it was something other people did that I knew about. But as soon as I considered myself in a sexual context, my mind would go blank. And a lot of my like, very early relationships were like, Oh, this is what next narrative of what I've been told to do, and respond and like what these things mean and look like. And so I played out a script. Okay, you meet someone, you think they're cool, then they'll kiss you. And then like, very much like before basis of like how sex happens, it was very mechanical, it was very, like procedural, I suppose. And being able to find language, and other people with similar experience has been really transformative, because there's so little ace representation. And I read ace by Angela Chan, which is a great book, I really enjoyed it, and have been in conversation with other like Ace arrows back people. And for me, I really enjoy being ace and arrows back, because it holds a duality, that is really fun for me, where I can care about these things. And not care about sex, like sex isn't a deciding factor for me. And also, if I want to have sex, if I choose to have sex, I can it can be something like super fun and enjoyable. So I do like that. I feel my asexuality gives me slightly more space to explore the middle ground between things.

1:28:02

So can you talk a little bit

Olivia N 1:28:06

about being a Serbian great sexual and are being a grace and how that interacts with your current relationships?

1:28:16

Yeah. My current relationships and something that I've noticed across other relationships is that I really don't have an awareness of other people's attraction to me, because I'm not thinking, action and like, like, I'm not attracted, so I'm not thinking about it. And so it never crosses my mind that somebody would be like interacting with me differently because they're attracted to me. And that's been really amusing to explore, especially now that I am showing interest in people and showing up with other people and different relationship dynamics.

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To a certain extent, I think allows me to have a more, I hesitate to say genuine because I don't intend to imply that other things are disingenuous, but I'm able to have a more natural connection with someone and from that go to a place where attraction can be considered, but it's something that has to be like explicitly put on the table. I won't think about it unless it is named as something that is wanted and I Actually, recently being like the past handful of months, I noticed that because sexuality and attraction doesn't feel as instinctual for me that I have skewed way to sexual with people more than they are comfortable with, or very disconnected physically. So I've been very much in a practice lately of learning how to be in an energy that feels comfortable for me, and also in the situation like in the context of the situation. So can you talk

Olivia N 1:30:49

a little bit, it's gonna be like a pretty hard switch. So your views on marriage, and maybe if they've changed before, and after you've identified as a lesbian?

1:31:02

Yeah, hard switch. I have mixed feelings about the concept of marriage, especially what most people think about with marriage, which is being married under the law, like being recognized, like having a marriage license, you know. And like, this is my one person, we are a team, just the two of us like we are one unit, I feel really uncomfortable with that. Because it implies a degree of certainty that doesn't really exist. Even if you know someone really well, and you love them a whole lot. Being life partners is a very different sort of relationship than dating someone. Also being polyamorous, I married marriage, both in my like, personal experience, and like how society treats it, it feels like ownership. And I really don't like that. It feels like an obligation that, you know, you're saying these things in front of other people. So like you're accountable to like these vows that you're taking and whatnot. But it feels so forced, like it feels so removed from the relationship itself. So I think for me, I do really enjoy having clear boundaries and like understanding of what, like me and whoever else I might be in a relationship with are committing to each other, and having that be really firm and really strong ground. And it could be to the extent that some couples who are married hold that space regard and priority for that person. But I think marriage is really limiting. To me the concept of it. Especially like glorifying, romantic love

over other types of love, like you don't marry your friends. But your friends can be life partners more than a romantic connection can be. And so I feel like it just creates this false, really weird pressure and dichotomy of like, our relationship isn't real unless we get married or we have to be aiming for marriage or like that is the goal. And it's like, you can just like see what your relationship is like. And if you feel ready to make that commitment at some point, go ahead and make it but it doesn't have to be oriented around marriage as a bowl or stepping stone. So

Olivia N 1:34:11

the next question is, has your lesbianism been influenced by like theory or like any kind of like readings or, like as your lesbianism or maybe understandings of your gender been influenced by like theory, you mentioned like that ace book that you read. There's anything similar to that?

