

BARNARD COLLEGE
GENDER* IN THE ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Noa Rui-Piin Weiss

Barnard College Archives

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Noa Rui-Piin Weiss conducted by Autumn Johnson in 2022 in New York City. This interview is part of the Gender* in the Archives oral history project. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose

Noa ([00:00](#)):

Provides my answers. Should I what's what's the deal? Oral history. Why should I try to recreate what I said or,

Autumn ([00:07](#)):

Oh, no, just like anything that comes to mind again. Okay. So it's June 21st. I'm in the Barnard media studio with Noa.

Noa ([00:17](#)):

We're on take two.

Autumn ([00:19](#)):

<Laugh> could you please introduce yourself with your name, pronouns and graduation year?

Noa ([00:24](#)):

Yeah. my name is Noa Rui-Piin Weiss. Um, I guess I currently use he/him pronouns. Um, and, uh, I graduated in 2021.

Autumn ([00:35](#)):

And could you tell me about the first home that you grew up in?

Noa ([00:38](#)):

Yeah. Okay. So the first home that I grew up in was in Portland, Oregon. Um, it was this, yeah, this huge house. We also, we lived across from a castle, um, that someone built in like the early 19 hundreds for no reason. Um, and there's this big, like one story tall ficus in the middle of our house. Um, and so, yeah, it was just like in this huge concrete pot, um, hanging out

Autumn ([01:09](#)):

<Laugh> could you tell me a little bit about your parents or the family that you grew up with?

Noa ([01:15](#)):

I grew up, I guess I should say my parents' names for the archive. So my mom is Georgette Marie Pan. My dad is Joseph Benjamin Weiss. My sister is Isabelle. Jiin-Mei Weiss. So the three of us, we my parents met in San Francisco. My sister was born there. I was born there. And then when I was two, they moved to Portland, Oregon for my dad's job. He's a, a cardiologist and also does like fruit fly research doing genetics. So that took up most of his time and life writing grants and <laugh> fighting the institution. My mom is a lawyer and she worked from home and like really was the one who like raised me and my sister and just w really made sure that we were doing just like, had access to everything that we wanted. I feel like our, yeah, our childhood was full of a lot of activities. A lot of books, a lot of music. Yeah.

Autumn ([02:32](#)):

And then what do you remember about your elementary school experiences?

Noa ([02:36](#)):

So I went to Woodstock Elementary in Portland, Oregon which is a Mandarin immersion half day English, half day Chinese program. And it was also at a time where Chinese wasn't a super popular language. Like by the time I graduated from elementary school, like admissions had tripled because everyone was like, China's a global superpower. But we, my mom enrolled us there out of district. Because she she was the first person in her family born in the us. Her parents are from Shanghai. They moved here after the cultural revolution and they didn't let her speak Chinese really growing up because they wanted her to grow up without an accent. And it worked, her Chinese is really bad <laugh> but it was really important for her that my sister and I learned the language. So we grew up speaking Mandarin and English. Yeah, I

think socially, it was sometimes a strange time. I think. I definitely was not a kid who like picked up on social cues very easily and I was also like a huge teacher's pet. Like I loved school. One of my favorite pastimes was kicking boys. <Laugh>, which probably has some kind of gender related thing, but mostly I was like, they're annoying and I don't like them. So yeah.

Autumn ([04:25](#)):

And then moving forward what do you remember about your experiences in high school?

Noa ([04:29](#)):

Yes. high school was rough. So I went to St. Paul's school, which is a like fancy prep school in Concord, New Hampshire. I mostly went for the dance program but also like for, for the academics and like the prestige like the chances of getting into college. But it was way more conservative than any environment I had ever been in. Growing up in Portland, I didn't really have to question anything or really fight for anything. Like for the most part, people were all on the same page, politically kind of to a fault, like everyone was just like, ah, we live in post-racial America. It's so nice. <Laugh> like, it doesn't matter that like, it's mostly white people here. And then I got to St Paul's and there was like a full young Republicans club. And like people who voted for Trump, like in my class, like my peers.

