

On Selfhood: Young Lesbians Within the Margins
Oral History Project

The Reminiscences of
'S'

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with ‘S’ conducted by Olivia Newsome on November 19, 2022. This interview is part of the On Selfhood: Young Lesbians Within the Margins oral history project.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Olivia Newsome 00:00

ready?

Olivia Newsome 00:01

Okay, today is November 19, 2022. I'm Olivia Newsome. I'm interviewing 'S' here at my apartment in Brooklyn.

Olivia Newsome 00:09

Do I have permission to record this interview?

S 00:11

Yes.

Olivia Newsome 00:12

Do you know you can stop recording at any time?

S 00:15

Yes.

Olivia Newsome 00:16

Great. Can you say your name, age and pronouns?

S 00:21

Of course, my name is S for the purposes of this interview, I can't give you an age, but I can give you a range, which is 20 to 22 and my pronouns are she/they.

Olivia Newsome 00:32

How would you describe yourself?

S 00:34

Um, I am a South Asian lesbian, who is originally from the Midwest, Ohio to be specific, and I came to New York for my college education. And I hope to stay here for law school as well, which is what I want to do in the future. I want to be a lawyer.

Olivia Newsome 00:53

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

S 00:58

Yeah, sure. I grew up in Ohio, I grew up in central Ohio, in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. My childhood, I guess, was, you know, interesting, it definitely was a predominantly white town and a very kind of like Christian town at that, too. So the dynamics of that later on, when I realized I was gay was pretty interesting, because of kind of religious pressures that weren't my own religion.

Olivia Newsome 01:29

What religion was that?

S 01:32

My parents are Hindu. So, yeah, I don't identify as a Hindu and I am not particularly religious as well. But you know, being one of the few non Christian families in a predominantly Christian town, and a predominantly white town was really interesting, especially as a younger child. Um, but outside of that, I had a pretty complex relationship with my parents. So that really impacted my own home life growing up, especially as I

kind of grew older into my teens, and had to deal with some of those negative dynamics. But that was pretty much my childhood.

Olivia Newsome 02:09

What were those negative dynamics?

S 02:11

Um, I think for my mom, she let fear kind of determine a lot of her decision making. The way I immigrated into this country, I think, like, it'll come up a little later into the interview based on the questions that I pre-screened. But my mom and I immigrated to this country, and our visa status did not allow her to seek employment anywhere. So she was kind of delegated into this role of housewife, that I think now she convinces herself that she wanted but I think back then she just wasn't completely committed to the idea, or the lifestyle or what it really meant.

And my dad, he traveled a lot for work, she was basically a single parent when I was growing up. So a lot of those pressures, a lot of cultural pressures, I guess, and just like, kind of her own prejudices and understandings of parenthood and what it means to like parent, a child, kind of clashed with a lot of the ways that I saw my friends getting treated. She, you know, as someone who was very isolated, experienced a lot of like loneliness, and kind of dependent on me and my, my siblings, for a lot of her company, kind of put a really interesting strain on a relationship, especially as I kind of got older, wanted to do more things by myself and with my friends. There are definitely some like emotionally abusive aspects to it, which I think she's in a place now that she regrets and that she's vocalized to me, but you know, growing up, those were definitely the dynamics that were present. It took a long time for her to acknowledge those dynamics and kind of grow from there.

Olivia Newsome 04:03

How does it affect you now?

S 04:05

I think it just means that I've interestingly complex relationship with my parents like I there for like so many reasons, I'm not out to them, the predominant of which being like

they're not particularly not open-minded to their kids being gay, as open minded as they are to other people being gay. My best friend, when I was growing up, had two moms, my best friend in high school had two moms. All my friends in high school were gay, and they didn't care. But they really aren't the type of people to I think, support their gay child if their child were to be gay. So I'm not out to them. I think that's the biggest thing I think more than anything. It just my parents are just not somebody that I speak to, on a more than surface level.

Olivia Newsome 04:59

Did you like attending middle and high school?

S 05:03

I didn't hate it. I know a lot of people had really intense negative feelings with high school and middle school. I think middle school for me was just like, as awkward as like all middle school experiences are for sure, like racism definitely made it really, really bad in general. But outside of that I had pretty solid friends that I could rely on and a life that

S 05:29

I was pretty comfortable with. I don't have any regrets from high school and middle school, if one can have regrets when they were that young, but I genuinely a lot of my angst and fear and like disappointments as a teenager were not based in high school dynamics, but more so like, my family and town dynamics. I was like a pretty vocal political figure in my school. And that combined with my race and gender, kind of put a target on my back, which I guess is like the only real pivotal negative experience that I had in high school that I could say, it really affected the way that I act now. But otherwise, high school and middle school for me were just like, you know, periods of life where there was like, a lot of growth and change. And with that just came like a lot of like feelings, I guess, but not feelings that are negative, like I necessarily associate with pure negative memories.

