

Existing in Lesbian Present: An Interview with Olivia Newsome on her Lesbian Oral History Thesis Project [Transcription]

Maia [00:00:00] I'm here with Olivia and I will be interviewing her about her lesbian oral history project, which she is doing as her thesis for her MFA in Public Archives and Special Collections. Alright, so I'm going to ask you some questions about your personal background first, and then we'll move into the next set of questions. So how did you come into your lesbian identity?

Olivia [00:00:25] So this is kind of a funny story. When I was 11, my mom was like, "Olivia, I think you're a lesbian." Don't really know what I did for her to think that. Um, and I didn't know what a lesbian meant. So I kind of just like threw that away in the brain prison and just locked it away. And I was like, that, "It really has nothing to do with me. I'm 11. I don't know what a lesbian is."

Maia [00:00:49] Right.

Olivia [00:00:50] And then, I was going through life. And then, I think at like 13, I realized that I was like bisexual. I was like, "Yeah, I'm bisexual. Like 80/20, you know."

Maia [00:01:03] In favor of men or women?

Olivia [00:01:04] Oh, women.

Maia [00:01:05] Okay.

Olivia [00:01:06] And I was like "The way that you are. And I would never marry a man because that's gross, but bisexual— love men."

Maia [00:01:12] Got it.

Olivia [00:01:13] And then I was living through my life. And— okay, let me first say, I know that bisexuality is not a transitory identity, but it was all I felt comfortable with at the moment, mostly because I didn't really know what lesbianism was.

Maia [00:01:28] That's okay.

Olivia [00:01:29] There were no out lesbians in my area. I think I was one of two out queer people in general at my school. Um, yeah. And then, I made two wonderful friends who were lesbians of color who were kind of my "lesbian life doulas." And you know, you all sat me down and talked me through my likes and dislikes and were like, "You're actually... you're actually a dyke, a big old dyke-y." And I was like, "Yeah." And nothing has ever felt better than that.

Maia [00:02:02] Aw, that's great! Okay, so the next question is: how do you define your own lesbian identity?

Olivia [00:02:12] Hm, I would say that my lesbianism is really shaped by um, I don't know like the current moment. And I define lesbianism as a non-man who is attracted to other people who don't identify as men. [And] my form of lesbianism includes gender non-conforming people, and um, non-binary people, and trans people. And that's really the only way I've ever known how to be a lesbian. I never knew any other way. Um, yeah. And it's one of the places where I've actually found community. It's one of the places that I've felt have been the most freeing and the most accepting and some of the best places I've found where I can truly show all parts of my selves without any negative judgment.

Maia [00:02:59] [clears throat] Okay, great! Thank you. So how has your history in academia and your personal experience led to the conception of this project?

Olivia [00:03:10] Huge, big, giant question! So I would say that... a lot of my undergraduate career was focused on marginalized histories and histories of the oppressed. Focused on Atlantic history, Black history, women's and queers' histories. And I really found myself or like found my

footing in Black women's literature and intellectual history from the 19th and 20th centuries. That's when I really had that "Aha!" moment of recognition where I saw myself in those pages. And as I continued to grow within my own um, identity, and even within my own academic background, I engaged more with queer theories and disability justice theories outside of the classroom. So academic — in school — focused mostly on Black history, Black women's history, histories of the oppressed. And then outside of school, I focused mostly on queer theory and disability justice— light on the queer theory, it makes me sad. And um, all those backgrounds were heavily involved in Black feminist theory and um, gaining disability justice awareness has led me really to the conception of this project overall. So that's kind of what led me to this project. Like, I've— I've always been rolling this ball, focusing on marginalized histories. And a lot of the time, growing up Black in the South, in a majority-white school, you're really made to feel like your histories don't exist and don't matter.

Maia [00:04:51] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:04:52] Or they're just histories of suffering and anguish. And I often felt really disconnected from my own histories. And I knew that in my work as a librarian or my work as an archivist or — I wanted to be a teacher for longer than I wanted to be a librarian or an archivist — that I wanted to highlight stories of resilience, um, of personhood and of culture. Right? Not just in spite or in response, but just people who lived nuanced, creative, innovative lives. Um, not— not "because of" but just "of," if that makes sense. And I really wanted people to feel empowered and connected to their own histories. And while I was coming into my lesbianism, I really wanted younger lesbians to feel connected to a lesbian past and their current lesbian moment, and then think about a future and what community meant to them. And I wanted to highlight multiply-marginalized lesbians who felt excluded from lesbian pasts. You know, they would look at famous lesbians or lesbian groups or lesbian movements and only see white, cis lesbians— white, cis, straight-sized able-bodied lesbians. And I wanted people to feel like— to have an understanding of a past that included them and did include them — not saying that it didn't — but I wanted them to feel connected to their past by thinking about themselves and their own perspectives. And I wanted there to be a moment where they could literally add themselves into um, the historical narrative like they talk about themselves, what makes them happy, what inspires them.

Maia [00:06:42] Right.

Olivia [00:06:42] And I really wanted to create a history of the present where I-I'm not necessarily crafting a historical narrative in the sense where I'm like putting pen to paper or writing like a thesis or an argument, but there's definitely a throughline. Um, even within all of these disparate marginalities there is a through line that I think um, will be evident when all of the um, oral histories are published. And I wanted people to feel connected to a lesbian past that wasn't so far in the past while thinking about their current moment. That was really important to me.

Maia [00:07:18] Wow, thank you! You really painted a very clear picture in describing all of that. Um, so my next question is what other archivists, academics, theorists, historians, etc. have inspired you and why?

Olivia [00:07:35] I'm really going to go into my mind palace for this question— a lot. Um, I think I'm going to start with Black feminist writers because I have to say those have really been the undercurrent, or they were my like academic genesis. So I would say people like Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, um, Maria Stewart, Octavia Butler. Um, those are like historical figures from the 19th and 20th century that I really appreciate. And then for historians, I would say I really love Saidiya Hartman, Jennifer Morgan, and Grace Cho. Saidiya Hartman coined this term called "critical fabulation" that was really, really, really critical to me um, as an archivist and as a les-brarian-in-training. I really wanted to think about, "Okay, we understand that there's archival silences, we understand that archives are a sliver of a sliver. How can we surface histories of the marginalized?" And Saidiya Hartman was like "Well, doing what our ancestors have done for years, for decades, for centuries." It's a sense of fiction where you are thinking critically and fabulating or fabricating histories of what could have been. And I'm- and I- and I really want to think about that in my processing work and my work as a librarian. And so critical fabulation, creating histories of the oppressed, thinking creatively about history-writing and history-making in archives, and the process— like the history as a process.

Maia [00:09:19] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:09:19] Um, [Maia coughs] is really important to me. And for disabled oracles, I have so, so many. So Sami Schalk, Patty Berne, Stacy Park Milbern, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Eli Clare, Alice Wong, Leroy Moore, Alison Kafer, and Mia Mingus— all the people of Sins Invalid. These are disability justice activists, uh DJ activists. Um, most of them are people of color, queer people of color. That's what disability justice was um, a movement for queer people and people of color who felt excluded from disability rights. And they legitimately taught me how to live a Black, disabled queer life. You know, like, I-I see their books out and their wisdom out. Maybe I'm having a meltdown. Maybe I'm stuck in bed. I'm in overload. Or I'm just feeling shitty. Like I-I-I truly go towards their texts for guidance and-and comfort um, during really hard times. Always. Always. For archivists. Um,. I would say I think of people like Michelle Caswell and her thoughts about radical empathy and bringing in Black feminist and feminist thought to the archives. I think about Dorothy Berry in "The House the Archives Built." Um, and the work that Dorothy Berry does with reparative description. I actually got to speak to her and she's wonderful. And Gracen Brilmeyer. They apply disability justice and disability theory to um, archival theory. And they created a critical disability archival methodology that I really appreciate, and that grounds a lot of my work when I'm thinking about process— when I'm thinking about showing the fullness of someone's life and someone's experience using the complex embodiment theory. Um, to ground my work and it really inspired my Multiple Marginality Project is. I'm not...I'm not trying to highlight — like this isn't the oppression Olympics. Like I'm not highlighting the most marginalized. Or when I say multiply-marginalized, what's important to me is that people with our backgrounds and our identities feel empowered to tell their own stories. Right? And these are parts of their lives but it's not all of their lives. And I wanted to make sure that I was displaying a complex, nuanced history of their-of themselves. And so the questions that I created, I tried to make sure I was highlighting a fullness and not an absence. Right? But I wasn't highlighting a lack, of something that they didn't have. Like because of marginality, you don't have this. That's not what I was doing with the questions. I just wanted people to talk about— I just wanted people to talk.

