

**On Selfhood: Young Lesbians Within the Margins
Oral History Project**

The Reminiscences of

Sasha K.

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PREFACE

The following written story is part of the On Selfhood: Young Lesbians Within the Margins project. While most of the stories are oral histories, some participants chose to write their responses down. Sasha K. responded to questions over a period of 3 months however they wanted to. Sasha K. chose a narrative, story-based response using the questions as prompts to formulate their life story. The story and the questions are integrated below with the responses below the questions.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading the written life story of someone. The following story was fully written and approved by the storyteller and unedited but reformatted by Olivia Newsome, the project coordinator.

Section 1: Childhood, Adolescence, and Coming of Age

1) Can you write your name and pronouns?

My name is Sasha and I use they/ them pronouns.

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

I grew up in the southeast of Brooklyn, a little beach neighborhood called Brighton Beach. It was primarily made up of Russian-Jewish, Pakistani, and Latin American groups. My mother, whom I affectionately call a hippie, raised me on many cultures, food and traditions. I grew up listening to the call to prayers from the mosque, hanging out my window to watch people celebrate Purim, and children dressed to the nines leaving their first communions. I grew up on nopal, pelmeni and sushi. I listened to bossa Nova, dancing in my mother's belly dancing hip scarves. My mother in her youth was a punk rock icon who's lived a million lives and can tell you even more stories. I listened in awe during her retellings, my personality being shaped by the person I wanted to be...a reflection of my mother. I obsessed over photos of her around 746 lives ago. She lays across a few turnstiles in a leather jacket, dark dress and jeans with her blown out hair spiked and eye makeup smudged with purpose. A picture of her and her best friend, Eric, particularly sticks out to me where they both dressed up like Las Vegas showgirls. This was the first time I had seen a man wear "women's clothing". My mother's friend group was definitely queer coded, but at the time they really only had terms that were very black and white. Gay or Straight. But my mother and her friends lived within the gray space. I admired this gender bending my mother was doing and I definitely credit her openness about her youth and young adult life to my identity today.

I went to a mostly white school where my existence was a question and fascination of many. While being biracial was not unusual, the insular (and xenophobic) Russian community has rarely been witness to it. Russian people are for the most part pretty racist and my lightness shielded me from a lot of that. I was never treated the same way as my mother was. She has been mistaken for my nanny and had the front door quickly shut in her face when entering our building. I never understood why my mother and I were being treated differently because for much of my early childhood I didn't know we had different skin colors and we would be treated differently due to them.

I grew up an only child to a single mother. When school was not in session, I would stay at my auntie April's house in Harlem for a week or so while my mother worked. Harlem was a stark difference for me and my home back in Brighton.

Brighton was very quiet, people kept to themselves, and very WHITE. Harlem was loud, expressive, colorful, and my aunt knew everyone. I think back fondly on our walks throughout Morningside park (a park she regularly participated in the board in) and April saying hi to nearly everyone who passed by. If she didn't know them, she'd eventually. April knew everything about everything. We cooked and ate our own crabs, made a million arts and crafts projects, and went to all her doctor's appointments. and of course, there were many adventures in between errands. With April there was never a full moment.

My mother Iris is a hard worker. I look back now on all the "I had a big lunch" days and her giving me the lunch she bought realizing we did not have money for food sometimes. She would come back exhausted and make simple meals which I protested frequently. When we could, we would order out. In my near monoethnic neighborhood we enjoyed Russian, Uzbek, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, Georgian and American cuisine. I had access to affordable foods from around the world and my relationship to food was healthy because of my upbringing.

In terms of how I was personality wise, I was surprisingly very quiet. Since I was an only child, I was very used to being alone at family gatherings. At school, I was seen as an anomaly for not having any siblings. My mother in her mid adulthood was very reserved and I took after her. I thrived in solitary activities like art and creative writing. I drew a lot. I mostly drew faces of people I found attractive, many of which I look back now and can be considered gender queer. I drew idealized versions of myself. I wanted to be goth or punk or really anything else than who I was. I was poor, wearing the clearance section of the old navy, and perpetually had high waters. I never felt represented in my own body. Surprisingly, as reserved as I was, I was always the class clown. Never too noticeable but when you spoke to me I'd always say the most out of pocket shit. I attribute it to my mom. Really when anyone asks me why I'm the way that I am, my answer is always the same: Because my mom raised me.