Noa ([05:40](#)):

And so that was really scary. I had like a, for part of my high school experience, I had like a good group of like cool queer friends, kind of like, you know, the sort of bottom of the barrel people, like all band together. Um, and we're like, wait, we're all gay. What, um, but also like as much as I had that kind of safety net or those that community, I also watched those people, um, like become outcasts or like slowly become more and more socially unacceptable as they got like more or more gender nonconforming, or like, like I had a friend who started using they/them pronouns and that was like not

great for them. And we had, well, we had this big class wide debate because for graduation, we had to walk in boys and girls lines. Um, and this person Kalé [Camara] was like, where am I gonna walk? Like, I, I'm not these things. And instead of the administration being like, oh, we understand like, we'll change the policy. They like threw us to the wolves and like made it a class wide debate where they like had a big meeting with our whole senior class. And they were like, what do you guys think should happen? And like, people, they made us like defend ourselves to our like transphobic classmates. And that was kind of the philosophy there.

Autumn ([07:22](#)):

And do you feel like the high school experience would've been like very different had you stayed at the elementary school system that you were that you had grown up with?

Noa ([07:32](#)):

I'm not sure. I think it definitely it definitely would've been different, but I actually think that I, I think I still would have been just as scared of standing out or not. Yeah. Not being able to fit in and really the experience of watching other people get like harassed or just like not treated well. Those things like all intensify when you get older. So I don't know.

Autumn ([08:05](#)):

And then you mentioned that most of your friend group was queer. Was that--how did you navigate finding queer friends or was that just kind of happenstance that your friends turned out to be queer?

Noa ([08:18](#)):

Yeah, I think I really don't remember how I found my friends, but I think there's I don't know, we were all on Tumblr. Like we were all <laugh> like, I can't remember what the fandoms were that we were in,

but, you know, we were like all fandom people. There were like some people who read Homestuck, which is like, so shameful that I'm putting that in the archive. Yeah, or like anime, there were just all these, it, the entrance was like the media that we were consuming. And then when we realized we had had those things in common, we also all happened to be like queer and trans and and like also mostly not white. And we were kind of, I don't know, we all managed to find each other pretty fast mostly because we didn't fit in anywhere else.

Autumn ([09:14](#)):

And the media that you feel like brought you together, did that have any queer representation in it or was it just yeah.

Noa ([09:22](#)):

<Laugh> yeah, definitely. I think, well, yeah, <laugh> Blue is the Warmest Color was like one of the movies, which in hindsight, like should not have been the go to for a bunch of like high schoolers. And yeah, I'm trying to think of what other things I think there, there were things with queer representation in them, but it was also mostly that I feel like it was still in an era where it was mostly that kind of queer yearning or like you get a vibe from a character and it doesn't really happen in the show, but like you find other people with a shared understanding of that narrative. Or like, I guess that counter narrative. Yeah.

Autumn ([10:11](#)):

And what drew you to Barnard when you were applying to college?

Noa ([10:15](#)):

Yeah, so my older sister Isabelle also went to Barnard for very different reasons than I did. I was mostly looking for dance programs, um, and I also really wanted to be in New York. So my first, my top choice was Julliard which in hindsight is very silly. Wouldn't have been a good fit for me. But I auditioned got cut at the first round, sat with my ego for a little while and then was like, okay, I need to apply to college. I was definitely looking for I applied to like a bunch of Ivies to make my parents happy, but mostly I, I really wanted to go to a women's college. Um, coming out of that conservative environment. I just needed a place where I could like stop fighting for my human rights. Um, and I think I was looking, I think queerness has always been an easy way for me to find community with other people. And I knew that that was a thing that I would be, be able to find really easily at a women's college.

Autumn ([11:29](#)):

Oh, oh. And you mentioned you were, you had come in wanting to study dance. Was that one of like the activities that your mom got you involved in when you were little?