Maia [00:12:24] Right.

Olivia [00:12:25] And I tried to frame the questions in a way where they could highlight— not like it's all happy all the time, but just highlight things that were there versus things that were missing. Um, I feel like when people talk about the history of the marginalized, sometimes they can do that, especially past histories of the marginalized or faced a lot of lack and a lot on deficit. And I learned um, how to do that and how to think like that from disability justice, activist writers and thinkers. I owe them so much. And um, I think everyone that I talked about so far, they're all products of hundreds of years of activism and fighting of people who, you know, fight the good fight. Right. All of our collective ancestors, and I don't mean like genealogy, blood-related, but I mean our multiply— ancestors or our marginalized ancestors who have been fighting for not just recognition, but fighting for survival. I'm thinking about Leah Lakshmi's new book, "The Future Is Disabled," and I'm listening to them narrate their own book right now. And in the introduction, they talk a lot about books being your community. Like as-like as someone who's disabled, your books being your community, being your friends, and readings being the thing that you find solace in and comfort in when you had none. And that's what I wanted to create. I wanted to put people in conversation with each other. I wanted to make a built community. Right? Something very intentional. I wanted people to feel connected. And I wanted to connect people from all over the world to each other because, I don't know, like most smart, multiple marginalized lesbians, they only got one other person, and two other people, which is still a community. But I wanted there to be more. And to be completely honest, I am very new to this community thing. I've never been able to maintain lots of friends. And I've never been able to maintain or keep friends. I think I have had like one or two friends at a time, Max. And I didn't know that I could want for more, that that was all I was capable of or all I could do are all I deserved. Um, and all of the books and articles and people and all their multiple works that I talked about earlier. They were my friends and they were genuinely my first community, and. I really can't think about anything that's mattered to me or that I, I owe my life to them genuinely. So, yeah.

Maia [00:15:13] Thank you. I-Speaking of community, um, I wanted to ask, how have you found and forged a lesbian community, especially as you speak about this being a recent thing for you?

What are the tenants of this community that are the most important to you? And what part of this journey has been the most difficult for you?

Olivia [00:15:35] So I would say my lesbian community, it started online. Um, I would-I followed a lot of lesbians. Multiply-marginalized lesbians. I was listening to their experiences, listening to them talk. And even though they didn't know me. And they don't know me and I wasn't, commenting, I wasn't super active. I watched every single one of their videos. I watched every single thing that they ever did. I listened and read every single article or blog post or Instagram monologue in a comment or caption that they did. And I watched it. And then my in-person lesbian community started with one person. It was one friend, and then that friend had a girlfriend. And then we met and I can't remember [laughs] how we became such close friends, but I really couldn't-I know I couldn't have done it without them. And my lesbian community is Black. It's full of people of color. Gender nonconforming and non-binary lesbians. Trans lesbians. Disabled and neurodivergent lesbians. Um, we listen to each other. We help each other. We support each other. My lesbian community is sensory-friendly. Ya know... ambient lights, chemical sensitivities, food, and textures. We're not going to bars. We're not going out to restaurants. We're sitting on the floor wrapped in blankets, watching a movie. Talking about our lives. Shit, maybe we're just doing parallel-play and we're, you know writing papers together in each other's presence. Maybe we're where we're sending the same \$20 around on Venmo to pay for GrubHub because none of us had enough spoons to go to the grocery store to get food. Maybe we're sending each other money to get a shirt that we really want because our paycheck won't come for another three days and we have a -\$13 balance [laughs] in our checking account. [Laughs] It's brunches. It's getting day drunk on a Thursday. It's getting night drunk on a Thursday.

Maia [00:18:01] [Laughs].

Olivia [00:18:01] I don't know. Sometimes we fight. A lot of the times, we laugh. Sometimes we cry. But I have truly never felt as accepted and loved by my lesbian community. I made it— it was really intentional. I wasn't like thinking about forming an intentional lesbian community of marginalized lesbians on purpose. I think if you are talking about these things and you are someone— the community is very small, and it only gets smaller. And I think if you are someone who is talking about things, people will talk about you and be willing to be friends with you. And you know, you make one friend, and then they bring their one friend, and then they bring their one friend and then all the friends get into one space. And then fuck, that's like 20 bitches.

Maia [00:18:58] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:18:58] In someone's apartment watching "Shrek 2".

Maia [00:19:03] [Laughs].

Olivia [00:19:03] And that's how it happens. Um, I don't know. Like, I-I really think about being visible and thinking about places to be visible. And I understand that, for some lesbians, visibility is not possible for them in the same way it is for me. I have many protections. Um, I am straight-size, I'm class-advantaged, I have job security, and my workplace is a place where I know that my lesbianism or my being visibly out is not something that would be a detriment to making money and... I don't know— staying safe. And so I think about ways that I can be visible in spaces where other people feel comfortable reaching out to me. Um, so one way I did that was maybe I have a lesbian pin on or I— [laughs] funny, I met-I met, oh my gosh, like a separate, smaller community, a little enclave of, like, lesbians and like weirdo-queers because I had a DND sticker. I had a D-20 Dungeons and Dragons sticker. It was pink and sparkly on my old laptop case because I love playing Dungeons and Dragons and there's lots of weirdo-queers and lesbians who play Dungeons and Dragons, too. And someone saw the sticker in class and then we became best friends, and then they had a Black lesbian partner, and then we became best friends, and then they knew other Black lesbians. And I really think that's how it works. And I don't think that's something everyone can do safely or comfortably. I'm very privileged and very blessed to be in New York City with a job where I honestly work with mostly queer- queer non-men um, and also, lesbians for work. So I can do this safely, um, without fear of retribution, like getting fired or workplace hostility. And another thing about like forming community is thinking about how we can support each other within our means at the time. You know? A lot of the times I'll be having a

really shitty day and so maybe I'll have a seven-hour FaceTime with [laughs] two of my best friends. And I think that's an example of lesbian community. I don't know how many cover letters, resumés, or job applications I've read for dykes. It's been a lot of them. And I think that's a form of community building. Maybe we're talking about our childhood for the eighth time. And it's the same story, but I learn something different every time. And I think that's a part of community. I don't know. Like, maybe we're going to watch the same movie that we've all seen 17 times. Like tomorrow we're going to watch "How to Train Your Dragon" because it's the movie I would like to watch. And to me, community is fuzzy socks. It's warm soups. It's sitting on the floor. It's seven Squishmallows. It's noise canceling headphones with some of my favorite people in the whole, wide world. Like the lesbian spaces that I've tried to curate and that we've all tried to curate are really personal. They're personal. And I think that's what makes them super cool is that they're centered around our apartments, they're centered around our comfort things from our childhood. They're centered around accessible spaces. Like maybe we go to the person. Whose apartment isn't a 5-floor walk-up. Maybe we go to someone whose apartment has a door wide enough for a rollator. Ambient lights only. Food is approved beforehand. All stim toys and stimming is acceptable for whatever you want. And I think that's. Really important to me. Like lesbians or who have more, you just fucking do it. It doesn't-it's not a question. It just happens. Like if we split brunch 90/10. One person pays for [laughs] 90% of it and the other person will get it later. It's never that deep. And I think the fact that in our communities, it's-it's an understood of course, and that's something people have to ask for is really important. Like, I think there's so many— a lot of multiply-marginalized people and non-men have really struggled asking for help and asking for-and asking for accommodations where I wanted to make a space where we would anticipate each other's needs and we wouldn't have to ask. Maybe, maybe you don't have to ask and you just let people know. You're like the closest accessible ride stop is here, but it sucks. And you know, the elevator is always out on this side so take the other side. And I know that maybe you don't get paid for another three days so dinner is on me. Or my birthday party is at this location in my apartment and you don't really have to get me anything. Or, you know, I have finals coming up, but I don't really have a way even where I can support you in person. But I would love to sit on a face time with you, one where we just sit in each other's presence together. Sometimes I feel like other lesbian communities are hostile to people of color. They're hostile to disabled people, people who have different access needs. Um, and I didn't want to do that because that's part of the reason why I didn't really have community or friends. I couldn't I, I couldn't, number one, and didn't want to. I can't sit at a dinner table every week for 3 hours. I can't go to Cubbyhole. It's fucking small. I don't want to get COVID and it's sensory hell, it's tiny and I don't really like them and it's like sweaty white queers and they don't really talk to you. And anyways, I don't really like them. And I wanted-I didn't want a center like my community purely around substances and I didn't want to center my lesbian friends and community around always going out and pressures to party and spend a lot of money. And I wanted it to, I wanted to really have connection. I wanted to really have friends that I feel like are extensions, like we're all extensions of each other, you know? Like I don't have to think about— I'm really blessed where I don't have to think about if something happened and I needed to get support in the city who would I call I can was like eight people and I think everyone in my circle can list the same eight people because we would all do that for each other. All of us would. I'm going to cry, but I won't. But I think that's. I think that's really important. And I've never, ever had this happen before in my whole life. And sometimes, we'll like, take on a new lesbian, and then they'll be like, "Are you sure? This is okay? Can I really just come over and watch- watch a movie on the floor? Are you sure? I won't be a bother if I ask you to turn off the lights or maybe turn off the AC because the buzz is bothering me? Or maybe you'll have to carry me up three flights of stairs?" And of— it's never a bother. And I think that moment is really important to someone or when they look at it and like. Wow, you really all are dykes of color. Yeah! It just happened. It didn't just happen. As I just explained, it took a lot of intentionality. But not like intentionality as in we like wrote shit down and then planned it like that. But it's just it was just a given. It was an. Understood. This is what would happen. This is who we were talking about just really meant to attract. And this is how we make people stay. Because people can tell when a space is fake. You know, we're not like playing Pokemon, like collect them all. It's just [pauses, sighs] it's just sometimes the people that you need to be around are people who are like you in some way. And sometimes that's the safest. And I don't mean like we're both Black. I mean that we are both dykes who think the same way. About access and the world and care and love and friendship. And I think that's what really matters.