3) When were you first aware of Queer identities in general? How did that happen?

I'm not sure if I necessarily knew Queer identities existed in the sense of being aware of the terminology but I was definitely aware of queer concepts. Two of my mom's best friends were gay and lesbian respectively. I remember my mom telling me about a time I was at a party with her and her friends when I was very young. One of her friends was dating a trans man and I was side eyeing him the whole night. I finally went up to him and asked him "are you a man or a woman?". I look back on this mortification but it goes without saying I was surrounded by different sexualities and gender identities.

I don't remember having explicit conversations about queer identities any time as a child and I'm not sure how I would answer if we were to go back in time. Considering the way my mom raised me, I'm sure my grasp of queerness was much more advanced than many kids my age, even if I didn't have the terms to describe it.

4) Who or what influenced you the most growing up?

Other than my mom, an even more cliché influence to my identity was Lady Gaga. I loved how she expressed herself. Her sense of fashion was never "I am a woman" but always "I am a Concept". And that really resonated with me. Dressing in outlandish and surreal outfits was exactly who I wanted to be. I felt so seen by Lady Gaga's sleek and monochromatic Fame Monster looks to her abstract and colorful Art pop concepts. Like she is such an icon like...

5) How did gender affect your coming of age in a way that was different to media representation?

I definitely grew up with the media telling me I was going to have my first boyfriend and first kiss in high school. I never really liked anyone in my school save for a few. The few crushes on boys I did went away pretty quickly (I wonder why). Most of my serious crushes were with other people I met online but eventually they faltered. Nothing ever really felt right about the way I was supposed to love and be loved.

I'm not sure when I knew I was not a girl. I grew up a "tomboy". Hung out with boys, love volleyball (LOL), and played video games. But definitely as I got older I was like wait.....something's a little off. I never really resonated when people would refer to a group I'm in as "girls". It just doesn't feel right.

6) How did being neurodivergent affect you growing up?

I think the beautiful thing about being neurodivergent is that we always look at the concept of being a human so uniquely. We have never seen the world through a neurotypical lense and therefore reject a lot of standards that are put on us. I have noticed this especially in the gender and sexuality fields of development. Many of my friends are both neurodivergent and queer and I think would attribute those identities influential to each other. I have officially been diagnosed with BPD and bipolar 2, and self diagnosed with autism. I have never been able to interact or be interacted with society in a "normal way". Many times I have expressed myself in a way or behaved in a way that was violently rejected by those around me and from a young age I became very aware I was "weird". I didn't mind that label at all, if anything it was empowering.

Being othered was very hurtful to little developing Sasha but as an adult I wear that shit with pride. I think that othering opened doors to my development in the sense that I did not care how people perceived me after a while. I became more comfortable to wear what I want, refer to myself as I want, and overall control my narrative. That inkling feeling that I was not a girl grew greater and I couldn't ignore it anymore. I felt like my being transcended the binaries and traditional gender roles. It's almost like a magical feeling? Maybe others share this experience. When I began to give into these thoughts that I was more than just X or Y of M or F I really did start becoming free. My existence could not be explained verbally or contained by words

Section 2: Burgeoning Queerness and Lesbianism

- 7) When did you realize that your sexuality was different from what was around you?

I vividly remember a moment in 7th grade when my two best friends at the time asked a question consisting of something about whether or not I'd rather have sex with two strangers or two of my friends (please forgive us we were hormonal and young). I told them I would rather have sex with them as my friends. They were so weirded out that I would hook up with them because we were all girls. But I didn't see anything wrong with that. I was like "well we're friends and I feel comfortable with you guys so why not!" and at that moment I knew I was a little different.

Throughout highschool I started having feelings towards my female classmates. I specifically remember one crush I had that was consuming. It was a girl that I went to taekwondo with. We were in all the same classes together and I was obsessed. A deep yearning love I had never felt so young before. Then I suddenly stopped liking her (BPD things). But It was such a beautiful feeling. I consider her my first real crush.

- 8) What were your earliest interactions with Queer spaces?

My earliest interactions would probably be in college. The middle school/highschool environment was really limited in visibility for queer identities and most kids were closeted. I think I tried to join the LGBTQ club in college my freshman year (in my determination to join every club ever) and I never went again. It was very white and a brand of queerness that did not resonate with me. My experience as a Black lesbian (but I didn't identify as that yet) was composed of experiences and feelings while I feel a lot of white queer culture is very corporate queer, and not rooted strongly in history or ancestral knowledge.