Olivia Newsome 06:32

How did gender norms influence you growing up, especially growing up in a South Asian household?

S 06:40

I think for me, it was less than most South Asian people, most South Asian women. My dad grew up in a family of only boy children. And because of that, my grandmother who really wanted a daughter, and my grandfather, who also really wanted a daughter kind of were of the mindset that a daughter was a blessing and not a curse. And that's kind of the whole mindset that my entire family had had. My mom grew up in a family where there were no sons, it was just her and her sister. And so in terms of like expectations of higher education, career accomplishments, etc, etc, they were not really, you know, extremely gendered. There was no expectation that boys would do better in a career or that I wasn't intelligent, or that they didn't expect intelligence of me. I think what's interesting about my dynamics with gender, in my household was mostly just like future expectations, expectations of a marriage and have children and having to have the family in that traditional sense, which obviously, I don't want, since I am a lesbian.

Olivia Newsome 08:06

What about gender norms, that you faced just being a non man in the world? Excuse me, sorry,

S 08:17

I just burped. Um, I don't know, I try not to think about, like how gender impacts my day to day, because I feel like, I don't pay attention to it as much as I like pay attention to other things. Um, I guess, in the workplace, it's a lot more evident. I feel like I have to subdue myself as a personality, if that makes sense. I think a lot of like, racial expectations also kind of fall into that. Expectations of like, my ability to be confident or like a leader, or like intelligent or like well spoken, are interestingly, played out in the in a professional setting, in a school setting, or like in a personal setting. I don't really encounter it day to day simply because all of my friends are predominantly like black and brown lesbians. So, I don't really have much to say on that. And in terms of like, how gender roles really limit my day to day life. I think it's really only in a professional capacity that I kind of see that play out.

Olivia Newsome 09:23

Who or what influenced you the most growing up?

S 09:28

Influenced me in what way?

Olivia Newsome 09:30

You can talk about social media, you can talk about, 9/11, Obamacare.

S 09:37

Um, I think for me, as like a personality now. I think two events really like influenced the trajectory of my life. And that was like, the death of Michael Brown in 2014, which was like when I first kind of like engaged in politics on any level, and then the election of Donald Trump as a president in 2016. Which kind of led me to become an active political participant in as like a teenager, it also led me to the world of community organizing, and it also cemented kind of like, the career that I wanted to pursue. It was also in like, the framework of these events that I cultivated a lot of my online relationships, which is also like what eventually led me to, you know, identifying as a lesbian because as these online relationships kind of like, grew with time, a lot of people started coming into their own identities and because lesbianism I think, as a culture necessitates pull it like political prism, in some aspects. A lot of the people that I grew up with on the internet just became queer, or were lesbians. And so, yeah.

Olivia Newsome 10:56

How did class, race and gender influence you growing up? I know, that's a loaded question.

S 11:08

Um, class, race, and gender as like, intersecting identities is interesting to me. I think just because like, I grew up fairly middle class for most of my life. While my family did experience in poverty in the early years that we came to America, I mostly just remember kind of being in that like, middle middle class kind of background, we had a house in the suburbs, very nice suburbs, I went to a really good school, and a good school district surrounded by really, really rich people. And so that middle, middle class was just more emphasized. And then I came to New York, and I go to a pretty expensive school here that disproportionately accepts people in the top like 1% of the global distribution of

wealth. So like, that was further exacerbated. And then when I realized that I had to kind of be on my own financially, because of my own lack of desire to be solely supported by my parents, or even really supported by my parents, as like a main main thing. That kind of disparity in wealth only became more evident, because I really, like I work a minimum wage kind of job right now. And I live paycheck to paycheck pretty much. And I don't really have a support system, if something super bad happens, especially given COVID My family had to like my family really lost some of the financial stability that they had when I was like in high school. Um, I think it's interesting also, because a lot of the South Asian students that go to my school are from the West Coast, or are from New Jersey, and are incredibly wealthy. So their understandings of race and class and the performance or gender are like very intrinsically linked to that kind of like, wealthy performance as well, if that makes sense. Just like the I just feel a little like alienated from other South Asian students at my college, and in my immediate space just because of the disparity in where we grew up. Also, because I grew up in Ohio, which is certainly not an ethnic enclave. My dynamics with South Asian people are a little bit more critical than I think what other people are used to I don't tend to shy away from issues of class and specifically cast. So

Olivia Newsome 13:43

How did immigration affect you growing up? You mentioned your parents immigrated. And did you immigrate?