Maia [00:28:08] Thank you. So I'm going to be moving into the next part of the questions, which is about the project and background and the planning portion of it. You've touched on some of the elements of this question already, like, but I'm just going to be trying to like ask you more details for you to explain some things a little bit more in-depth. So how did you conceive of the idea for this project? What were your inspirations?

Olivia [00:28:42] So at the beginning, I was thinking about doing um, Black lesbian lesson planning with primary source materials at um, the Lesbian Herstory Archives. But then I was planning the lessons, and then I was getting to the last lesson, and I wanted to do um, a community building event where people would be able to put themselves into the archives and we would process them together. And I was getting so excited putting that together and thinking about what it can mean. And I was like, "Why don't I just make this my whole project?" Then I was like, "Oh my God, who do I focus on? What do I focus on? What do I do? Can I even do this? Is this allowed?" [Laughs] "Like, what am I supposed to be doing?" Like, I don't want to create my own archive. Not necessarily. I want to still be in conversation with other lesbians. But then how do I do that? And so I spoke with Maxine Wolfe and Flavia Rando, and they were really great with talking to me about my process and my ideas. And I started developing a history-collecting project around lesbians. Young lesbians. At first, it was just going to be young lesbians um, in the city. And then I was thinking of people I could talk about. I was like, these are all multiply-marginalized dykes. I don't really know any other [laughs] lesbians. And at first, I was going to my friends and I was like, well, if it's just going to be multiply-marginalized lesbians, I should just make the project around multiply-marginalized lesbians. And then I thought about, okay, it needs to be more specific than that. I want to have an angle. I wanted to talk about something that I didn't think was being talked about. I wanted it to be something that I think people could talk a lot about and be excited about sharing. And I didn't know, I was thinking about myself and my own conversation with my lesbian community. And as a Black lesbian, as a disabled lesbian so much of my life was centered around trying to find space. Like, what is my space? Where do I find people like me? Where I can find a community like me? And I was thinking about how multiply-marginalized people the way that we form community is different from dominant narratives about community building. And I was thinking about the really innovative really, I don't know, really cool ways that my friends and people that I've seen online were forming community. You know, really niche hyper-specific communities that maybe they don't translate. Does rolling around on the floor watching DnD, stimming under star lights is that a translatable community experience to everyone? No, but that's not what I was trying to capture. I didn't want to like I wanted to capture the- the innovative ways people who are multiply-marginalized were thinking about communities. And I didn't want it to be palatable. I didn't necessarily want it to be understandable to people outside of our group. I wasn't and am not making this project for other people to understand us. I'm not a fucking anthropologist, you know, this is a project for us to understand each other and to meet each other, right? So if we're going to say if-if we're going to say shit like starlights or if we're going to talk about specific TikTok niches or specific experiences on 2015 Tumblr and you don't know what's going on, then I want you to know that this project was not for you and it might not ever be for you. And my first community are the people who are in this project and people like them who weren't in the project for whatever reason. And you are an outsider. Who is being allowed to look in and you should be doing so graciously. And I mean that. Like I'm not- I didn't do this project so that seven stuffy white cis straight academics can like give me a check on my thesis. I can write a paper, I can write a thesis. I chose not to do those things because I didn't care. I wanted to do something that matters. I felt so completely indebted to my lesbian community for changing my life, and I was like, I want people to have similar, the same, or document their own transformative. Experiences with their lesbianism. And what it means to be multiply-marginalized. So that's really how I came up with it and why I'm doing it.

Maia [00:33:36] Thank you. So I want to ask you what the plot— planning proj—process for this project was like. What parameters came to mind immediately? What parameters came later? How did you lay out the process for this project? If you could just walk us through that.

Olivia [00:33:54] Process, process, process. Alright. I actually love planning. I think it's really fun. I'm autistic. I like planning, I like lists, I like scheduling. That was the most exciting part to me. I was like, Oh my gosh, I get to make a Google form. I love Google Forms. I love creating all the little questions. I love writing them. I love shaping them. That was my favorite part. And then there was a one-pager that I wrote, a Google document, and it was like a short "Who I Am," "What This

Project Is," "Who You Are," "Deadlines." That was hard. I was like, How do I-how do I summarize all my hopes and dreams, collate and aggregate everything that I want for this project in the world and from my lesbian community into three sentences. And I-and I did it. I should say we did it. [Laughs] Because my-my lesbian community helped me write it, large parts of it actually. Um, I would just sit on FaceTime and talk at them and we talk with each other for 3 hours and then suddenly she would be on a page I'd be like, "Oh, thanks." [Laughs] So I think I created a Google form. Um,. I asked them to respond about stuff that I thought would be cool like their rising sign. And it was actually, it was actually, funnily enough, not a mandatory question, but every single dyke answered that question about their astrological signs. Much to think about, much to think about. But [laughs] I guess I could because I wanted- I wanted to learn about people's hobbies. I am first and foremost very curious. I would like to know what you are. Who you are about, what you're like. And I think, I don't know if it was maybe one of the first times or sometime in the pre-interview is people were talking about how they don't really talk about themselves. They like people were going in about their hobbies and their interest and why they thought this project was cool and I was just sucking it all up. I was like, shit, yeah. Look, I want to learn about your cosplay. I want to learn about your paintings. I've never seen that movie. Maybe I should be watching that movie. You make-you make historical fashion. I want to learn how to, like, sew historically. I want to know what they're doing. And I don't know if that was the question was. But I had a Google Form-Form, people would respond. There are sections in the Google Form where people could talk about their marginality in whatever way they wanted to respond. But there was a checklist of some, that was really hard. Lots of hours discussing about what I was going to put in, how I was going to put it, because this is going to shape the responses that I would get. And I didn't want it to be like census data and I didn't want to trigger anybody. But I wanted to be specific because this is a specific community and a specific project. And I think one of the reasons why there were no no one not a single person and I've talked to everyone at least once so far had an issue with any part of the form is because it was very obvious that I was from this community. I am a part of this community. And any-if there were any mistakes that I made, it would-the intention was obviously a documented good one, right? So when I was asking people if they were Black or if they were disabled or if they were class disadvantaged or marginalized by income or class, it didn't feel extractive. Accusatory, bad. Like no one spoke about that being a hard part. Actually, a lot of people really struggled with how to describe themselves outside of that, which I thought was kind of funny. But no, I, I didn't really have any problems with that at all, actually, which I think is not true for other oral history projects or other information collecting projects. There's lots of issues around that, but I didn't have any of that. I got like 45 responses, more than I thought. I have a series of Google folders that separate in-person interviews. Oh, I thought a lot about access and accessibility. So there's many different points in which people can list what they do or do not want to talk about and how they do or do not want to be displayed. I wasn't interested in outing anybody and I didn't want to make anybody uncomfortable, right? Because visibility is not the end all be all for queerness or lesbianism. It really isn't. I wasn't interested in making people feel uncomfortable, and I think that's another way that I got such honest, really interesting responses is because I'm like, you can have no name, no age, and no photo, but your history still matters. But I will take it down. It will be an initial. It'll be an age range with no location. And that is perfect. And I truly believe that. And I think, like, there's I think the level of sincerity in this project was important to me and I was like, I really had to sit with myself and with my lesbian community and think about it because, you know, I wasn't trying to make anybody uncomfortable. I don't want to talk about I'm not a cop, you know, and I'm not. This isn't a job interview. And I'm genuinely interested and I genuinely care. And this really is about you. It's about us. It's about each other, you know?