My sophomore year I was hired at my schools diversity office as a diversity advocate. I was tasked with hosting events about various topics of diversity (but I always made sure Black and Queer topics were at the forefront lol). I definitely started questioning my identity as a cis woman around that time after being exposed to other genders and sexualities. After meeting my good friend in my junior year who identified as enby at the time, I was like whoa...yeah this is the one. I started to go by she/they and eventually now I am fully a they/them. This transition into my queer identity also coincided with my reflection on men I have had relationships with in college.

9) If you had queer and/or Lesbian friends growing up, how did you all find each other? Clothing, body language, club, sport, or something else?

Most of my queer family I have found within the last couple of years (ESPECIALLY during the pandemic). I found a lot of them online. I grew up on the internet and made a lot of internet friends since I went to a small school where the friend pool was very limited. I didn't find many people in real life who understood me or liked the same things I liked,so I turned towards the internet. Two of my closest friends I met on Discord when I was 15, and one of them happened to be transmasc today. Instagram is a very interesting app because people would just stumble upon a profile and start following them, and then a friendship would just bud from that. Eventually you'd meet up in person and actually solidify that relationship! I've also met a lot of cool people on the app Lex. It originally started as an app for lesbians but it broadened to general queer identities. I met some really cool people there that I hang out with! But also I've met many people through the nightlife scene. I love techno and consider myself a raver, so I go to a lot of Bushwick dance events (think of Bossa, Rash (rip), Trans Pecos, etc) and meet people through there. It's not necessarily the venues that attract queer people but the parties that are held there. I love going to specifically trans parties because I feel most at home there.

10) *Do you remember what your first exposure to Lesbianism was?

Probably my mom's best friend. She was always a presence in my life so I never really questioned women liking women ever.

11) *Around what year did you know you were a Lesbian and how did you arrive there?

I want to say I knew I was a lesbian during one of my last relationships I had with a cis man. We just finished hooking up and cuddling and he straight up came out to me. I was very supportive but confused cause I was like...so what just happened. But then as I was thinking more about who we were and who he was, I

was really focused on who I was. I was ruminating on why I liked him, or really any man that I had previously dated.

I came to the conclusion that I rarely loved a man and when I did, mustered up enough emotion to maintain that relationship. I loved the security I got in men, or at least thought I would get.

Many relationships fizzled out due to me not feeling loved or me feeling like I was mothering the relationship. I just wanted obsession and support. I realized my longest standing feelings for people they were always queer. The strongest heartaches were queer. The most humbling and confidence shattering ones were queer. All of my queer crushes and relationships were so powerful and I never gave them the time of day due to comphet. After taking a long break from relationships and sex, I realized I was lesbian in the gender AND sexuality terms of the word. Who I liked could never be cis or straight and who I was could not either.

- 12) Have clothing, jewelry, makeup, tattoos, piercings and any other body modifications or other forms of gendered expression assisted with affirming your identities or Lesbianism?

I have always considered my body modifications as an extension of my views on myself. I have many piercings and tattoos and it is a way to reclaim my body from society's grasp. As someone who is perceived and grew up as a female, I was expected to keep myself pretty and pure, which imagery did not include piercings, dyed hair, and tattoos. Destroying this expectation my body was subjected to is rejecting beauty standards. I consider myself beautiful, and it will never be in the future bride type way.

Clothing has always varied drastically. I have no androgynous clothes and either wear bodycon fashion Novaesqu dresses or thrifted men's pants and country flannel. My only insecurity about wearing traditionally women's clothing is that it subjects me to being she/her'd a lot. But I have a fine ass body and sometimes men's clothing don't do it justice.

- 13) *Do you believe in 'coming out'? Have you 'come out' multiple times before? Does the phrase 'coming-in' to your identity versus coming out resonate with you?

I say with extreme privilege that I do not believe in coming out. I recognize that many people do not have the luxury of just existing as their true self without disclosing those identities to others. I have been fortunate enough that I never came out. It helped that I was considered a weird child from the get. So I feel like anything I identified as would be considered on par for my being.