1:34:28

Yeah, I'm gonna check the title of this book, but listening to queer stories that are very different than my own, have been really significant, or my understanding of lesbianism and theory does heavily influence it because I feel like lesbianism is a practice more than it is an identity for me like it is a continued D centering of male pleasure and wants from how I move through and orient my life. And even if I'm not like in a queer lesbian relationship, or having lesbian sex, or whatever the case, the way that I move, I move with the intention behind what lesbianism is. One of the books that I read for a class is stone, Bush Blues by Leslie Feinberg, I read bits and pieces of it for that class. But having an experience it was a novel, but having an experience based on what it means to be Butch and a lesbian. And the line of being denied womanhood socially, because you don't look the part and also feeling genuinely connected with womanhood, and also being attracted to other women. And the book talks about an interesting power dynamic is not the right language, but a play of expectations or ideas, where being a butch lesbian, does have some degree of chivalry to it, it has some degree of like, okay, I am Shang and I can protect you. And I think that butch lesbians stepping into roles that we traditionally consider masculine energies that we traditionally consider masculine, while still being very explicitly a lesbian, like, I think there's a lot of power in that. And it's something that I think about a lot in relationship to lesbianism because there's really like, there's no way that it's going to look, there's no one way that being a lesbian is or can look like, and the more that I engage with these spaces with less hands, all kinds of other backgrounds and experiences, the more I am enjoying the sense that, okay, there are rules and structures and boundaries that we've created to have a space in which we can exist. But within the lesbian spaces themselves, there's so much diversity of experience. That lesbianism feels like a feeling like I can feel and I am in a lesbian space, as opposed to a queer space, the intention and hair that goes into making those spaces are really rooted at not just D centering men, but prioritizing and honoring the pleasure of people who identify outside of male being able to not just separate and distance oneself from men and patriarchy, but in the same breath, being able to celebrate and delight in what feels good, especially when it is counter to like, dominant narratives. I think, even in the context of kink, and BDSM, the taboo of things, does make them weightier, does make them more interesting, it does make them more fun to play with. And I feel like lesbianism is always in that area of this is something that can't be defined by the structures that we typically use to define things. And that in and of itself, is a really cool fluid area that lesbianism exists in. And it's informed by all of the various theory people stories that I've encountered. And they're descriptions of like, what it feels like to be a lesbian.

For them, there is no real one way or one definition. And I really enjoy that space in the lens of like radical queerness. So now we're moving on to

Olivia N 1:40:28

different, how different aspects of your identity and your self interact with lesbian community and your lesbian friendships. And you can even just talk generally about, like, your interactions into your understandings of how a lesbian community works and operates those kinds of things. So can you talk about how you like class and forms your interactions with lesbian community?

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Hmm, that's a really great, it's a great question that I think doesn't get asked in all kinds of contexts, because I feel like it definitely does.

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Something that's coming to mind is the dichotomy of how fairness specifically, lesbian sapphic. People exist in the predominantly black and low income area that I grew up in compared to the very wealthy university that I attended. And having money gives you a lot of freedom of expression. And it is such a privilege that I don't think many people realize or understand. Particularly with the intersection of race and class, so many lesbians of higher class backgrounds are white. And they haven't. I don't mean to generalize, but they naturally in their lives, will not encounter as many challenges to their lesbianism as other lesbians will, who are in lower classes. Their lesbianism might cause conflict and their personal local communities and their family dynamics and their personal relationships. But they have access to a safety and money the other lesbians don't. I was listening to a podcast yesterday, which I can send you if you want to reference or cite it. And it talked about this idea of poor people broke people in business, have a drive and fight and will to succeed that people who have a lot of money don't, because the things they do matter. They can't just throw money at their problem. They can't just go somewhere else. They have to, on a very community level, carve out space for themselves to exist. And I think that in that process at least for me solidifies truth in my experience, because I've had to grapple with it, like it hasn't been easy. And I've been challenged a lot challenged by people in higher classes, like with more class privilege than I have. And learning to hold my experience as true and valid. While other people who do have higher class privilege might try to police how I experienced and understand lesbianism you were talking about theory and things and something that I have noticed with class differences, especially in queer spaces is that people with more class privilege, give theory a lot more weight than they do to live human experience. And it seems almost as if they're so closed minded, like they're trying to make things fit in a box in a way that I don't think lesbianism at school. or really does, it's supposed to be expansive, it's supposed to be like outside of our default understanding. And I found that the way that class intersects with my experience of queerness is it almost commodifies it as something that anyone can do like the types of signaling that people do that involve like, like getting a pair of Tim's, or Doc's, those are \$100 shoes, like not everybody can afford those shoes. And that's just one example of signaling. And I've noticed in lesbian spaces that are centered or organized by people with class privilege, the ways in which people show up to that space feel not performative, but extravagant in a way that I don't necessarily associate with lesbianism, which is something that anyone anywhere, theoretically can, like touch and engage with, regardless of their class experience. And class adds a

whole other layer of performance around how we show up and lesbian spaces of meeting to walk the walk, so to speak. So