Maia [00:39:27] Right.

Olivia [00:39:28] So there's three folders, and then I let there be a written response because some people just don't want to talk. Shit, I don't even like to talk to randoms and I'm a random person to them. I don't know most of the people who applied. I know like seven of the people who applied. Most people I don't know. And so four people chose to do written responses. And I was like, "Sick!" So they're writing their story for me and I'm really excited to read it. Some people, English wasn't their first, second, or third language, and they didn't want to do an oral history and they were like, "Can I really write their responses?" And I was like, "Of course you can." And so they're writing responses. I don't really know if they're in English or not. Maybe. I don't really, I don't think that matters. [Laughs] I'm just excited to get their responses and see what they decide

to talk about. Um, I have virtual and in-person options for access reasons. Not just for COVID safety, but also for COVID safety. Also for accessibility. In the sense where I have two accessible locations, where I'm doing the interviews, my apartment is accessible and like physically accessible and in Brooklyn, and then um, I'm going to record them at Barnard College. And the building that I'm recording it in is an accessible building with accessible bathrooms. Um, and there's accessible transit to get there, if not, I'm covering people's Uber costs and stuff like that. Because it shouldn't be you shouldn't have to spend money that you may or may not have to get access to come to see the interview in person.

Maia [00:41:11] Right.

Olivia [00:41:12] Also, people from all over the world in the U.S. are doing virtual options like there's— it got international reach because my friend, um, she posted it on her TikTok and she has international audiences. And the Lesbian Herstory Archives— my- my- my bestie reposted it on the LHA Instagram and I got some international people which I wasn't expecting. And was like, "Dang, I have to change the questions." I was like, "What do lesbians do in Brazil? I don't really know. But we're going to find out."

Maia [00:41:43] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:41:43] Um, so I created a list of like 60 questions with every question I could possibly think. And then based on everyone's specific form responses, I would select specific questions based on their responses. And then during the pre-interviews that I would have— most oral histories don't have interviews for people beforehand. I actually don't think any do, but I don't really know any. Like, I don't— I don't know every. And I actually intentionally didn't read any oral history theory because I didn't want to. I wanted it to be my authentic gut reaction to what I think an oral history process should be like. Um, so I hadn't read any oral history theory not until later. I want to finish it, and then maybe I'll be like, "Ooh, I should have this. Or maybe I could have included this," but no regrets! [Maia laughs.] I didn't want to be influenced by like oral history theory.

Maia [00:42:33] Right.

Olivia [00:42:34] For this project. Anyways, [unintelligible sound] I had the questions. And then, in the pre-interviews, it's been anywhere from like 45 minutes to hour-and-a-half conversations — almost as long as the oral histories themselves — where we go through every question one by one and we delete questions that I thought they might answer. And then, we re-word questions. Then, maybe they add a question. They're like, "Oh, did you consider this?" I'm like, "No, I didn't consider this." And a lot of the questions themselves are built off of the form responses. I think almost everyone in the form response had something that they thought that they wanted to see in this project. And I was like, "I will make this a question so that everyone can decide if they want to answer this or not."

Maia [00:43:13] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:43:14] And so every question that I asked them, no one was going to be surprised 'cause I fucking hate being surprised.

Maia [00:43:20] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:43:20] I don't anybody to be surprised. I didn't want anybody to be triggered. I had a section in the form where I told people, this is like— "you know, if you don't want to talk about this, you don't." And so I just didn't. And that was that. Like, this wasn't— like I wasn't going to convince them. I- I don't care. It just is what it was. And then we'd go through the questions to make sure I didn't do something that they didn't think of initially. We changed them and edit them and work together to create a story. And in those pre-interviews I would also talk about myself, right? Because I wasn't doing that in the oral history and I didn't want it to feel extractive like they were pouring their hearts out to me and I was just some unfeeling like person with a pen taking notes. I didn't want to be an observer on the outside. That was really important to me. I was really

interested in the storyteller. In me, the listener, or the story-taker. I guess. That's kind of how I'm seeing it, versus interviewer interviewee.

Maia [00:44:18] Right.

Olivia [00:44:18] I feel like that feels really sterile and that's not what I'm doing. And I really wanted [pauses] them to feel like they could just talk. And I feel like I've known all of these people. And I'm not a inherently social person. I don't really like people like that. I think that was really hard for me in the project. I don't like talking to new people. I don't like doing new things. And I've had to do so many new things and talk to so many new people and I'm constantly tired. And I'm running on E [laughs]. All I think about is this project. I see this project when I close my eyes. [Maia laughs.] I see it when I open my eyes. I think about it 24/7, it's all I can think about. And I wouldn't have it any other way. I really wouldn't. I- I think so much about this in my free time because I really want to do the best by the people that I'm- that I'm- that I'm talking to. They matter to me, like, legitimately! And I hope they can tell that I [laughs] that I truly, really care. I think a lot about the project in the process.

Maia [00:45:18] I think that's really beautiful and I think it's really amazing how much you dedicated yourself to this project and how much you really dedicated yourself as a member of the community to protecting members of the community. So that leads me to ask, what are you hoping to accomplish with this project?

Olivia [00:45:41] I'm hoping to accomplish— what I really care about is not about other people. I care about the people in this project— what I want them to feel. I want them to know that someone cares. Someone is literally listening to them speak about themselves. I want them to know that they aren't alone. I want them to know that the struggles that they're having, other lesbians who are exactly the same age are having the same exact struggles. I want them to know that they can form own— their own communities from within this project. Maybe they'll feel empowered to do projects like this, similar for themselves. I want them to feel empowered from telling their own story and from listening to other lesbian stories, you know? I want them to feel connected to a lesbian community that was intentionally built on being inclusive.

Maia [00:46:35] Mm.

Olivia [00:46:35] Like this is a collection — like a canon, one might say — of multiply-marginalized, young lesbians. And we're fucking cool! [Maia laughs.] And there's a lot of us.

Maia [00:46:47] Mm.

Olivia [00:46:47] You know? And we're all here in this moment. And I want them to know that I don't care if five people other than us listen to this. I don't care if no one does. I don't care if 20— 40 people— I don't care if a gabillion people listen to this. My— like my intention from the very beginning was always about them. This is a project for them. About them, about us. And I want them to feel like the lesbian present is accessible to them. Right? We talk a lot about histories of the past, and we think a lot about queer futurity or Crip futurity. And I want people to think about their lesbian present, like the life that they're living right now matters. Like you're not ruminating about a past that you never got to live. Or you're not thinking about a future exclusively where things can be better, which I think is important. I think imagined futures are quite important, um, especially for community building and goals and goal setting. But I want people to think about why their current moment and their current lesbian life matters. You know, I feel like a lot of times we go through life and we're like, "Eh, we don't really matter." You know, fucking life tells you as a multiply-marginalized lesbian that your life doesn't matter in so many ways! And [sighs] I wanted this to be at least one space where we could be like, "You know what? At least here it does. And it's actually a prerequisite. And actually, that's part of the whole reason."

Maia [00:48:26] I love that. So I wanted to ask you, how did you taken into account your own personal biases when you were creating this project, constructing the questions and doing a lot of the planning?

Olivia [00:48:42] One thing about having an overactive, anxious, autistic, disabled body-mind is that I do a lot of contemplating. You know, I be thinking thoughts, right?

Maia [00:48:53] Mhm.