S 13:54

Yeah, I did. I immigrated here when I was two and a half, almost three years old. Um, and basically, that kind of affected my life in a in kind of, like, every way possible. I was a dependent. There were moments in my childhood and even in my young adulthood, where my visa status prevented me from traveling. It prevented me from getting a driver's license, it prevented me from scholarship opportunities. It prevented me from being considered as a domestic student. When I was applying to colleges, it prevented me from getting a job, especially as a teenager, when my parents were kind of like, at and when my parents were kind of at their worst in terms of like, emotional and like financial manipulation and abuse. I couldn't work a job I didn't have access to my own money. And that kind of exacerbated a lot of my own issues with my parents. I didn't get a green card until I was 19 years old. was almost 20 years old when I immigrated here when I was almost three years old. So that was like a 17 year difference of just, I mean, I was, in all intents and purposes, I was an American, just not in any official capacity. And I think that affected a lot of things I couldn't engage as much politically as I wanted to because of the limitations that I had. Protesting is something that still is very dangerous to me, even though I have a green card, I can't necessarily put myself in a place where I could

potentially be deported. And those are all things that I consider to this day. Those are things that my partner now considers she's also going to be doing this project, so yeah.

Olivia Newsome 15:44

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

S 15:53

I think different around me is like a really interesting question. My best friend in elementary school, my best friend in middle school, and my best friend in high school all had lesbian moms. So lesbianism was never really new to me, I kind of had, it was in my periphery ever since I was like seven years old. So I never really saw it as new. I never really saw being attracted to women as new. My parents kind of framed it as though it was a thing people chose to do, a lifestyle that people chose to have. And that's how I thought about it for a very long time until like, I was my own Cognizant person at like, 10 or 11 years old. And I was like, it's not really a choice. It's just who people are. And so I never really like, had this idea of different than those around me. I was also like, on some medications as a child that prevented me to like, from fully experiencing like, like, any type of attraction really as much as like a child can feel attraction, like a child and a teenager.

So like, I didn't realize I thought I was bisexual, when I like first experienced sexual attraction at like, 16-17 years old. And then I kind of moved into being a lesbian when I realized that like, being with a man in a heavily, like in a romantic, trusting context was just not something I felt comfortable or safe doing. I had to interrogate why I never felt comfortable or safe doing that. But yeah, I never really felt like it was different than anybody else around me, just because I'd seen it since I was so young, and it was pretty normalized. Well, my parents used unsavory language to describe it as like, a lifestyle of choice. They never said that it was abnormal. They just said it was something that people did. And yeah, it was just like, people do this. So it's, it's fine.

Olivia Newsome 17:46

What are your earliest interactions with queer spaces? Did you have gay or lesbian friends? And how did you find each other growing up?

S 17:56

Again, kind of accident, my best friend was really into like, the same book series that I was into. So that's how I met her. And then at the time, it was Percy Jackson. And so like, I just kind of like we were talking about that. And I saw a picture of her when she brought in a picture for show until family week or something. And I was like, how do you have two moms and she was like, I just do. And that was like, my first lesbian space ever. But I was like, in her parents house. And it's kind of like been my experience. My experience with lesbian spaces and my introduction to them have been like, deeply personal, it's like been people's houses, or it's been like people's tree houses, if that makes sense. Like, my friends have always been queer, even if they were straight at one point in our friendship. And I don't really know how I found them. They just kind of like appeared into my life. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Olivia Newsome 18:58

Do clothing, makeup, tattoos, piercings, or any forms of body modification or gender expression assisted with affirming your identities, or your lesbianism?

S 19:18

So hair is something that's super important in South Asian culture, especially like as a woman and so like something that's really helped me be more comfortable with my own self and helped me feel more in control. I guess of how I'm perceived to be has been like having short hair. I don't really see it as an expression of my gender identity. However, I think gender is a very nebulous context to me I'm non-binary by definition, but I really identify as kind of like this shifting androgyny. In certain days, I feel like being exceptionally feminine. If you were to ask me what my like personal style was in South Asian clothing, it would be like very like Indian princess bullshit like that. Which is like interesting just because I don't have the money necessarily to dress the way I want, which is like different than something else, I guess. But like, clothing to me has never really been affirming for my lesbianism or like my gender identity. It's not something that I seek affirmation through. I think for me, the only thing that helps affirm my identity is my hair and it's less so an affirmation of identity and more so an affirmation of my ability to choose who I am and how I present to the world. As for tattoos, I just like tattoos. I want like a lot of them. I like want my body to look like a botanist book. It's not necessarily like part of my gender sexual expression, though. Like I don't I think a lot of my gender and sexual expression is through my behaviors and not the way I behave.

Olivia Newsome 21:07

How do you behave?

S 21:08

I don't know. I just walk and talk like a lesbian. I don't know what like it's just like who I am.

Olivia Newsome 21:20

Have any forms of media helped you with your lesbian, like any at all? Movies, TV shows, books? It doesn't have to be gay media.

S 21:33

I know. I think for me, media was not how I identified myself as a lesbian or like how I came to my queerness I was how did you I was fortunate enough to have like a lot of like queer friends with queer parents. And I think I realized I was queer before, like, I knew there was a word. It was such a normalized subject for me that I didn't really seek affirmation or like, confirmation through artistic media. There's a lot of queer media that I enjoy personally that I've enjoyed for a long time. But I don't think media itself has been really seminal for my personal identification as a lesbian.