Noa ([11:38](#)):

Yeah. so I, I don't know my, I feel like my mom tells me that like, you know, I was like dancing as a kid and then she put me in classes. I think my very first dance experience was like this sort of community, like free movement. Like you get to wear a dress kind of dance class, but then since I liked it so much, my mom looked for like more serious forms of training. And what she found is like the best school in Portland was Oregon ballet theater, which is like super strict classical ballet. And I did that for a really long time all the way. I was like on pointe for like eight years. And then like slowly got introduced to modern dance and also like really had to deal with the fact that like, I was never going to be able to succeed in ballet for a variety of reasons.

Noa ([12:40](#)):

I think my unrecognized transness was definitely a part of that, but also just like the body type, like my knees are not what they should be if I, or like needed to be if I were to get like paid to do ballet. But I, yeah, I wanted to keep dancing. And I also like Barnard's program is based in New York, but is also really invested in postmodern dance, which is a very niche form that I was lucky enough to get exposed to in high school. And so I was really excited about that here.

Autumn ([13:16](#)):

And then you mentioned kind of knowing that you would be able to find queer community at Barnard. Had you heard from your sister through her experiences that there was like a very present queer present--that there was a very present queer community at Barnard? Or is that kind of like through your own reading about the school?

Noa ([13:36](#)):

It's I was really just going on vibes, which <laugh> is not how you should do a college search at all. My sister is to my knowledge, very straight and like, definitely not something that I heard about from her, although actually in hindsight, I, I came out to my family as bi when I was like 15. I did like a, these very dramatic phone calls where I was like, I'm bisexual. And they were like, okay. But my sister's reaction was like, yeah, like nobody cares. <Laugh> she was like, I'm in college at Barnard and no one cares if you're bi. So I guess I did have that small piece of information about community at Barnard.

Autumn ([14:28](#)):

Um and then did your intended field study change at all while you were here?

Noa ([14:34](#)):

Yeah, so I I definitely came in wanting to study dance check, did that stuck with it? I also applied thinking that I was gonna study religion which was really just that I, I think I was at an school and I really liked school. And part of that, like part of the humanities there was, you know, doing like an exegesis and like, you know, religious study. And I thought that was really fun, but I didn't actually know what that entailed. And so I took some religion classes freshman year and was like, absolutely not like this isn't, this isn't for me. I ended up doing history and theory of architecture, which has changed a little bit over my time here, but is mostly half art history, half architecture. I really like the structure of art history. And I think it's so useless. <Laugh> I find fine art really hard to care about. And so architecture was a way to sort of like ground it in the real world and be like, this has like political consequences, but get to do like the fun art history kind of analysis.

Autumn ([15:51](#)):

And what, if anything stands out to you about your experience attending Barnard?

Noa ([15:59](#)):

Yeah, definitely the people like the friends that I got to know. And that's kind of an impossible thing to predict when you're applying to a college, but I think the type of people that Barnard attracts are at least some of them are my people. And granted, I mostly interacted with the people in the dance program, so who knows what, like the poli sci people are up to. But that's, yeah, that's like the big one for me.

Autumn ([16:33](#)):

And then did you feel like it was easy to connect with people outside of like those who you interacted with in your classes or like make friends outside of like the dance department, like you had mentioned

Noa ([16:45](#)):

A little bit? I, I was in the Chinese Students Club for the first two years. Yes. Yeah. I spent the first two years in the Chinese Students Club, um, which I, I got into because of my older sister. She was the vice president or the Barnard VP because that's, it's an inter-college club. So she got me into CSC and I was really excited about meeting other Chinese people and like having, or like Chinese American friends. Um, and then I kind of realized that I was like too queer and too, like non-traditional for that social space, it was like a, it was a kind of fratty or like frat-adjacent thing. And so I was like, oh, I actually like really need to just stick with the, the queer people that I know.