Olivia N 1:46:45

you've kind of mentioned it a little bit when you were thinking about how class and race interact, and also how like white class privileged or class advantage lesbians have left challenges to their lesbianism? So can you talk about how you think race informs your interactions with lesbian community? And if you think about how race informs your gender, and your understanding of

1:47:06

gender? Yeah, yeah.

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What's coming to mind is an internet discourse topic that I find very amusing. Who can use the word stud. And I see a lot of white, lesbian people really wanting access to that language, and that we're on the principle that they relate to the experience of being a mask of center leaning, lesbian, but God, like the origin of the word is, you know, women would go out to bars and events and clubs and things, just really masculine ly. And all of the men in the space where like, okay, that's definitely not a man. But when they weren't allowed, like when women weren't allowed to be in those spaces, like on escorted or whatever, and somebody would ask questions, the guys would be like, Nah, that's a stud like an acknowledgment and poking fun at the joke of like, okay. This isn't actually a guy in the context of whoever was asking the question, whatever enforcement people but an acknowledgement of that experience and race. Race touches everything. It can't not. And the concept of lesbian has been in theoretical spaces talked about as you know, in opposition to patriarchy generally because you're not necessarily having babies or to take a second to organize my thoughts. They got a little loopy

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okay, I remember what I thought I was going on. Like lesbian, bi technical definition puts into question one's womanhood in the patriarchal society. that we exist in. And for black women, especially, they have not been given space to be viewed as attractive to be viewed as feminine. They've been over masculinized. And I think that the experience of black lesbians as opposed to lesbians of other like white lesbians, as opposed to any lesbian experience of color, is there's this added weight and pressure of social capital. Not wanting to push too far on the lines, because being out and being a person of color can have really severe consequences for you, more so than it would for white queer people. And

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something that I ponder in regards to queerness and regards to lesbianism and regards to my gender nonconformity.

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All of these things, challenge colonial structures, all of them at their core, say, I actually don't align with any of that this is my thing, this is what I'm doing. And whiteness is so deeply intertwined with colonial power, social power, and those things leading to harm in ways that many white people are unaware of.

They're unaware of how complex and intricate race works in our society. And I feel like oftentimes, there can be a gap in the practice and experience of lesbianism for white lesbians existing outside of colonial structures that are enforced on us. Because there also needs to be conversation and how like their whiteness fits into that. And I don't think that's always had that even though they are queer, even though they are lesbians. Their proximity to whiteness, gives them a different relationship with lesbianism because whiteness is involved in these patriarchal standards and colonial standards. Yeah, I can keep rambling, but I'm going to not know you're so good. So,

Olivia N 1:53:09

can you talk about how disability informs your interactions with lesbian community?

1:53:34

This ability for a large part of my life has been something that is very invisible. Not only is there like not media representation, that isn't stereotypical and surely disrespectful and ableist. Disabled people are encouraged by society to not be seen because they aren't attractive or pleasing to look at. Because it requires more effort to make space for those people and that's not convenient. Not in the world of capitalism, a gainful thing. So I think about disability as an undercurrent of everything, because disability is a marginalized group that anyone can become a part of at anytime.

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And more I experience with lesbianism. I find there to be more space made for disability than and other types of dynamics or encounters. Because there isn't a blanket norm that lesbians have to follow in the way that heterosexual people are following a very clearly structured narrative of this is how this is supposed to work. This is how we do things, this is what this looks like. And because lesbianism exists like outside of that narrative, I feel less resistance, and more space for holding disability. In lesbian spaces. There is a openness that I find where even if a space isn't accessible, or a space isn't made with the intention for disabled people to be able to access it, that work and effort will be done when it is pointed out to bring accessibility to that space. That's something that I have noticed

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I experience a fair bit of chronic pain, and I also have invisible disabilities. It goes, somewhat understated, I think, how much stress and pressure that can put on disabled people a feeling of wanting to show up and perform to a standard and not being able to like knowing that you can't do this really specific, physically intensive thing that somebody might have seen in a video at some point. And there's a fear of disappointing where the fear stems from the disability being the thing that makes someone disappointed with their interaction with me. And lesbians faces I feel less worried about that. I feel less like my disability is something that I have to hide or cover or like overcompensate for I feel like I'll be met partway.