I've definitely had to explain my identities to people who didn't understand before, but I've always been fortunate enough to be in environments where it's not weird to be gay. Being non binary/ GNC is a different story. In most environments that are not explicitly queer, I am perceived as a cis woman. Even saying that makes me cringe. At work, even with my pronouns in my signature I am subjected to she/her pronouns. This is not a battle I want to fight since in many of the places I am still seen as a woman I truly do not care about how I'm perceived. At work I'm there to get a check and that's it baby.

14) * Did 'Lesbian' or 'Dyke' as an identity ever feel scary to you? If so, why? Lesbian was definitely a weird word for me to start using regularly. Growing up lesbianism was very sexualized so coming into that identity I didn't not want who I identified as to be considered an inherently sexualized lifestyle. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that but being a younger person that was not something I was comfortable having immediately thought of when I disclosed that. I love the word Dyke! I think it's so fun. Reclaiming that term is so fire. When I think of lesbian I think of very chill, vanilla lesbian person. A Dyke is a bad bitch who is into unconventional shit, does shit their own way and knows their way around a drill. I'm sure this means differently to different people but Imma Dyke because Imma bad bitch.

15) What were your first encounters with Lesbian sex both directly and indirectly? What attitudes did you have around it before and after the encounters?

My history is a mystery lol.

16) How have your views on marriage changed from before and after you've identified as a Lesbian? Both as an institution but also as a means of romantic unity?

At first I thought marriage was reserved for someone you spend years with, but within a few months of my current relationship we agreed to get married one day.

17) *Has your Lesbianism been influenced by theory or academics in any way? And if so, how?

One piece of literature that really resonated with me was Stone Butch Blues. Leslie Feinberg really gets it. Leslie's experience with gender was the first time I felt seen. Neither as man nor woman, more than what society could ever describe in words. After I read it I truly had an epiphany. I felt like crying, really. I was so floored by how much my experiences were validated and while I knew I was not the only one who felt like this, I felt very alone in my thoughts. To have someone say it so eloquently

and which such raw vulnerability was beautiful. I wish Leslie was alive so I could write a letter to Leslie.

- 18) *How do you negotiate your Lesbian identity in different spaces? Like to yourself, to other Queer people, to straight people, to your family, at work, and/or at school?

I am out in every space I inhabit sexuality wise. I am very open about having a queer partner but never delve into how they identify because it truly doesn't matter to anyone else. In terms of gender identity, I keep that under wraps at work. I don't bring it up because it opens up the awkward conversations around pronouns. People start to overcompensate and then get over apologetic when they mess up. Also there is still so much stigma around anything not cisgender. For the most part gay and lesbian identities are respected (in my experiences) but when trans identities are brought up it gets very uncomfortable. I have a coworker who saw my pronouns in my Instagram bio and uses them but I wish she wouldn't. It puts me in a position where I don't care to find myself at work.

Section 3: Influence of Marginal Identity on Lesbianism and Queerness

- 19) How does class inform your interactions with the Lesbian community?**

Not sure about this!

- 20) How does race inform your interactions with the Lesbian community?**

I love being a Black Lesbian. I remember the first text I read in my Intro to Gender Studies course (which I hated) was The Combahee River Collective Statement. I was so moved by it and how Black lesbians really considered themselves built different. At this point in my gender and sexuality journey I had considered myself cisgender and bisexual so the identity and it's importance had not made itself clear to me yet.

As I started to become more familiar with my identity I realized the stark differences between Lesbians. The experiences with Lesbianism as a Black person are so much more complex than what White Lesbians could even fathom (with the exception of my comrade Leslie Feinberg). Interacting with White lesbians has been very...uncomfortable. I dislike going to Lesbian events that are not specifically catered to Black lesbians because too often Lesbian spaces in NYC

are overwhelmingly white. I don't need to explain why a overwhelmingly white space is uncomfortable as a person of color, especially a Black person.

One notorious space I very rarely go to (and if I do, it's most likely in an act of masochism), is The Woods. Every Wednesday they hold probably one of the biggest regular spaces for Lesbians and other queer identities in the city. I dislike it greatly for how much White people show up. And the states you get when you walk in as one of the few Black people? Humiliating. It's as if you are a piece of meat. That stare that just makes you aware you are being fetishized to high hell. The "we saw you across the bar" stare. I also once heard a white person (who wasn't even giving Burch) call themselves a stud. I call it violently white for those reasons. White Lesbians also tend to fall into the corporate gay stereotype. Taylor Swift, Whoever that person with the undercut from Orange is the New Black (Ruby Rose?), and septums. Like....idk man. Lesbianism has always been more than that. Black Lesbianism is love and nurturing and freedom and a deeper feeling of belonging and connection to a queer spirituality instead of binaries defined by who knows who.