Olivia Newsome 22:15

Who was your first queer or gay crush? real or fictional?

S 22:19

Real or fictional? Okay, I'm gonna do both my first fictional gay crush, um, animated, was Princess Jasmine in the red outfit that Jafar forced her into. And then, actress, there's this Bollywood movie called 'Dhoom 2' and there's a Bollywood actress called Bipasha Basu. Her character in that movie was like this gunslinging femme fatale. And I was like, okay. And then in real life in real life, I don't know. I never really liked girls in high school like that. I had complicated relationship with the way white queer women and white queer non-men interacted with me vis-a-vis my sexuality. I felt a lot like I was just kind of like this mode of experimentation rather than someone that they could potentially see as like a romantic

partner, or like, a long term partner in any capacity. So I kind of distanced myself from white queers. My first human person crush was a boy in seventh grade, who I ended up having sexual relationships with later and lost my virginity to later [laughs] Um but queer crush, I think, has to like my first honest and true and like, I think, coming from a good place, crush has to be my girlfriend right now. I'm sorry.

Olivia Newsome 24:07

Have you ever struggled with your identities? Like did lesbian or dyke ever feel scary to you? As a personal identifier?

S 24:16

It never felt scary to me as a person identify again, because I was very fortunate. Yeah, adult lesbians and they were just absolutely kind and wonderful human beings. So to me, lesbians were never scary. lesbians were never intimidating. lesbians were always just my friend's parents who couldn't really cook and had very interesting questions about me being Indian, but it came from a very nice place. Um, so, you know, I don't I didn't really experience any like hesitancy in that way. I think a lot of my hesitancy came from the fact that like, I did not enjoy sex with men when I had sex with men. But I was coming at it from a very warped attitude. And I think it took me a long time for me to realize that. I think for me, the issue with identifying with a lesbian was really just like internalized compulsory heterosexuality. Just because it was so ingrained in me that like, I could love a man and a woman, or like a man ended on man, but like, never, I could only love on them. So I think that was my personal kind of struggle with identity for a little bit.

Olivia Newsome 25:34

What were your first encounters with lesbian sex? Both directly? And indirectly? What attitudes did you have around lesbian sex before and after you had it?

S 25:45

Um, indirectly. I obviously first saw it through like internet porn, like, tragically.

Olivia Newsome 25:54

Around when?

S 25:58

The way that I was introduced to porn when I was younger was really, really horrible. But to keep a long story short, a kid in my fourth grade class, made jokes about Harry Pickles and googling sex videos, because it was a board game. And I did that one night, I googled sex videos, because I thought it was just a board game about girls versus boys. And because that's my understanding of sex at that point, was just girls and boys. And then I saw porn for the first time. And I kind of like, was fascinated by it. Not in like a inherently like, not in a masturbatory way, because I was like, in fourth grade. But more so than like, What the fuck are these people doing and it just kind of evolved into a place by the time I was like, 12, I was just watching it to like, understand sex of any variety, which was like, probably really detrimental to my understanding of sex as a young child, but that's how I saw lesbians having sex for the first time. I never really sought it out. I just kind of showed up because it's a pretty popular porn category. And it looked very, like, you know, obviously staged as like, all porn is staged to an extent but like, feel like like lesbian porn was at the time, like, you know, 2013 was like, really interestingly, interestingly, like, executed. In real life, I had a series of semi-sexual encounters with [chuckles] queer women in high school. And they were very extractive. I didn't really come to them necessarily entirely on my own or, like organically on my end. And, like, long story short, like they never really like, touched me. So like, it was mostly just like me kind of like being projected as this like big, like, queer person, since I was like one of the few out queer people weren't men.

Olivia Newsome 28:04

Were these partners white?

S 28:06

Yeah, they were. I wouldn't even call them partners necessarily just because of how extractive

Olivia Newsome 28:12

Yeah. Were those encounters with white queer people? How do you think race played out?

S 28:19

I think it is so interesting, in the sense that like, especially as like lesbians, or like queer non-en, they like to pat themselves on the back to be like as like being inclusive and being radical. But obviously, like, while they would date other queer white non-men, I was just kind of like this, like, foray into like bisexuality or lesbianism. A lot of a lot of quote unquote, straight white girls would like, have their first encounters with me, and by a lot, I mean, like, one or two, but like, when I was like, 17, that's a lot. And in my town, that was a lot. So, yeah. So now, you know, I, to me, my first lesbian sex encounter was with my current partner. We came at it from a very interesting place. Um, I'm sure when my partner does her interview, she'll go more in depth with it, but she didn't have a great sexual history prior to when we met. [burps] Excuse me, so like there was a lot of there was a lot of turmoil on her end from that, before she could even really vocalize it. So when we had sex for the first time, we had told each other we wouldn't have sex until we like we're in love with each other. And so that's what we did. And I think for me, that was a great, first lesbian sexual experience, especially given how I was treated in the past. My partner is a black woman, by the way, just wanted to clarify that just because of the like, we were talking about how whiteness played a role with my sexual like encounters in high school and stuff like that my lesbian sexual encounters.