Olivia N 1:58:09

Can you talk a little bit about this generally, your experiences with disability as an adult we talked about, like being a disabled kid who didn't have their access needs accommodated or met at all completely disregarded and ignored. And then now we've talked about disability and your interactions with lesbians, like, can you talk more about like you're just being a disabled, like adults

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now. And what that's like, it's really hard. It's really hard. That's the first thing that I'm thinking of, is that it's really hard.

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As a kid, I don't think it's as front of mind are noticeable

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because you're a kid and everything's kind of like above your head. But as an adult. Disability is really disabling your ability to participate in and engage with life in the way that your peers are,

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is not dictated but heavily influenced by your capacity with your disability. I have neuro diversities that meet certain social settings a lot harder for me than others. So if a group of friends want to connect at a bar or at a club, and that's the only option that's presented, I I wouldn't be able to participate in that type of connection or interaction, I am very reliant on other people, or things that seem so trivial and simple, like ordering groceries and needing somebody to go to the store to get groceries and bring, like bring them to me. That is how I get groceries. That is how I'm able to eat. And I pay a fee, I pay an additional fee to have that accommodation. In adult contexts where there are very tangible consequences to deadlines being missed, and canceling things.

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I feel like I'm often choosing between my, in the moment while being do I feel physically able to engage with whatever it is I'm engaging with my long term well being in the sense of like, okay, I want to have a sense of stability that I can provide for myself. And that might involve pushing beyond my limits and capacity, so that I know that I have something to rest on later. Which can be like burning yourself out for a work job or a project or something like that. So that you can have money to pay for whatever like accommodation you might need,

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that costs more than you are able to expand right now. And it's felt really isolating, especially in the window of adulthood that I am in,

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freshly out of college, my peers are doing a lot of exploring and a lot of

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I would say exploring how to take up space differently, you know, after college, having this open sort of playground of who and what you can be, I feel like I'm in a sandbox, not an open playground. And I can play with people in the sandbox. But if everyone else decided that they wanted to do something different, and didn't take time or effort to consider my capacity to do that. I'm just in the sandbox by myself. So I found that disability as an adult can be really lonely because you have to be responsible for taking care of yourself and meeting your needs. And not everybody else is willing to do that. And so I

often like you often find yourself getting left behind and ways that are really sad. Because the desire for connection, enrichment and engagement are all still there. And other people are doing that without you not because you don't want to or you can't but because it requires an additional effort that they're not willing to account for.

2:03:56

Can you talk a little bit about what it's like being a

Olivia N 2:04:01

gender queer trans misogyny affected lesbian?

2:04:28

My gender is fairly fluid not along the axes of man, woman other but there are times where I present more feminine ly than others regardless of where in my gender spectrum I'm sitting and when I am more feminine presenting, it still feels very gay, it still feels very queer, even if I might look the part of a traditional or expected idea of a woman. And in those instances, I am even more aware of how other people's perception of me and get me hurt. And all I'm doing is existing. Someone perceiving me as a woman, or even just seeing like, Oh, this is a pretty person.

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Especially when men like interact with me and perceive me that way.

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I'm really aware that how I respond in that given moment has a huge impact on like my literal physical safety. Chair misogyny

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is a slightly unique experience to misogyny because it feels slightly more intense, and that there is no right direction to go in, where trans misogyny will not hate you. You're either confused and like not performing the role of traditional woman correctly. And you're going to be like attacked and condemned for that or you are performing the role of femininity that is societally expected of you. But you are doing it outside of the scripts that you have been given, which is queer, being queer and also being like a feminine person, a misogyny affected person. But outside of that dynamic of misogyny, trans misogyny is a more active form of policing I experience of my body and where I am in space. And there really doesn't feel like a way around it, there doesn't feel like a way that I can escape it. Because for them being trans was the incorrect thing for them, like my gender presentation is incorrect. And I'm being objectified not just as something to fix that doesn't align with their perception of the world. But also objectified as something to control. That's what trans misogyny feels like policing and control of how I choose to exist. And it's insidious and everywhere. There will be times where I'm not actively thinking about it, especially because I am intentional about spending time in queer spaces with queer community. And even in queer spaces. Those people will enforce expectations or norms that are transphobic and misogynistic. There is no way not that I even want to but like there's no way to show up to the demands that they are making. That trans misogyny is making generally

2:09:33

can you talk

Olivia N 2:09:34

about so now we're talking about your poor life and how you're meeting other lesbians? So what's it like making in meeting other lesbians in your area and city now? Where are you finding them?