Olivia [00:48:54] And so I have my lesbian community who's marginalized— whose marginality is I don't hold, right? And they really help me craft a lot of the questions over group FaceTimes, text, conversations. I'm bringing up soup again because we drink a lot of soup during the time. And I—the section on the form where I had people voice concerns really helped me think about ideas that I didn't think about at first, especially with international lesbians. Um, I also was very aware I'm very, very aware of blinders that I have, of shortcomings that I have. You cannot know a life that isn't your life. And I am—and this project is very focused on life stories. I simply cannot know lives that are not mine. I can read about lives that are not mine. I can learn about lives that are not mine. But I can never know a life that isn't mine. Even if someone is another Black, autistic, disabled lesbian, I will not know their life. So I think having a lesbian community that doesn't, that isn't myself that aren't just reflection carbon copies of myself, which a lot of people do—

Maia [00:50:09] Hmm.

Olivia [00:50:09] —helped a lot. I think having the pre-interview was really important to me where we could edit and change and shift questions. If you notice that a lot of the oral histories might not all be the same, that's because they aren't. And I wasn't looking for like a standard set of 30 questions. I don't think anyone has the same question as anyone else. I think, yeah, that's a lot more labor intensive for me and I'm really tired [laughs]. But it was—but it was worth it, you know, because these questions are all different. And if people talk about different things, it's not because they weren't answering the questions. Because they were all answering different questions. Like, for example, I'm I'm cisgender and I'm class-advantaged. Um, I wanted to make sure I was doing right by people whose entities I don't hold about their lives. And so I asked other people and I asked the people who I was—who were telling their own stories, what they think, to write their own questions with me, to write them when I'm not there. Everyone has time to change the questions without having to ask me up until right before we scheduled the oral history. That was really important because you don't know everything in the moment and maybe something will bother you that you saw, that you sat and thought about for a couple of weeks before the oral history. So I wanted to make sure there was a lot of time between the pre-interview and the oral history itself so that they could sit and think about what we discussed and what this project is and what they want it to be for them. That's how I thought about my own personal biases.

Maia [00:51:33] So, you um, I didn't have this as a question before, but I was thinking about it as you were answering. But you mentioned how important the preinterview aspect was and how this was not commonplace in a lot of [Olivia: Yeah.] oral histories. So how did you come up with this idea to have a pre-interview?

Olivia [00:51:51] Damn. Why did I do that? Yeah, I think it stemmed from the fact when I realized that I'd be talking to a lot of lesbians that I didn't know. And since I was focusing in on community, I was like, I want to know them. I had a very deep, very earnest, real desire to want to have a conversation with the—with all these wonderful beautiful people who were willing to share to a-a-a very large part of themselves for this project. Everyone is incredibly brave to sign up for a project like this. I didn't even want to do this interview that's happening right now! It's [laughs] so crazy because I'm asking people to do the same thing. I didn't want to do this. It's almost midnight [Maia and Olivia laugh] sitting here doing this interview. I didn't want to do this. I wanted to be asleep. And I think that was really important to me, is that I wanted to honor the people who were doing this project. And I was like, I don't want — like some oral histories have really shady ethical backgrounds, where people didn't know the consent forms they were signing. And I was like, I'm going to go through every line of the form with each person and there's going to be multiple checkpoints in which they can decide what they want to do. I'm going to ask them out loud, that's recorded. They're going to write it three separate times on a form and we're going to talk about it every time. Um, and I didn't want to surprise people with any of the questions. I wasn't — I think people have understandings about having honest answers and I think when you're talking about a medium, like oral history, there is this like push towards historical positive positivism, right? Where there is some objective, real truth that needs to happen that people

ascribe to written history and that people have with oral histories or issues that they have with oral histories is that how you know that the person who was talking is telling a true thing? And I don't even care. Like, I'm not—I'm not taking the stance where people are like oh, they are telling a true thing because it's the life that they lived. That doesn't matter to me. Like, this project is not a truth. There is no end to this project. Like so many of our lives are messy and entangled and currently in progress or in process or in a state of becoming. As many of us would say. [Laughs], I'm so sorry.

Maia [00:54:23] No, I like it, I like it.

Olivia [00:54:25] Everyone-everyone quotes "Cruising Utopia."

Maia [00:54:27] It's an important quote.

Olivia [00:54:27] But-but I just — I didn't, I wanted there to be a chance where I sat with people and I was like, look, this is me. This is you. This is us together. This is real, this is what we're doing. So when you look at this project. I have spoken to every single person beforehand. They know every single question. We've talked about it. We've thought about it. We've cried about it. We've laughed about it. And that was really important to me. Really important to me, especially when you're breaking down like academic barriers. Right. I didn't want to be the unfeeling researcher.

Maia [00:55:03] Hmm.

Olivia [00:55:03] I'm not researching them. Like when I write. A process paper, it's truly about how I did this. I'm not making any conclusions. There's no conclusions to be made. At least I'm not making them. You know, I wanted people to be like, you know, I'm talking about my gender identity. I'm really working through it. A lot of people are new to lesbianism and I want them to talk about it. You don't have to have an answer. Like a lot of people don't. Like if I ask you about your gender identity, like it's really messy. You like talk it out. Shit some people find out stuff about themselves. When they were answering the questions. They're like, you know what? Maybe. And I think that's kind of what this project is about. That was what was important for me. I didn't realize I was doing something that other people weren't doing in oral histories until I would bring it up that I'm doing pre-interviews and they're like, "You're doing what?" I was like, "You know, the interview before the interview." And then people weren't doing that. And I was like, damn, they were really just raw-dogging these people with questions—.

Maia [00:56:01] Right.

Olivia [00:56:01] —that they didn't know. It's really making them sign consent forms before the interview happened.

Maia [00:56:06] Right. It's putting in the extra work for sure. Um, so the next question that I wanted to ask is the lesbian community has had difficulties with issues of exclusion, inclusion and self-definition. So what role did these issues play when you were designing this project?

Olivia [00:56:34] So there are lots of conversations that I had with lots of people in my lesbian community when they were like, "Are you going to define lesbianism?"

Maia [00:56:47] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:56:48] And, you know, I thought about it. I was like, maybe I will. And then, you know what? I decided not to. I understand the lesbian community— for multiple reasons— has had issues of exclusion based on gender identity, on race, on class, on disability, and size. And most marginalities in general, right, that weren't white, cis-gendered, straight-sized lesbians. And I decided that I really didn't want to define lesbianism for this project because the people who I wanted to join this project, who identified as lesbians, I knew wouldn't need me to, honestly. I—I—, maybe this a little bit arrogant, and I was terrified at first, but then I was like, "You know what? The people that I want for this project know." And they didn't even know me. They didn't have to know

me. Most people didn't even see it on my Instagram, and then my Instagram isn't me... if that makes sense. Like, I don't know most of the people.

Maia [00:57:46] It makes sense.

Olivia [00:57:46] They just... I just knew that they would know. Like I instinctively knew that the people who mattered would know. And they did. And I knew that if I defined lesbianism, it would close more doors than open them. Right? One thing I did include was I explicitly stated that one marginality that could be included would be gender nonconforming, trans, and non-binary lesbians. Right? That was incredibly important to me. I wanted to take down histories for people of the younger generation talking about gender non-conforming, non-binary lesbians. Most of the participants are not cis. And it was important to me because of um, exclusion and bio-essentialism. And- and um, aspects of transphobia that can cover large parts of the larger lesbian communities. So that was important to me. I didn't define lesbianism, but I did state marginalities that could be included in lesbianism as an example. And I didn't have to define lesbianism. Everyone who's here is here.

Maia [00:58:48] That's a really great way to go about it, and I really appreciate you explaining that part of it. So what specific tenets of identity did you deem necessary to highlight in this project? And I know you've already touched on it a bit, but if there's anything else that you feel like you'd like to say about it, I'd love to hear that, too.

Olivia [00:59:08] I was ripping my hair out trying to think about what specifically I wanted to include and what specifically I didn't want to include, you know?

Maia [00:59:14] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:59:15] But I know I wanted to highlight gender nonconforming lesbians. I wanted to think about [breathes deeply] lesbians of color, class-disadvantaged lesbians, disabled lesbians, and indigenous lesbians.

Maia [00:59:31] Mmhm.

Olivia [00:59:32] Um, I feel like multiply-marginalized lesbians are so dynamic, you know, and innovative [imitates punching sounds and laughs] in the way that we think about community, figure community, and what unity actually means to us. And there's like a level of resilience and, um, creativity that I thought was really important to me. So that's the specific tenants. And I really wanted to make sure I was recognizing wholeness, fullness of each person. So that was important to me in this project. And that's the whole reason why I thought about the exhibit. As an aspect of it in the first place.

Maia [01:00:14] Okay, great! So the next part, I just want to really talk about the actual participants of the project and I specifically want to know how you went about selecting participants from the people who applied. Because I'm assuming you didn't accept every person who applied.