Olivia Newsome 30:18

How long into the relationship did it take for you guys to fall in love?

S 30:23

Um, we had started talking in the May after senior year -

Olivia Newsome 30:28

What year is that?

S 30:31

I don't think I can say because of the age range.

Olivia Newsome 30:35

Right, sorry.

S 30:35

It was after my senior year. But like around April, May. And we met in like a group chat. So we'd been talking for about five to six months before we came to our college campus. We went on a couple of dates. And then I think about a month after we had officialized, everything like three to four weeks was when I told her I loved her for the first time. And now we've been together for like, over three years.

Olivia Newsome 31:11

How have your views on marriage changed before and after you identified as a Lesbian?

S 31:18

I never wanted to get married. I like the idea of marrying a man to me, was like the ultimate forfeiting of my independence, my personhood, and like my own career ambitions and my ambitions as like a human being. And that like virtually like, like 180 degree change, when I realized that was a lesbian, especially with my like current partner. We talk about marriage all the time as something that we both want to do in the future. It's no longer something that feels suffocating or sacrificial. Just because I'm not going to marry a man. Especially as a South Asian woman, just seeing so many women lose their lives, both like metaphorically and like, not metaphorically, to their marriages. It just was something that I absolutely hated. But now I don't.

Olivia Newsome 32:12

Has your lesbianism been influenced by theory or academics in any way?

S 32:21

I think abstractly. So the way I associate lesbianism to political activism, I think is definitely theory based. And how we associate lesbianism to, you know, existing on the fringes of society. And what that implies for my solidarity with other marginalized groups is definitely informed academically. And theoretically, I think, though, in a personal way, a lot of my lesbianism has just been identified through my like, lived experiences.

Olivia Newsome 32:49

How do you negotiate your lesbian identity in different spaces, like to yourself to other queer people, family or school?

S 33:01

Um most of my friends are queer, I'm all out to them. I don't really have to negotiate that identity in those spaces. With my family. I'm just, I'm me, I don't hide the fact that I'm a lesbian, but I don't say if that makes sense. Like I don't subdue my physical presentation. I don't necessarily some do my behaviors, or my beliefs, ideologically, I don't subdue my support for the LGBTQ community, I don't subdue my like, anything, really, I just have not told them that I am a lesbian. And in that way, it's just not an identity that I vocalize to my family. At work, I tend not to vocalize it unless I know that I'm safe to do so. In the sense that there may be other queer people at my workplace. There are, you know, other people my age, who are queer, that I trust, et cetera, et cetera. And it's just something that never really comes up in an academic context unless it absolutely has to. Just because I'm not somebody that like being a lesbian is important to me. And it's important to me when I'm in community organizing spaces and like spaces that I'm comfortable in, but it's not something that I necessarily qualified to most people. It's just, you know, they can make their assumptions about me. And I'm not going to challenge those assumptions and not wanting to challenge them, simply because I am also like, pretty visibly queer, I guess. And so like, sometimes I don't need to come out and if it's a safe person to not come out to, then it's a fine situation. Other times it's not a safe situation and people make their assumptions and it is what it is. But negotiating my identity. If it's something that I can negotiate, if assumptions have already been placed on me it's not something that I necessarily choose to do frequently, especially in like professional academic spaces. It's just not something that I think it's important to like my job, or like, my schoolwork.

Olivia Newsome 35:23

How does class inform your interactions with the lesbian community?

S 35:34

I think in New York, a lot of a lot of the lesbian community that's like, you know, glamorized on social media is extremely wealthy, like, I just can't afford to, like, go out on the weekends and stuff. So ultimately, it informs the way I engage with my lesbian communities, which, at the end of the day, just ends up being me and my friends and my apartment or their apartment, and we're watching movies and getting drunk together, and in the safety and comfort of our own homes. It's at queer people of color's house parties, you know, their own events that they've thrown. I think for us, it's never been something that we can, like, you know, as someone who has some limitations on the money that they can spend, and also limitations on how they can interact with the queer community because of their other identities. Queer spaces, to me, have to be affordable and welcoming. And oftentimes, that's just my own home. Or the friends or my friends' homes. So that's pretty much it. Like I just don't have the money to go out drinking every weekend. And that's it, because like drinks cost an arm and a leg in the city.

Olivia Newsome 36:44

How does race inform your interactions with the lesbian community?