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Ah, I'm finding a lot of them online through online spaces, whether they be dating apps or community apps like Lex

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I really appreciate dating apps, even outside of the intended use of dating. Because you're able to find and connect with people who you have some degree of knowledge that this is also a queer person, this is also a lesbian person, like we are seeking each other out, intentionally. And there are people I've met on dating apps, who I'm really good friends with. But nothing else came up that connection. And the connection was only possible because of those apps because of the ability to sort of filter through and find people

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who are affirming and aligned with how I move through the world.

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Another point of contact that I have been noticing and aware of lately is I feel like there's this secret underground lesbian. Everybody, like lesbians know each other. In spaces. Even if they don't know a specific person, they will know someone who knows that person. And I feel like that sort of mycelial network has been showing up a lot recently, where I will meet someone and through them meet another person and through that person, meet another lesbian. And it creates this web of connection that I've really enjoyed. Because in the way that you are filtering, and apps and websites and stuff. It's kind of like, you know, someone who is already vouching for like the character of this person. And they're also a lesbian. And so it's like, Oh, you are a friend of my friend. And now we are friends. And that connection feels really cool. And there's like less fear involved of gauging how safe might this person be for me, because someone I know, and trust, knows and trust. And that's been a really interesting way to meet people that I really would not have had any other connection with otherwise. So

Olivia N 2:12:34

have you been to a lesbian related place or event

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before? Yeah, I went to the LSM party, lesbian sex mug. And, I mean, I had a great time, it was super cool. I really enjoyed being in the space.

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Especially with the contrast of having been in a very distinctly non lesbian space, the day before. The level of intention that was put into this lesbian space for lesbians to feel safe and comfortable in this lead lesbian space. The visible effort was significant for like, in addition to like, the specific things they were doing, having people COVID tests, making sure that they were clear guidelines and boundaries, you know, like people can't have their phones in certain spaces. There are spaces where you can do that, like providing alternatives. The fact that those things are even thought about, I feel is a really good reflection of what lesbian spaces feel like, as opposed to non lesbians faces, a lot more thought and care goes into them. And part of the reason I might speculate why is because other lesbians also know the experience of like, not having their needs met and like being rejected and not safe and spaces. And so I feel like there are more questions asked that cover more bases that make the space accessible for more people. And that level of like consciousness and thoughtfulness adds a layer of pleasure to being in those spaces beyond just existing in that space.

Olivia N 2:14:43

Can you talk about what identifying as a lesbian means to you? I know that's a huge thing.

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Identify are words, like lesbian or queer or any other potential labels that I might apply to myself. I engage with as opportunities to understand myself better, and find community and resources with people who share my experience

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when I get too in my head about it, the labels feel like a box. And I will notice myself in whatever context or way, do something that doesn't feel in the box that is defined as lesbian. And in those moments, I oscillate between, okay, I don't have any access to any of this because I am an outsider or I must adjust or give up or change whatever aspect of myself in this moment to still be able to fit in that box. I don't recall where the concept was presented to me. But someone talked about labels. Clusters of points, rather than defined boxes, where things can be like really centrally grouped, in that you can see a trend that is reason for this trend being named. And that trend is like being a lesbian. But were in the grand space of it, you claw like you might be really close to whatever that nexus point is. Or you might be a little further off, or you might be in a different space, but still fall into the general wider cluster of lesbian. And I've been holding that and considering that

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understanding myself through the language of lesbian is really important to have how I understand myself at all. It's something that influences the way that I move the way that I interact with people. The way that I pique and name desire.

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It's an identity that feels like home in a way that I don't know necessarily, if I can put into words. I think that lesbian is also like a gender identity. And like, the way I understand my genders through lesbianism because I am not a man. And I am attracted to people who are also not men, that at its core is lesbianism. And even as my gender fluctuates the technicality of terms can get really complicated, but they are supposed to be helpful descriptors, not cages. And so I've been giving myself more permission

to exist in the space of what it is to be a lesbian, the way that I am a lesbian. Rather than comparing that or holding it against other people's definition that would deconstructing that would be limiting and demanding, which feels very unclear to me. When A word and identity a concept so deeply nested and interrogating, challenging and expanding on our understanding of like how we love each other, how we love ourselves like where the context of love and desire falls in our greater lives.