When I think of Black Lesbianism, I feel a warmth in my chest that I don't think can be replicated anywhere else. It feels like validation, love and freedom to exist. A feeling that transcends history, has been shared by our ancestors and will be passed on to our future selves.

21) How do you think race informs your gender identity?

Being Black American, I really don't have any connection to my ancestors pre enslavement. However from time to time I come across text points to a genderless, or gender queer society (compared to gender now) in many West African cultures. From matriarchal societies, to pronouns being near non-existent, there's history and modern nods to a genderqueer and fluidity in sexuality in our roots.

Within Black American culture, our relationship with gender is very interesting. I feel that in terms of gender nonconformity, it is very well respected and kind of considered a " oh that's just how she/he is". In terms of trans identities, it can be more nuanced in the reaction unfortunately. I don't think I will ever "come out" in terms of gender to my family. Only one cousin and my mom knows.

22) How does your gender identity inform your interactions with the Lesbian community? Can you talk a little about the complete lack of consideration of trans identities in the world and even within Lesbian community?

There is absolutely a disregard for trans identities within the lesbian community. From, like, everyone. Lesbianism has always been an amalgamation

of gender and sexuality, with probably the only qualification relating or having experience to in some way of the feminine experience. That doesn't mean that you currently identify as feminine, I hope you know what I mean! Regardless, there is a huge issue with transphobia in the lesbian community. I've noticed it especially more often about the term WLW and the whole thing about hating penises. WLW never sat right with me for multiple reasons. One, lesbianism at its core is not women who love women and it just feels like erasure and sanitization of the identity. I have been told it was to include bi women but Lesbian identity is more complex than sexuality alone. Another reason is that it just gives off TERF vibes considering not all Lesbians are women period. The hating penises thing is self explanatory considering there are Lesbians with penises. I never connected with cis lesbians because of these, also they're cis lol.

Section 4: Community-Based Questions

22) What's it like making and meeting Lesbians in your city now?

It's both easy and hard. Luckily there are a lot of events in NYC to make meeting other Lesbians easier but it's still a relatively small community (at least Black Lesbians who like to be on the streets) so you tend to see the same faces. I can imagine it is harder when you're sober or don't do nightlife. Too much of LGBT socialization is done in the bars which is both historically significant and modernly problematic with shifting views on alcohol and drugs.

23) Have you experienced or felt any isolation or disconnection from the broader Queer community?

Just from cis people!

24) Where and how do you find other Lesbians? (bars, online, dating apps, meeting halls, music venues, halls in supportive churches, etc.)?

I meet most of my Lesbian friends either in person at parties at clubs or online. Some good parties are Gush, Raw Honey, Body Hack, Out and Bad etc. Once you get into those you can find way more through DJs and hosts. I met a couple of friends through lex, a queer social app. There's a pretty active queer Black community on there that I am grateful for.

25) If you are in Lesbian spaces now, are you noticing any specific subcultures?

Not that I can think of.

26) What has it been like building Lesbian community during the beginning of the pandemic in 2020? Has there been any struggle building physical, in-person Lesbian communities during COVID-19?

I had a very traumatic beginning of the pandemic due to an accident and was shut in for around two years. I didn't really interact with anyone new, nor could I think about my identity.

27) What Lesbian spaces or communities, if any, are you involved in now?

I am part of the general queer nightlife scene but now a big name. I just know a lot of people! I'm just a vibe.

28) What Lesbian spaces or communities do you wish existed?

I wish there were more Black trans lesbian spaces. It's probably one of the smallest queer communities but I don't care! I wanna meet us all.

29) What does Lesbian community mean to you?

It means what Black Lesbian has meant to me. Freedom, Love, Belonging, Transcends Our Physical Form.

30) How are you making space for people whose marginalities you don't hold within your Lesbian community? For example Trans lesbians, Lesbians of color etc

How are people making space for me! I'm the marginality in question, lol.

31) What does Lesbian joy look like and feel to you?

Nature, sunshine, dancing, laughter, and fulfilling sex. :)

32) Is there anything you'd like to talk about before the end?

Thank you for doing this.