S 36:49

Kind of similarly, like, there's so many lesbian bars here, and I feel like none of them actually cater to lesbians of color as a whole population. And if they do, the lesbians of color that they're catering to have to be extremely palatable to white people. And by palatable I mean, like, either a ethnically ambiguous enough to be seen as universally attractive, or be palatable and their behaviors and attitudes to white queers. And I don't think either of those things. I don't think I'm ugly. But I am not ethnically ambiguously beautiful. I'm pretty ethnically forward [laughs] Yeah, like I just don't, I don't enjoy the bar scene. Mostly because of how wide it is. It feels like I step in with my, like, dark skinned black partner, my dark skinned black best friend, and it's just like, we're not even there. And if we are there, it's like the two or three other lesbians of color that notice us and it's like never fun to be in a crowded bar and have only two other people notice you or not even like notice in a superficial sense, but like acknowledge your personhood and your presence. Yeah, again, for me as a lesbian of color, my lesbian spaces are just often my own home and my friends homes.

Olivia Newsome 38:20

How does your gender identity inform your interactions with the lesbian community? Do you feel like maybe with the lesbian community as a whole there's like a lack of consideration for gender non conforming lesbians within your personal community and general broader communities?

S 38:39

Not within my personal community. My personal community is just made up with like a lot of like, gender nonconforming (GNC) non binary lesbians, trans-masc lesbians, trans-femme lesbians. So for me personally, it's not an issue. I'm sure in a broader sense, though, like that eraser can definitely play into the language that a lot of lesbians use the way spaces are advertised

Olivia Newsome 39:04

What language?

S 39:06

Specifically like excluding, basically, just like bio-essentialist language you know? Like making parties pussy themed or shit like that I know drives away like a lot of gender non-conforming and trans lesbians from lesbian spaces. But me personally, it's not an issue that I face in my personal circles just because of how diverse they are in terms of their gender makeup and their own like personal values. I guess they're not as like I said before, my personal circle is kind of almost exclusively like lesbians of color and I feel like that's provided me with a very forgiving community for a lot of things and not forgiving, just inclusive I guess forgiving was wrong.

Olivia Newsome 40:00

How do you think race informs your gender identity? And can you speak about the understanding of white androgynous, nonbinary queer as the only way to present as nonbinary?

S 40:17

Yeah, sure, I'm nonbinary, I don't tend to look androgynous all the time. And I'm not white at all. I think race influences my gender and in many ways, I have been masculinized my whole life. And while I am non binary, I am not someone that identifies as a mask lesbian or a butch lesbian. And while I think those identities are beautiful, and deserve to be loved, and deserve to be cherished, et cetera, et cetera, for me personally, when I get called a masculine lesbian or a butch lesbian simply because I exist with short hair, it could be it could be that I'm literally like wearing a dress and somebody will choose to only use they them pronouns with me when I introduced myself as having she they pronouns it's definitely interesting. I remember, my sophomore year, I had an interaction with a white professor who discovered that I use they/them pronouns somehow, and exclusively used they/them pronouns for me the whole year, despite my email tagline ending with she/her, since I don't use they pronouns in an academic or professional space, just to keep myself safe. It's just kind of like this constant kind of battle. I am non binary. I do like it when other specifically black and brown lesbians use they pronouns. For me, I think it's more of an acknowledgement of my non-binaryness rather than a masculinization of myself when I'm not consenting to that. Yeah, that's pretty much how race influences my gender.

Olivia Newsome 42:13

How does your immigrant status, your former immigrant status, or the immigrant status of your loved ones affect your ability to develop or engage with lesbian communities as a child?

S 42:24

I think it affected me heavily since I didn't have my green card. Um, I didn't have any safety or like financial independence to do the things I wanted to buy the things that I wanted. So that limited my consumption of like queer media, it limited the things that I could do in the place that I could go. I think now though, I just have to be careful with everything because I was not only like a legal immigrant dependent on my father, which meant that I couldn't out myself lest he disowned me and then I did deported. Um I think it's a lot more forgiving now that I have my green card is all I can say. I still have similar fears. But because I have my green card, and I'm no longer intrinsically linked to my family, and my family's acceptance of me. I'm a little bit more permitted to engage with my lesbianism in spaces, just because I'm not as afraid of what might happen if they found out and disowned me.

Olivia Newsome 43:29

What's it like making and meeting lesbians in your city now?

S 43:35

Oh, what do you mean?

Olivia Newsome 43:38

How did you make lesbian friends? How do you meet other lesbians in New York?

S 43:47

Mostly through my classes. I was fortunate enough to like, you know, take classes that are interesting to other lesbians of color. And that's kind of like how I meet queer people of color. And, you know, then I meet more queer people of color when I go to parties with some queer people of color. And it's kind of just kind of like, it's like when one domino falls, the rest fall for me personally. My partner is also lesbian of color, my best friend as a lesbian of color, all the spaces that we frequently, almost exclusively make friends with other lesbians of color because we make space for them. And so pretty much that's it like it's kind of like a game of telephone.