Autumn ([17:55](#)):

And how do you feel about the college experience that Barnard has provided for trans students?

Noa ([18:05](#)):

I mean, I think again, I think the things that shape my experience the most were my community and my friends and Barnard provided me with like fantastic people. And I just, I wasn't surrounded by as many trans people as I wanted to be surrounded by, but I was surrounded by a lot of people who were very willing to like talk with me and learn with me and like respect the process that I was going through and support me when it was hard. Um, and so that was really important and beautiful. On the other hand, I also feel like my experience as a trans student has been shaped by lots of weird little interactions with professors, just like little offhanded comments or like, you know, getting misgendered a lot. Cuz I, I also started transitioning well I, I came out the summer before my senior year and then I started T (testosterone) September of my senior year. But like hormones are slow and like everyone already knows who you are and like everyone knows your dead name. And so yeah, it was a lot of, a lot of that little interpersonal awkwardness. That's not quite the institution's responsibility because you can only like train people so much, but it's more like having to confront other people's personal journeys of like

figuring out what gender is when they're supposed to be like your superiors or the people supporting you.

Autumn ([19:57](#)):

And through the process of changing your name, do you feel like Barnard was very accommodating towards that or was like, was it easy to get it changed on like rosters?

Noa ([20:08](#)):

Yeah, the logistics of it were not too bad there. I don't know. There's like occasionally a problem with my email and stuff, but like, you know, those are kind of Google related <laugh> hangups. I did, it was pretty easy to do all of the little, yeah, the little digital steps.

Autumn ([20:37](#)):

And you mentioned being a part of Chinese Students Club. Were there any other clubs or organizations that you were involved in?

Noa ([20:43](#)):

Yeah, I guess in chronological order, I, I danced in the Columbia ballet collaborative for a little bit. And that was also a thing that I kind of phased out of my life because I was like, this is not a place for trans people or I don't know, maybe there are other trans people who have, I think there, there are other trans people who have been a part of it, but not, not for me. And then I joined CoLab, performing arts collective, which I later became the vice president of and like ran with my friend Miranda or Miranda brown for the archive. And CoLab is like this <affirmative> very like alt low-stakes. Like we've had people do performance art. We've had people I performed in like a bunch of different stuff. The first thing I actually made for CoLab, I performed in other people's work.

Noa ([21:42](#)):

But the thing that I made first was an interlude because we had a student coming from a CUBE show, a Columbia, Columbia university ballet in ensemble. And she was like biking, uptown to make it to be in the last piece in the CoLab show. And she needed like, like three extra minutes. And so my friend Uila Marx and I made a piece where I would read the ingredients on a bag of chips or like the text on like <laugh> a bag of chips and then Uila would like interpretively like move to it or like, you know, do something funny with it. So yeah, like cute, funny things like that. Usually movement based. And definitely for like, for our friends to make our friends laugh.

Autumn ([22:41](#)):

Okay. and then in your experience, how did you navigate connecting with other trans students at Barnard?

Noa ([22:50](#)):

Yeah, I think like my first sort of memory of that is, um, Eli Duncan who is a year younger than I am. We were in an architecture class together his freshman year, my sophomore year. And he came in and was just like the prettiest butch. Like everyone was like, oh my God. <Laugh> and he like immediately had a girlfriend and like but he wasn't out yet or he, he wasn't, he hadn't done the gender stuff. And so then he came out after freshman year and I was like, oh, sick, like, great. And then I started my intense phase of gender research sophomore spring, I guess. Or, yeah, I guess sometime in sophomore year. And every once in a while I would like corner him and be like, Eli. Like, what do you think about this?

Noa ([24:01](#)):

Like gender as a construct <laugh> and he would have these conversations, which I now have with like other people who are questioning their gender, where you just sort of sit there and like affirm them.