Olivia [01:00:32] I didn't accept every person. I accepted a lot more people than I thought I was going to do. I felt like I was going to do ten people. It's now 30...ish. I'm bad at counting, probably 35.

Maia [01:00:44] Mm.

Olivia [01:00:44] I think four of the 35 are doing written responses, but I truly don't know. More than 20, less than 40. Um, I... said it from the very beginning that lesbians love to do things and love to get involved. I didn't think it was going to reach this many people. This many people whose stories were relevant and fit the criteria that I had in my head and that they had in their head because they thought that they mattered and that they were right for this project. And I was like, "You know what? You are. And I'm not going to say no, and I'm just going to not have any free time for two months doing the oral histories and pre-interviews. And that's is going to be it! This is gonna be my life for three months. And it makes sense. I didn't say no to people who

applied that didn't fit the parameters. If you were white and cis and you weren't disabled, were class-advantaged I was just kind of like, "Did you read the project description?"

Maia [01:01:48] Mm.

Olivia [01:01:49] So the people that I said no to were people that truly didn't fit the description. I was like, "This is a space that I wanted to feel like everyone could speak freely.

Maia [01:02:01] Yeah.

Olivia [01:02:01] And if I were to include people that didn't fit the project, then people wouldn't feel as comfortable. They'd be like, "I thought I trusted you." And I'd be like, "You're so right." [Maia laughs.] And so I just said, "No." It was that simple.

Maia [01:02:14] That's really great. I think that was a great way for you to handle that. Um, so I- I wanted to ask you... you chose not to edit the audio in this project. What led you to make this decision? What is the significance of doing this? And why is this important for the project and its goals?

Olivia [01:02:36] So I chose not to edit the audio because I feel like it would be super sterile and I didn't want to sterilize or... or censor any parts of everyone's stories that they didn't consent to. You know, like what they consented to was a story that they told me. And taking out "ums" or "buts" or "burps" — which I did add into the transcripts — or chuckles or laughs or cries, um, or when people were thinking and they needed to gather their thoughts, you will hear a silence, right?

Maia [01:03:16] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:03:16] You will hear— you will hear breaks. You were— you will hear— you will— you will hear mumbles. And you will hear— maybe you'll hear rocking or fidgeting and I'm not editing that out of the audio because it's the realness of our lives and the realness of our conversations. And, you know, there's these thoughts in archiving and archival processing where you do this thing called deaccessioning, which isn't really related to this specific process, right? Because this is the moment of history-making or processing where I could take things out, but I chose not to, right? Because a lot of archivists and memory-workers, where they're doing this work, will see something that they don't think matters.

Maia [01:04:00] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:04:00] They will throw it out, right? And depending on the person, the shit that matters to you is different than that matters to other people.

Maia [01:04:11] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:04:11] And you can never know, but what I do know is- is that I was going to accept every single thing in the audio. Any single thing anybody said I was going to accept, even if it said that I didn't agree with. T.

Maia [01:04:23] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:04:23] Because it doesn't matter, right? What matters is their story and what they agreed with. And I was really important in not taking away from histories that already didn't have much, right? There is a lack of multiply-marginalized lesbians. I wasn't going to cut out more of their own voice. That would be silly. And anything that they said, they actually wanted to say. Like they didn't say it for it to be cut out or deleted or edited later on. So I just didn't do that. And I'm not going to. And if you hear a long pause it's because there was a long pause. And I think when you're thinking about oral history, and when you're thinking about performance, and you're thinking about vocality, long pauses and taking pauses and breaks are really important aspects which you can interrogate and analyze. So I didn't want to get rid of those. And I don't really know what's important and I don't want to take away— like who am I to decide? I'm just a girl. Who am

I to decide what's important in someone else's story? It's not my place, so I'm not doing it. If someone's oral history is 2 hours long, that's because they wanted to speak for 2 hours and it is what it is. [Maia laughs.]

Maia [01:05:38] So you mentioned, like to me privately, but also um, briefly in um, this interview about exhibiting this project. So I wanted to ask you, how do you plan on exhibiting this project? What factors of the exhibition do- did you consider in designing the project, or was the exhibition aspect of the project added later?

Olivia [01:06:05] So the exhibition part of the project was added to the very beginning. I knew that I wanted to have an exhibition piece because I was worried that if I made the oral history [unintelligible] I'd be too— I'd be focusing too much on a deficit and not enough on the fullness of each person. And so I really, really, really didn't want to do that, right?

Maia [01:06:27] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:06:28] And so I was like if I have an exhibit, people can show stuff that they think is cool... about themselves. Like I love the color pink, and I love playing D&D. And if I was in this project, then I probably would show some of my dice and my favorite pink stuffed animals, maybe my favorite fidget toy, and then some writings. And I wanted people to talk about what's really interesting to them. And I wanted— I was really interested in [unintelligible] like you are a whole person who was more than just the sliver of oral history questions that we created together. You're more than just this conversation. This is a chance— you can think a little bit about the project, and think a little bit about community, and think a little bit about yourself. And that's what the exhibit is. I wanted it— I wanted there to be a physical option where people could see the fruits of their labor. Their real labor they put in, it is labor—.

Maia [01:07:22] Yeah.

Olivia [01:07:23] —to do an oral history — on their end — to tell their story. That is labor. And I wanted to show them how much I cared. Like, I think I cried for like hours when I saw the amount of responses I was getting. [Maia laughs.] I was like, "People really want to do this. It's not just the thought in my head. Or like, my friends are lying to me."

Maia [01:07:43] I love that. So I wanted to ask, how have you considered issues of accessibility and preservation in the exhibition and publication of this project?

Olivia [01:07:54] So I made a website where everything is going to be displayed online. So accessible people who are not in New York, they'll be able to see their own stuff. And everyone else's stuff will be online, fully tagged, fully cataloged and processed for archives people. I'm using local subject headings that I made myself in homosaurus subject headings, so inclusive ways of cataloging and describing our lives and making own tags that fit for our project. Like AO3. That doesn't exist. I made it though. Because it's relevant.

Maia [01:08:31] It is.

Olivia [01:08:31] Webcomics, web series. Um, I also— whenever I have the physical exhibition, it will— I already have listed the places that I know are physically accessible. Like actually though not just on the website because I've been there.

Maia [01:08:46] Right.

Olivia [01:08:47] And I looked at it myself. I didn't want to have it at NYU because NYU, to look at the stuff you have to get approved like 48 hours in advance and you have to know someone at NYU to get in because like I could probably get an exhibit in Bobst — in our library, but I want to do that because most of the people don't go to NYU. And what if they want to bring in friends and family? I wanted it to be free.

Maia [01:09:13] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:09:13] The place where the exhibit happens will be free. It will be accessible physically. And it will—if it's not free, it's got to be a sliding scale or I'll just cover your cost. Um, it's online and people will have options to craft their own exhibits. And there's a function on Omeka where you can take people's images that we have and any of the stuff, and you can write your own narrative and then you can put on your resumé that you published something. There'll be an about the author section. It's a really beautiful way to—and they have no time limit on that. Like, I don't, just send it to me whenever, if you want to do it. So that's what I was thinking about with accessibility. I was like, it has to be a place where people can go for not a lot of money or no money at all. And I want everything to be online. And so I'm like—web development and learning how to display them online was really important to me. And it will all be online.

Maia [01:10:09] Wow. I think that's really great. So um, this last section of questions will be about conducting the project. So what have you learned from this project so far? Since you've been giving interviews?

Olivia [01:10:24] I've learned that a lot of people are, honestly, really excited to talk about themselves. I didn't think people wanted to talk about themselves that much at all. I am constantly humbled and shocked by the amount of time and energy people are putting into this. Everyone has—everyone has shown up. Everyone has done everything. No one has been like, "Wow, this is too many steps or too many forms or everyone has been really awesome about that. Which I—which I love and I didn't expect. I didn't expect that all of the 30-something people I-I accepted would actually want to do oral histories. They all said yes. I was expecting like ten or so people to drop out. But now everybody said yes, which is good. Which is good. More work. But it's good.

Maia [01:11:22] Yeah. So what has been the most interes— interesting part of interviewing the subjects for this project?

Olivia [01:11:31] The most interesting part was learning about what other lesbians who are multiply-marginalized are doing in their life. People who are younger than me, like 18, 19, people who are older than me, like 23, 24, 25. I was like, "What are y'all doing?" I wanted to know what they were doing and they're telling me, and I think. That's been the most interesting part. Or like seeing that my. Questions actually work and they excited them and they weren't just thoughts on the page. But hearing actual responses and real people was really important to me.