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Having that shared understanding with other people who also identify as lesbian is really important to who I am, and how I move through the world. And I'm really grateful to have as part of my lineage that informs who I am in this moment in conversation with my experience as a lesbian nothing exists in a vacuum. I think there are times where I have tried to consider lesbianism in relation to myself within a vacuum of okay, if nothing else, is this true. But there are other things that influence like my experience in my life. And so identifying as a lesbian is, in part, an affirmation for me, this describes my experience, it's something that feels true to me. And also it feels like a very deliberate choice. It feels like you have radical opposition to the state to

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this systems that are designed to eliminate and eradicate non compliance. It feels like hope.

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I really appreciate that. Lesbian has given me access to a really dope and expansive community of people, and also helped me to enjoy and have a more expansive understanding of myself.

Olivia N 2:23:11

We're getting into the final stretch. If you're feeling any fatigue, we're almost done. There's like three and four

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for more questions.

Olivia N 2:23:19

So can you talk about the importance of community and the importance of lesbian community to you you kind of touched on it in the end of talking about what why lesbianism is important to you generally.

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You know, unity is so necessary. That is something that I no one believes to be true. Nothing really gets done alone. And having community where interdependence exists.

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I think allows for a lot more freedom of experience. Community is essentially like the social contract. We are existing in this shared space and then share it energy together collectively, based on something that we share, whether it's location, whether it's identity, whether it's politics, or just like the vibe. Having community is so vital, and lesbian community specifically is so vital because seeing reflections of you More experience outside of you mirrored back at you, is a really powerful type of affirmation that can

only exist in community. A sense of belonging rather than just being tolerated, of knowing, like, there is space for me here, that space can be very particular to me like it can be a space where I am existing and the specificity and detail of my experience. And it's also a space where

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I don't have to be at the center of it and can still uplift, benefit support, and be with other people. There are a lot of really hard things about being queer, especially right now, especially in the US

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where I am. And community feels like a landing pad, hovering over all of the chaos in the world. And also all of the joy and beauty in the world community is a resting place. A space for integration of new experiences and ideas. And being able to challenge oneself, through relationship to other people is like a necessary part of growth, we exist relationally being accountable to community norms and standards that are set is part of what goes into creating a sense of safety. Having a community with a shared agreement, and a shared joy around and experience

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gives me a sense of belonging that I don't feel like I need to earn a lot of time being like part of a society. You can be in an in group or an out group. And those are really your only options. But community is a far more collaborative space. Because if we are in community together, even if there are places and moments of friction or tension, it's an opportunity for generative conflict it's an opportunity to grow our understanding of community rather than denying somebody access for community based on an arbitrary metric I feel

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Can you talk

Olivia N 2:28:16

about what less the in space of the communities or even queer spaces that you're involved in now?

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Yeah.

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My inner friend circle is very clear. Pretty lesbian, but like at it like very queer. And similarly to how I was talking about community earlier my friends are kind of scattered, they're not in the same geographic location that I am in. They are not in the same life context situation that I am in. Some of them are in school, which really affects the way that they show up and interact. Some of them are working particular jobs that affect the way that they show up and interact.

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And it's like these spaces these little portals of connection whether we are like physically together or not.

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are spaces where I just feel so much joy. There are spaces where I don't feel like I need to defend justify clarify, explain.

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I exist in the world. And so in these queer spaces, I feel like I am actually able to engage with other people who are actually engaging with me. And spaces that are not lesbian, that aren't queer, the aren't black, that aren't disabled, a variety of other identities that I hold. Connection is often interrupted, or understanding and clarity to be establish. And that takes a lot of work and effort. And for me, it takes away from how I connect with people. And so having a space where I know however I show up, I will be able to show up in the space gives me a lot of freedom to explore and genuinely relate to people. Without having such a strong guard up. It's kind of like when everybody does the reading before class, and you can actually have a conversation about it. Rather than people who just happen to be there, and you spend the entire class defining terms instead of exchanging ideas. I am in an intention, and desire of creating lesbian and queer spaces for people to exist in both virtually and in person, it's really hard to find queer spaces that are affirming that hold space for different variations and manifestations of like the human experience within a umbrella term of queerness. And I know how important those spaces have been to me to like have space where I feel safe and comfortable being seen. And seeing others, I want to be able to create that for more people, so that they know what's possible, it's