And you're like, yeah, you know, like some trans people do go through a phase where they're really girly and like they're still trans. So yeah, that was kind of my first memory. I do have a number of friends who sort of use they/them pronouns or experiment with them or who are kind of who feel kind of nebulous about gender. But of those close friends, none of them were definitely in my time in undergrad were interested in like medically transitioning. And so that was a thing where like, through Eli, I kind of had to like find other people. And he would like give me names of other people or like you know, my other friends would be like, oh, there's this person in my American Studies class. Yeah.

Autumn ([25:08](#)):

Do you feel like most of connecting with other trans students was like through other trans students versus like through organizations at Barnard or Barnard creating platforms? Itself.

Noa ([25:20](#)):

Yeah. I think I did that kind of intentionally, I think a lot of the time and part of the reason I tend to stay away from like queer affinity groups or like, I guess I'm maybe not trans affinity groups cuz I'm would love to meet any trans person ever. <Laugh> but I, I feel like I often end up in those spaces and realize that I have very little in common with the other people and that's just like so disappointing cuz you go in thinking you're gonna find your family. And so it was, it just felt like it made a lot more sense to be like, oh, this is a friend of a friend instead of this is a person who also showed up to this thing and like chances are also feels really lonely, um, which is not as nice.

Autumn ([26:06](#)):

And do you feel a connection to the phrase trans joy

Noa ([26:10](#)):

Totally. <Laugh>

Autumn ([26:13](#)):

With your personal experiences in mind, how would you define trans joy?

Noa ([26:21](#)):

Yeah, I think it's, um, like the feeling of finally knowing what you want or like going and doing what you want, even if you've been told it's not good or that people won't like it. Um, because you know that it like on a visceral level, it feels really good. Um, I think connecting with other people who have felt the same way as you in this way, that has previously felt so like unknowable or like beyond words. Um, I also feel like half jokingly, but not really. Like I would define my sexuality as t4t (trans for trans) um, mostly cuz I don't have time to deal with cis people <laugh> and they're nonsense. Um, and like I'm dating another trans person right now and it's just,

Noa ([27:28](#)):

I think a huge part of the reason I didn't transition earlier in my life was because, um, society really tells you that being trans is undesirable and that being gender non-conforming will make you less attractive to people. Um, and being able to do exactly what I want with my body and have someone else be not only happy for me, but be attracted to me because of that is just like so radical and beautiful and like to do that to another person to be like, yeah, I see exactly what you're doing. And also like maybe I don't even understand like the way you dress or the way that you have decided to like go about doing gender, but it's like incredible and fascinating. And I'm so happy that you're doing that.

Autumn ([28:24](#)):

And can you think of a time when you experienced trans joy during your time as an undergrad? This experience does not have to be affiliated with Barnard.

Noa ([28:34](#)):

Ooh, my time as an undergrad.

Noa ([28:45](#)):

Oh yeah. I so I made a dance film for my thesis. Usually we do like live solo performances, but we were at a point in the pandemic. We were, I got vaccinated my second dose, like the day of our virtual showing. So basically things like in-person things were not possible during that spring of 2021. And for part of the film I did, like I made a little, um, Magic Mike section where I, like, I learned some of the Magic Mike choreography off YouTube and I was wearing these like leather pants. Um, and Tricia Toliver the lighting designer like made these like flashing blue lights. Um, and that was doing that and also filming it and showing it to people and being like masculinity. Like I do that. <Laugh> like, that's me. Yeah, I feel like that was a little moment of trans joy for me. <Laugh>

Autumn ([29:49](#)):

And how do you feel about Barnard's policies regarding trans students?