Maia [01:12:02] So what has been the most difficult part of interviewing the subjects of this project?

Olivia [01:12:09] I think it has nothing to do with people telling their stories. And everything to do with me is that I'm just really tired. Like, honest to goodness. Bone deep sense of tired. I think I said it was malaise. Earlier. Because that's how I feel. Like I should be like languishing in a tower draped in petticoats.

Maia [01:12:37] I didn't ask this on the initial questions, but as somebody who's obviously very deeply involved in disability justice and concepts of radical self-care, do you feel like [both laugh simultaneously] that's something that you've been thinking about during this project?

Olivia [01:12:56] Yes, but I've mostly been thinking about it for other people in this project and not myself. And I know you might be being like, "Shouldn't you be practicing what you preach?" And I think. Sure. But when you are working with so many other people, it is not possible. Or at least I haven't figured a way where I can do that yet. I am okay. I am okay enough to think more about other people's needs and other people's wants. I know that this is an issue. I can't really do anything about at this point. Like, you're so right. You're so right. I've had many thoughts about it. I'm like, you know, should I be working myself to the bone? I don't know.

Maia [01:13:50] Well, I [Olivia laughs] that makes me think of, I guess, two questions. This is one probably very challenging for you as like, you know, somebody with autism and—

Olivia [01:14:03] You can say autistic also. We're also best friends. So it's okay.

Maia [01:14:08] Like I still get mixed up on, like, which words to use.

Olivia [01:14:12] Yeah. I mean, you know me. That's what I say.

Maia [01:14:14] As an autistic person, having such high levels of social interaction every week—

Olivia [01:14:22] Yeah.

Maia [01:14:22] Independent of your—

Olivia [01:14:22] My life.

Maia [01:14:23] Yeah, such as school and work—

Maia [01:14:25] Yeah.

Maia [01:14:26] —And stuff like that [Olivia laughs]. Managing that is one thing, but also you've spent a lot of time talking about community. Do you feel like you reach out to your community members for assistance on these things that are difficult for you? Do you think I— you'll rely on your community members to help you find rest in the times you can find rest?

Olivia [01:14:48] I already am. You know, I need to do more of it. I need to do more of it. Unfortunately, my community cannot help me with this project because it is a capstone thesis and I don't really know what the rules are for like participation, but I feel like it should mostly be me. Um, I think for like, community, like rest and relaxation, I, I don't know. I'm sitting on my friend's couch right now in my nightclothes. I think that's an accommodation.

Maia [01:15:26] So is there anything that a participant has said in any of the interviews you've conducted so far that have resonated with you and why have they resonated with you?

Olivia [01:15:39] I think the through line people have been saying, it's not like a specific thing, but it's like "I am a first of something" or "I am a only of something." And that really— it's really interesting because I often felt that way too. But then it's everyone is feeling that and everyone is like, I am one of two, I am one of three or four. Don't want to do numbers games, right? So don't want to quantify like me, like I- I know I am alone.

Maia [01:16:11] Mhm.

Olivia [01:16:11] Right. And there's, like, this profound sense of loneliness that is an undercurrent, even if people have community.

Maia [01:16:20] Mhm.

Olivia [01:16:20] It's— it's not, no one has found their community, if that makes sense, necessarily. Right. They're all working and they're working on themselves. And I think what really resonated with me was the sense of isolation and the the deep dread and loneliness that everyone's felt. And I'm like, "Wow, if we all got to be in a room together," — they will be online, they'll be in a digital built room, a digital community. And a physical one. But yeah, that resonated with me, Was that everyone talked about being alone.

Maia [01:16:55] Mm. So what have you learned from this project that has impacted the way you view yourself and your lesbian identity?

Olivia [01:17:05] I think I think about how grateful I am.

Maia [01:17:10] Mhm.

Olivia [01:17:10] I think in comparison to a lot of the people in this project, I have a very robust, very dynamic, sustainable lesbian community.

Maia [01:17:21] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:17:21] Almost all my friends are lesbians. Almost all my friends are multiply-marginalized lesbians. Typically, mostly gender non-conforming lesbians of color. A lot of people don't have that. And I think conducting these interviews, I'm like, I am so deeply lucky for the work that my community and my friends have done to create this community with me and with us. So I think that's one thing.

Maia [01:17:48] So you mentioned this a bit earlier, especially in the part where you're not cutting anything out of these recordings. But I wanted to know how your own personal and critical judgment has affected this project, specifically in the stage of conducting interviews and pre-interviews. Or how have you prevented your own personal and critical judgment from affecting this project? So, for example, if a participant has said something controversial, incorrect, insensitive, what do you think when it happens and how do you prevent yourself from reacting, especially in a way that can be visually seen and potentially impact the rest of the interview?

Olivia [01:18:33] Whew. So I understand that I'm a person who has thoughts, and I know that I always say we live in a society, right?

Maia [01:18:44] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:18:44] So... All— my footprints and fingerprints are all over this project, right? I'm very open about my positionality and what I think and what I believe and what I study. So it's not like I'm preventing my own critical judgment. I'm em-I'm embedding intentionally my critical judgment in my own personal judgment. And it is affecting this project. It's the affect behind this project.

Maia [01:19:08] Mm.

Olivia [01:19:08] Right. I think. What you're saying about participants saying something controversial or incorrect. I guess, I just don't say anything. Unfortunately or fortunately or neither. You know, if someone is talking about a perspective of their life, which they have an opinion on.

Maia [01:19:31] Mmhm.

Olivia [01:19:32] What am I supposed to do? I can't be like you're wrong, because that's not how it works.

Maia [01:19:38] Right.

Olivia [01:19:39] Like, one thing I am not tolerating is, like offensive behavior or offensive comments of groups people are not in themselves. Right. I'm not tolerating it. People are doing trigger— or saying things that I know are triggering. I'm making content warnings with time-with timestamps that the oral history. So if someone's talking about anti-black racism or homophobia from parents. Like there'll be content notes for that section. And I think preventing myself from reacting. I'm reacting, just in my mind.

Maia [01:20:17] Hmm.

Olivia [01:20:18] Not like I'm negatively judging them, because I really am not. I think most of the time, I understand completely what they're thinking.

Maia [01:20:25] Right.

Olivia [01:20:26] And I'm sure I have thoughts that other people would be like [dramatically gasps] about themselves?

Maia [01:20:30] Right.

Olivia [01:20:31] And so I just think in my mind, I'm— I think what helps is that I'm always thinking everyone is a person who has their own thoughts and minds and feelings and lives that I and it's

weird that I will never experience. And so everyone's going to say something that I'm not expecting. And so when I come into these interviews, I expect nothing. The only thing I expect to do is ask my silly little questions and listen to their wonderful beautiful responses. And if they say something controversial, I'm just like, "Damn." And then I just move on to the next question.

Maia [01:21:07] So when talking to people about difficult or potentially triggering topics, it can often take a toll on your own mental health as an interviewer. [Olivia hums in agreement.] Has this been something that you've struggled with? If so, have you navigated the struggle? If not, why do you feel that is?

Olivia [01:21:27] I really struggle with emotional permanence, and I don't really know what the word is, cause. But I really struggle. I have a feeling's wheel and I'm bad at it [laughs]. I feel like three things I'm like—

Maia [01:21:41] So, feeling specification?