Olivia Newsome 44:30

Is it difficult?

S 44:31

I think it's very difficult because that's the way you have to make friends if you're lesbian of color, by like word of mouth, which can make it difficult if you're in a space where like, say stem (science, technology, engineering, and math) spaces where like, like women are hard to find period non-men are hard to find period, but even more so for like marginalized non-men who might be queer. I was fortunate enough, like the area of study that I'm in has quite a lot of queer people. Quite a lot of queer people of color, and I was

fortunate enough to meet them early on. And that's kind of how my lesbian community was informed.

Olivia Newsome 45:06

Have you felt any isolation or disconnection from the broader queer community? So spaces that are advertised as queer, but don't feel lesbian? Or maybe white lesbian spaces or cis lesbian spaces?

S 45:23

I think I may not be the person to answer this question, honestly. On a real acknowledgement level, yes. I feel isolated in the sense that I don't feel welcome there. On like a frank level, though, I don't care. At this point in my life, and I was a very different person, say like, even when I was 18 years old, and all I wanted to do was be in those spaces. But because of the pandemic, because of who and where I am at now with my own personal lesbian communities. It's not something that I care about, like this isolation from like these advertised queer spaces is not something I personally kind of beat myself up over, or like personally did like feel really dejected about, just because I know that I have built a really strong community of lesbians of color around me. And because they matter more to me than like these hypothetical queer spaces ever would.

Olivia Newsome 46:39

What was your first visit to a lesbian related place? Or that like, what did you expect to find? Did it fit your expectations? Or was it completely different and you can talk about different firsts as well to lesbian spaces, since you've been to quite a few.

S 46:59

My first lesbian space that I was introduced to was like a queer space, in general, I guess, was like a college queer club. And I went, and there were three people of color there, not including the person that I went with, who was also a person of color. And it was a group of about 50 or so students. Um, so you know, like, a lot of them were trans and non binary, I do have to say that, but like, almost all of them are white, which I think kind of like, that's like a common experience. I remember the first time I went to cubby hole with my white friend, my white lesbian friend, and my partner, and it was really white. It was really white.

Olivia Newsome 47:48

What did that feel like?

S 47:51

To me, it was funny, it felt funny. Like, I again, I personally don't prescribe a lot of personal like, feelings to feeling isolated in these spaces. Like, it's not something that I really take to heart, I guess. But it was just funny, because I was just going, I was just like, going to have a good time. And I did have a great time. But, you know, at the end of the day, it was just white people playing their white music and drinking their white drinks. Like I don't know what else to say. I really, truly didn't feel like I enjoyed my time there any less, because I was just kind of there to enjoy myself. And I think I did. I just was like, noting the fact that I think my partner and I were one of like four or five people in this crowded bar.

Olivia Newsome 48:43

What other lesbian spaces have you been to?

S 48:53

Um, I recently visited the LHA (Lesbian Herstory Archives), which is kind of like it's a more academic space, but it's also a very much more community oriented space. That's free from like, kind of substance, substances like alcohol, drugs, etc. which was a very, very interesting experience. I really enjoyed my time there. And it was just a place where I felt a lot of connection to lesbians of the past, I got a chance to see the Urvashi wav files and she's like a personal hero, just like a really cool person. And South Asian lesbian, who is also not gender conforming. Um, so it was really, really fun. But again, like, I kind of classify those spaces differently than, say, like, traditionally, recreational spaces are the spaces that are marketed more towards lesbians than as like a space to spend their free time in. I think there's a problem in the queer community. Have over reliance on like, club and bar scenes just because of how substance abuse is a problem in our communities. Like addiction is a pervasive problem everywhere. But I think especially when the only queer spaces that are advertised to you are like clubs and bars, it's very, it's very difficult to let go of that kind of culture of consumption in order to feel belonging. But the lesbian Herstory archive was just definitely one of those spaces that like, was built to foster community, through connection history through connection to community, presently and otherwise. And it was one of those spaces where like, they truly were inclusive. It wasn't kind of like this shroud of inclusivity that just kind of fell away, the minute you stepped in. It was it was a great place.

Olivia Newsome 50:58

What has it been, like building lesbian community in 2020? We were at the beginning of a pandemic, and has there been any struggle, not just you personally, but do you feel like there's any struggle with lesbians to build community during COVID-19, but also just young lesbians in general struggling to build physical in person communities?