Speaker 3 ([29:56](#)):

Mm,

Noa ([29:58](#)):

I don't love it. <Laugh> this is also a thing that I wrote part of my architecture thesis about cuz I wrote about single sex space and the history of eugenics and how like, you know, the concept of medical sex that we use right now is really informed by like racism. So I really like my personal politics are that I

don't think single sex spaces should really exist because it's just too messy and like really doesn't account for the fact that people change. Um, and also that people might not be sure. And also that some people are not perfectly sexed. Um, and some people are born that way and some people imperfectly sex themselves over the course of their life for fun. So I think this policy of once you're here, you can do whatever you want, but you have to identify as a woman when you come here really. Um, just does a disservice to what I think the institution is doing right now, which is providing people of all genders with like a feminist or at least like gender-focused, liberal arts education. And I think that's a thing that should be available to anyone. And I also, like I have a friend who went to Columbia, who's transfem, and they were a dancer and like really, you know, spent a lot of time at Barnard because the dance program is housed at Barnard. And I was like, they should have been a Barnard student. But they, you know, like didn't really come out to themselves until after they had graduated. I just think that,

Noa ([31:57](#)):

Yeah, gender is not a stable enough category to define college admissions around. Maybe you can do an affinity group around it. Maybe like even then it's complicated.

Autumn ([32:11](#)):

And with that in mind, how would you change Barnard's current policies around trans students?

Noa ([32:19](#)):

Yeah, I would say, I mean, I know that this is controversial because people do think that having safe spaces for gender minorities is important, but also gender minorities, like who's the minority. <Laugh> but I think people who are persecuted, especially persecuted by the patriarchy, I guess. But if it were, if it were up to me, I would say no gender-related admissions policy and really like stop tracking all of this data about like sex and gender. Like it's really, unless you have a really good reason for doing it, like it's

not necessary. And then I would say this is an institution that historically was a women's college and currently is dedicated to feminist teaching practices or like focusing on gender throughout your education.

Autumn ([33:17](#)):

And with that in mind, you would still view sorry that wouldn't look like Barnard kind of merging itself with Columbia. Barnard would still remain its own individual institution. Oh

Noa ([33:29](#)):

Definitely. Please don't let Barnard merge with Columbia, I think. And that's the really complicated thing is that people, the exclusion, yeah. The exclusiveness of like women's college is sort of like one of the last strongholds, I guess, of like keeping Barnard independent, which is really unfortunate because I think that Barnard really needs to stay independent and like as much as this institution sucks, like it's so much better than like the machine that is Columbia and like the rat race of like Columbia College.

Autumn ([34:08](#)):

And what work do you feel could be done to make Barnard a safe space for students to explore their gender?

Noa ([34:17](#)):

Under yeah, that's complicated. Because really safe. I mean, Barnard is not one space. It's like thousands of tiny little spaces, um, and like different environments. I think I've seen individual teachers or professors do a really good job of, um, signaling that they are safe people. Um, but I think that's, that's always the calculation that you make when you are any kind of minority is like you walk into every situation being like, I'm not so sure about this. Like I need to kind of feel it out on a case by case basis. So

I wanna say hire more trans people. Um, and I don't know, teach your professors boundaries. I think that's maybe a thing that's specific to the dance department, but I definitely yeah, I had a lot of professors who like really felt like they could ask me things about my body or like give me their opinions or their personal experiences while I was like still a student, um, which is not, not how I think that should go. So yeah, I think privacy and also, I don't know. I really feel like, I don't know, safety is like always just a really personal calculation.

Autumn ([36:07](#)):

And then to wrap up what does being trans mean to you?

Noa ([36:15](#)):

Fun. Um, fun. <Laugh> um, I, yeah, I think, um, <affirmative>, um, being trans has meant accepting that I can change and that the people I love can change and that's like a really good thing. Um, and it means like really throwing out any idea of like, what is natural? Um, like I feel like I'm still kind of reckoning with respectability politics, but like kind of throwing out any ideas that like stand in the way of your personal like pleasure and like liberation, um, and yeah, loving, like loving the people and the people in history who other people have told you to hate, um, when you actually see like part of yourself in them.

Autumn ([37:22](#)):

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for coming in today. Sorry about the slip off at first.

Noa ([37:26](#)):

Yeah, no worries.