Olivia [01:21:43] Oh, yeah, sure. What you said. I'm real bad at it. I feel fine. And I feel okay. And then sometimes I feel not so great. That's like three things. And I'm sure. Maybe I feel other things inside. I just am bad at identifying it. So thinking about feelings is really, really interesting for this project. A lot of the times, I'm exaggerating the feeling that I think people are expecting me to feel in a moment. I struggle a lot with flat affect and I sometimes think that that's actually helpful in oral history because I'm not really like the facial expressions that I have on my face is not judgy, it's not leading, it's not expecting, it's not happy or sad. So I'm not really not expecting anything. And I think it makes people feel more comfortable to speak. I'm not like a sponge. I think I'm more like a steel plate. I don't know if steel is porous. So any of the metal workers that are going to come for me don't like I don't know, I feel like it just washes over me in the sense where I hear someone say something that's triggering or deep or really meaningful and you can tell there's a lot of pain built up about something in their lives. And I understand that it's an emotion that they are feeling, and that's how I deal with it in the conversation is this understanding that I have or the understood subject is people are going to say some really fucked up shit that happened to them, that they are working through in that causes them real pain. And that's how I think about it as someone who is really disconnected from like my own emotions and really disconnected from that. I have a really flat affect sometimes I have the emotional permanence of a goldfish. I'm so sorry. Like something will happen. And then I'll be like, that was a thing that happened with no emotions attached to it. I think it kind of helps me in the interviews, but not in the sense where I'm unfeeling or not empathetic or anything. I just listen to what they're saying, and I understand that it can be deep and hard for them. Um, I struggle with separating my general malaise and just feeling tired, I think. What it has been doing is not necessarily the content of what people are talking about, but more like the fact that they're talking in general. It's made it — I can do less things, if that makes sense. I have let's say I have ten spoons. I'm using eight of them all the time instead of three or four to operate at my most emotionally adept at my most empathetic, at my most friendly and my most engaged, I'm using eight of them all the time and I only have ten. Or maybe I'm using 11, but I only have ten. That's the only way I can explain it. And so some days I will finish an interview and then I will sit under my bed. Instead of on top of it, because it feels like a cave that I will sit covered in my Squishmallows I can barely breathe. And I'm like, this is perfect. And then I drink a gallon of apple juice. And I'm like, This is where I live now. And I feel like that's how it's been. So, I don't know, make your own judgments.

Maia [01:25:18] So having interviewed several people already, what would you have changed about your plans for interviewing people and the way that you went about that?

Olivia [01:25:30] I had a conversation with someone recently and one of the pre-interview... um, their name's Indigo. You'll hear it if you listen to the project. Super cool. They were like, "Why don't we just chat for my oral history?" Like, "What if instead of you asking me questions, like, you ask a question, I talk and then you talk about what that question made you feel in response to my question."

Maia [01:25:51] Hmm.

Olivia [01:25:52] "And then you talk about your own life." And I was like, "Damn. What if I did?" I've already done three interviews. I can't do them for those. I think what's funny about those that they were with my best, like some of my best and closest friends. So they already know the answers to a lot of the questions that I asked them. But I was like, you know, I could. But not everyone to be comfortable with that, you know? And sometimes it's better just to talk that talk at a screen or talk out an empathetic person.

Maia [01:26:21] Right.

Olivia [01:26:22] And so I'm now throughout the project I'm giving people the option, like before the interview starts if they want it to be more conversational. Um, then that would be cool with me because I do know all the answers. I see these questions in my sleep. I see them when I'm awake. I see them all the time. And I-if I have to think about my own answers to these questions, to write these questions.

Maia [01:26:47] Right.

Olivia [01:26:47] What kind of project would this be? I would just be lying—

Maia [01:26:52] Yeah.

Olivia [01:26:52] You know? And so I have answers to these questions and I could talk about them. And so with Indigo, I guess we're just going to chat. [Maia and Olivia laugh] I mean, they're in France and I'm in the U.S. and the time zones are going to be funky and we're all going to be tired. But shit, we're going to talk. It's going to be a conversation. And so some oral histories might even be different, right, than each other. But I don't really like it's gonna be like two modes conversation mode and listening mode. I can't do both. It's too much. One or the other.

Maia [01:27:29] So what parts of the-the interview process and your project planning process do you feel will work the best? And why do you think that they work so well?

Olivia [01:27:42] I think what really works is giving people spaces where they can be themselves.

Maia [01:27:52] Mhm.

Olivia [01:27:52] If— I don't know if that makes sense, but, like, I have multiple steps, like multiple access points and multiple entry points into this project. Right. You can do this or do that. You can do this or do that. I'm giving people options, but not too many where they feel overwhelmed. I ask multiple times throughout the project because I'm bad at tone indicating and also a lot of people are.

Maia [01:28:16] Mhm.

Olivia [01:28:17] And I ask people multiple times, do want to learn a little bit about this? Not at all. A lot. Do you want to skip? Do you like-yes-for-like on a scale of 1 to 5, how do you feel about this specific interaction? Like one being not great, five being great. Because people say words, bad can mean bad or bad can mean okay. And so I do lots of tone check ins. I anticipate a lot of needs. I try to anticipate questions before they happen. So most people are not asking me questions like that. You'll be asking me, like, what have you been doing today? Instead of deep questions about the project, right? Because I feel like there's this understood sense of camaraderie. Like it's something that I can't explain, but there's just this sense of like, we see each other vibes with every single person. Like, no one's asking me about like soul deep questions about the project because they don't feel the need because I think deep down they already know the answers.

Maia [01:29:21] That's really beautifully and well said. So are there any outcomes that you planned for but differed in actuality when you were executing the interviews and pre-interviews?

Olivia [01:29:33] Subjects!

Maia [01:29:35] The subjects.

Olivia [01:29:36] Like the- the storytellers themselves. Didn't think there was going to be so many. Ten is a lot different than 30.

Maia [01:29:43] Mmhm. [Olivia laughs.]

Olivia [01:29:44] It's so funny how many days become— I don't think there's been a single day I think I've- I think I've had at least one pre-interview six days a week for almost a month and a half.

Maia [01:29:58] Wow.

Olivia [01:29:58] At least one. Usually it's like more than one back to back. Much to think about. [Laughs].

Maia [01:30:04] Hmm, yeah. Lots.

Olivia [01:30:06] I think the number has been different and then the storytellers themselves and how multiply-marginalized or diverse or the amount of identities that are showing up are so very different. And the fact that it's international, that wasn't what I was expecting. So that was a big deal with the questions. I was like, what the fuck is middle school called in the D.R.? [Laughs] I was like, I have to do even more research because one of the things about this project that I didn't have to do too much research on the subjects. Because I am a subject.

Maia [01:30:42] Right.

Olivia [01:30:43] I just had to introspect [laughs] or ask my friends.

Maia [01:30:47] So we're now at the last question—

Olivia [01:30:50] Aww! It's been so much fun.

Maia [01:30:53] We're at the last question of the interview. And I didn't put this before, but this is— I guess, a little bit—

Olivia [01:30:59] A secret question?

Maia [01:31:00] —On the spot now. But—

Olivia [01:31:01] Most of this been on the spot, though. [Maia sighs.] Off the dome.

Maia [01:31:04] Well, that's the nature of these interviews.

Olivia [01:31:06] Oh, Okay.

Maia [01:31:06] But are [Olivia laughs] there any final things, comments that you want to say about the project to anybody that might be listening to — just in anything? Is there anything that you would like to say that you want out there?

Olivia [01:31:21] I would say do it. I would say if you think it's something that you should do and you think it's cool, I say do it for yourself. Do it for your community. You don't need a masters degree to do this. I don't use most of my masters degrees to do this. I haven't even finished my masters degree. You don't need it. You have a voice recorder on your phone. Do you have stories that you want to know? You have questions that you want to answer? Do you have people in your life that matter? I say do it. That's what I want people to know. Also, I don't know. Reach out. I know my deadline has passed, but I don't know, shoot me an email.

Maia [01:32:03] I'll be including information on how people can contact you—

Olivia [01:32:07] Yeah!

Maia [01:32:07] You and still sign up if interested.

Olivia [01:32:10] Yeah, I'll do that.

Maia [01:32:11] Okay. Well, thank you, Olivia, for sitting down to talk with me about your project.

Olivia [01:32:17] Mmhm.

Maia [01:32:18] It's been really exciting.

Olivia [01:32:19] You've been here from day one, babe.

Maia [01:32:21] I know! But it's very insightful to hear [Olivia laughs.] A lot of your interior thoughts and voice.

Olivia [01:32:25] Oh, yeah. I haven't shared these.

Maia [01:32:27] And that's— [Olivia laughs.] That's like, you know, a very it- it adds a different depth to the project—

Olivia [01:32:32] Oh, okay.

Maia [01:32:32] —And it adds a different side of it, especially in your actual, personal journey with the project, which I think is really interesting. So... Just thank you again for being a part of this interview.

Olivia [01:32:44] Of course, [Maia: Thank you for...] thank you for having me!

Maia [01:32:46] Yes!

Olivia [01:32:46] I'm about to go to sleep in your guest room.

Maia [01:32:48] Yes, that is true. [Maia laughs.]

Olivia [01:32:48] Which is my room.

Maia [01:32:50] All right. Thank you, everyone, for listening. And thank you, Olivia. [Olivia applauds.] Buh-bye.

Olivia [01:32:53] Okay, bye!