S 51:24

[burps] Excuse me, but I think, you know, 2020 was like a rough time for everybody. The dissolution of my, like, closest friendship, like really impacted me. And so making friends was really difficult for me personally, at the time, I just wasn't in a headspace to want to make friends and like, especially because of quarantine, and online classes. And all of those things, I just wasn't in his headspace to like, want to break those things either. Just because I'm someone who's very passionate about public health and such forth, and being safe. And hopefully fostering a culture that is accessible to all. Um, so, lesbian community formation was just like, completely out of my mind, at the time, my lesbian community was just my partner, whom I lived with at the time. And then, you know, kind of slowly but surely, it kind of just kind of incidentally came together. I met my best friend this summer, the spring of 2021. Um, through a class that we shared, and, you know, experiences like that was really where I started building my lesbian community, my closest lesbian friends of color now are people that either I've had class with, or my partner has had classes with, that we've just reached out to via social media, or we've seen so the school was a real site of making and meeting other lesbians of color for me, definitely. And for my partner, definitely, just because, you know, we were students. It was like, where we spent most of our time outside of our jobs. And at the time, our jobs were not particularly queer, nor were they like, a place that we felt comfortable to socialize. They were just where we worked.

Olivia Newsome 53:12

What do you think about this idea that young lesbians are not building any physical, in person communities, maybe the ones that used to exist?

S 53:28

I think online communities can be very powerful. I do want to say that like a lot of my South Asian queer community is completely based online or from a multitude of places, varying from different places in South Asian places like Texas, California, Ohio, Chicago, and places like that. So an online community can be just as fulfilling. Yeah, I just want to preface with that. I think now, though the Lesbian tradition of community organization, which I want to say is different than just simply having a community of people around you, has been diluted. I see lesbians of color carrying the torch splendidly, I think, white lesbians who can afford not to care anymore, just haven't. I feel like there was a very real fight for equal rights in the say, 80s, 90s, early 2000s, because of the way legal systems did not recognize lesbian marriage, lesbian love, et cetera, et cetera.

But because white lesbians are now in a position where they're lesbianism is not as much of an oppressive presence in their life, that they feel as though they don't need to foster community ties that are protective against oppression is very present in the way that they interact with other lesbians in the sense that they A lot of it is based again in this like culture of going out to bars and clubs that have been historically inaccessible to people of color historically unwelcoming to people of color. Again, online spaces can be wonderful to cultivate. I can't tell you how many times my online organizational communities have helped queer South Asian people raise enough money to escape an abusive household, or, you know, avoid being homeless after being disowned for being outed. But I do think that there's a real lack of community organization amongst the most privileged classes of lesbians across the country, but especially in New York City, it's kind of more superficial, I think now.

Olivia Newsome 55:53

What does lesbian community mean to you? How do you figure community it'd be outside of bars and clubs?

S 56:08

Like to me it's just being comfortable in others with others in my space and in their space. As lesbians of color we have to foster our own spaces very often. And I know that's something that I do, my partner does, my friend does investment in. We figure community as a place where we create or that we are invited into where we can support and uplift other lesbians and for us, that's more specifically lesbians of color. Lesbians of color, disabled lesbians, trans lesbians, lesbians who are otherwise removed or others in traditional lesbian spaces. That's pretty much it. Like I don't necessarily think that lesbian community is having a group of people you go out with every weekend. I think it's a group

of people that you can call if you have a problem. Serious feeling a lack of direction. It's a set of people that you can invite into your home for a fucking movie night every Friday. Or like just dinner for butternut squash soup one day, just because you found a really good butternut squash.

Olivia Newsome 57:46

That soup was good.

S 57:47

That was good soup, wasn't it! But that's what I mean, to me. Lesbian communities just like I guess family that you feel comfortable with.

Olivia Newsome 57:57

What lesbian spaces are communities do you wish existed?

S 58:05

I think it would be cool for like I really want to bring back like and not to like, because I just went on a tirade against like bars and shit. I think like those underground like lesbian clubs, dancing, like bars, things like that, that catered almost exclusively to lesbians of color. I wish those like, came back and accessed I used to work at the Schomburg and I used to see a lot of these like flyers for these, like queer parties that were just held every weekend in a different location or the other. And I think that's such a cool concept. Again, it is again, like you know, not it's not the most accessible spaces and it's not the most I think healthy space, but I think it's just like a space that has such a tremendous potential to be I think having coffee shops bookshops in more access, I think having like, fucking game rooms, where you can play like video games, or tabletop games or something like that. Libraries, just like more spaces for queer youth that don't involve sex or drinking or drugs. Like spaces that are you know, accessible to people who are physically disabled to people who might not be physically disabled or disabled. Otherwise. Those are the spaces that I kind of fantasize about. And I guess like, ideally, like, these spaces would exist in excess, but they obviously don't. We kind of have to make them but when we do make them they're fun, like, you know, they're fun. What does lesbian Joy mean to you?

S 1:00:01

I don't know. I really don't know. I think like lesbian joy just kind of means existing. I don't think lesbian resistance means just existing; that's not what I mean. I think lesbian joy just kind of like is existence with comfort, and existence with other lesbians, existence with just like safety. I guess I think being a lesbian is the safest thing I've ever been and I think that's what joy means to me. I think no one else can say that.

Olivia Newsome 1:00:45

Thank you so much.