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been isolating for a long time, up until honestly, maybe like last year to identify with the intersection of identities that I have, and find spaces where I didn't have to sacrifice one or the other, to feel

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included are belonging. And I didn't know that it was possible to show up in a space authentically and not have to manage or change or filter how I show up in that space. And so since that's been something I've been able to experience a space that other people have held for me, something that I know exists now. I want other people to know that it exists to and be able to access it. Because when you're lonely and feeling isolated, I feel more likely to spend time in spaces that cause me harm for just like wanting to be in proximity to others wanting to be in community. So I really value the spaces in my life that are lesbian spaces like with intention rooted in what it is to be a lesbian. I also want to like be able to provide that for other people

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on the last

Olivia N 2:34:18

two questions, so what lesbian spaces you kind of talked about it how you want to provide space for other lesbians to really feel at home. But do you have any like more thoughts about what lesbian spaces do you wish existed like if you were to like dream and ideal space?

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What would it be? Yeah.

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Thumbs up conceptually like my ideal space would be one in which the mortifying ordeal of being ignored or unseen isn't mortifying of space where

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there is no real concept of ugly thing things are just what they are, things can just exist how they are. And so whether someone in that space feels very put together, they feel like they have things that make sense or moving through the world in a way that makes sense, or whether people feel in the messy, middle confusing gunk of an experience, I want both of those people to be able to show up in space and feel held by it, even with their different experiences, a space where differences are not threats, or like something to compete against, or for, I find that in fierce spaces that I've been in, there is a sort of, postulating of like proving that I get to be in the space that I deserve to be in the space. And I want my ideal sort of lesbian space to be one where our differences are, like interesting and unique and fun things to explore rather than

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potential. Like critiques or threats to how we identify, more specifically explaining what I mean by that. There are times where I might see another queer person, specifically another lesbian person, somebody who identifies as a lesbian who's really different than

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me. And there's a voice in my head being like, Oh, well, I don't show up that way. Do we really have the same shared experience and like being in doubt and questioning myself, not even imposed by another person, just like their existing and I'm comparing myself to them. In Question of the validity of my experience, I want a space where people don't feel a need to compare, but they can connect, they can show up and see and talk about experience these different things without feeling a need or obligation to change how they're showing up or like be in the space differently than they are. Um,

Olivia N 2:37:59

what does lesbian Joy mean to you? When are you happiest as a lesbian

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I'm happiest around other black genderqueer lesbians

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let's be enjoyed to me is joy that doesn't need a reason. It's like joy in and of itself. Being outside and just being so delighted with like, oh my god, this patch of flowers is so beautiful and joyful, and I am experiencing joy just for the sake of it. There doesn't have to be like a reason or accomplishment or benchmark that gets passed or like, Oh, I am happy about this. Lesbian joy to me feels like moments and windows where there's just like pleasure in the fact that I exist in this way. Delight in the fact that I exist in this way. awe of the fact that I exist in this way. And what a beautiful, magical experience that is. Yeah, I feel like lesbian joy is something that our society is not structured to provide or give. And so it's a joy.

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That feels revolutionary, really, it's a joy that they did not want me to exist this way. And not only do I exist this way, I am so happy. I am so joyful.

Olivia N 2:39:56

Is there anything else you want to talk about before we end I

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think that this project overall, the conversations that it has sparked outside of like this interview process have been really important and generative for me, and

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provided a feeling and sense of realness that I didn't know I was looking for being able to see all the various directions like the people involved in this project are coming from. And the fact that like, we are all involved in this project like we are a collective

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it brings me a lot of joy to be included in this collective and the scene, appreciated and valued and witnessed in how confusing and uncertain everything feels for me right now, especially a sense of identity in this world in this timeline in this moment. It feels grounding in a way that isn't tethering. And that's really beautiful. And I think like that's what my relationship to being a lesbian is. It's like a core that I ground myself through like a touch point where I'm like, this makes sense. This is true. And rather than being something that I am chained to, it's something that a lot allows me to have a sense of who and what I am as I go through the world experiencing other things. Well, thank you very much. Good job. Happy to be here.