

BARNARD COLLEGE
GENDER* IN THE ARCHIVES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Mariame Sissoko

Barnard College Archives

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Mariame Sissoko conducted by Carson Stachura 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

Carson ([00:00](#)):

We're gonna start off with a little introduction, so could you just introduce yourself with your names—pro—your names,—your name, pronouns, and class year?

Mariame ([00:10](#)):

Yeah, so my name's Mariame Sissoko I use they/them pronouns and I'm the class of 2024.

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

Amazing. So I wanted to get into talking a little bit about the queer identities you hold and what those mean to you. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> Um can you talk a little bit about what your identities do mean to you?

Mariame ([00:28](#)):

So, yeah, so the two queer identities I kind of identify with the most is obviously being non-binary. I personally prefer to call myself genderqueer 'cause it's like, being nonbinary is a big umbrella, but I just really just don't like the idea of like fitting under like womanhood and what that means. But also, like, I am not a man in any sense of the way. And so, kind of just existing in this gray area or even what I prefer, is just, like, completely just non-distinguishable, off the binary, in like, like a black space. Then also I identify as a lesbian mainly because I find myself in women-centered spaces. I hate saying the word, 'not cis-het' men, but like, no, really just, like, not cis-het male spaces are really where I find my most comfort and, like, when they're not even centered and it's just women, non-binary folks who, like, a lot of whom who feel comfortable in spaces with women like those are my—that's my bread and butter.

Carson ([01:35](#)):

Amazing. So we're gonna move on to—there's only one question in this section really about campus life. And I wanted to ask what impact does being at Barnard have on the way you understand and or explore your identities. I also wanna preface this question by saying that this project is really to create an archive of just trans affect. So it doesn't have to be, you don't have to be, you know, really selling the whole 'queer at Barnard' thing. <Laugh> like fully, I just want you to feel comfortable speaking openly.

Mariame ([02:06](#)):

I can truly say I did not—I identified as a woman when I applied to Barnard and when I probably up until the end of my freshman year and I can absolutely say that being at Barnard is one of the reasons I started identifying as non-binary. I feel like a lot of my—before coming here—because I was in male spaces and I've always been more, like, drawn to like more women-centered spaces anyway. And, like, I surrounded myself with that, but sort of, like, being able to take myself outside of sort of this male gaze or even just like outside of the gender binary, because like that doesn't really have an effect here at Barnard. I kind of was able to recognize and, like, see the different ways in which womanhood was like being practiced and sort of viewed and, like, just realized that's just not who I am and, like, kind of recognizing a discomfort that I always had, and being able to place a name on to why I felt that uncomfortable. And I don't really know if I would've been able to do that if I didn't go to historically women's college or college that is predominantly women.

Carson ([03:11](#)):

Cool. I think that I wanna jump to a question in organizing before we get into your background on campus. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> I think that's a really good segue into this question. Mm-

Hmm <affirmative> do you feel that lesbian identity informs your personal understanding of gender? You kind of answered this a little bit. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> but if you feel like speaking to this, the floor is yours. Yeah.

Mariame ([03:32](#)):

I can say definitely. I be—, I kind of, again, when I entered Barnard, I identified as cis and bisexual. And so what I kind of, I didn't start identifying until—a lesbian—as a lesbian until after I came out as non-binary. Because I think I recognized all of the ways in which gender, like, effected me in what, like aspects of gender I was attracted to. And I wasn't attracted to just by understanding myself more. And so that definitely informed my decision and, like, not even just decision, but, like, identifying as a lesbian. And I feel like in turn that, like, Identification and allowing myself to completely remove, like remove myself from like cis-heteronormativity as a non-binary person as like —a lesbian—that lesbian doesn't, like, informed by gender. Yeah. Like my gender expression. Like, I feel like I've been playing around with it more and I feel like I have more freedom to do so.

Mariame ([04:35](#)):

Because I'm not trying to, like, I, I feel like trying to date men for me personally kind of affected the way I performed gender, because I was always trying to, like, even on, like a race level, like, the intersection of race and gender, it was really hard being a Black woman and trying to date men because it—there's—,there was just so many layers of like discomfort. And like also changing myself and, like, not really expressing who I am, because I—if I—there's this whole thing of, if you're masculine as a black woman, like, you're dehumanized, like there's no—there's no playing around with that, um especially when it comes to dating. So being a lesbian kind of

let me have me that freedom to not, to not consider masculinity as dehumanizing, but as something that I can play around with that I can be, and it's not doesn't mark me as unattractive or doesn't mark me as, like undesirable, mm-hmm <affirmative>, it's just who I am. And I really, really love that aspect.

Carson ([05:34](#)):

Desirability has been a point in talking about gender with my coworkers in the archives. Mm- Hmm <affirmative> that has been such a, it's just been such a point of conversation. So thank you for raising that and sharing that with me. Now let's get into your campus organizing I, yeah, exactly. <Laugh> so just tell me what kind of organizing are you involved with on campus?

Mariame ([05:58](#)):

Uh there's like a couple of things. I feel like I entered Barnard, like I was already like gung-ho 'cause I had just, it was 2020 and like I had just been apart of some huge organizing efforts in Philadelphia with the public school system and like those effort efforts had gone really well. And so I was kind of, like, in, like, this really weird gray space where I just was like, I can't really be in Philly anymore and doing all of that 'cause I'm in New York now. Um but also still having that like pumped-up energy that things need to change. And of course Barnard offered that opportunity with <laugh> big problems. And I was part of the organizing efforts to writing the boycott letter for that because it was harmful to students of color. And that was kind of my first taste, like my freshman, like my fall freshman year, it ended with me meeting with Linda Bell over the boycott letter.

Mariame ([06:53](#)):

And how student—and how students —freshman students of color specifically Black students felt about like how Barnard handled issues of race and talking about them in an academic setting. <Laugh> and I don't know, it's kind of just snowballed to, like, being in, like, being in acquaintance with other like older members at Barnard who was, are involved in SGA and other forms of activism like Solace and, u,o graduated in 2020. Uh,d so yeah, now I help—I helped start Barnard Mutual Aid. Um,typically run the—I don't run the mutual aid fund, but I run the community closet. Um,d I've hosted a couple popups and that's just been really incredible because it, like, helps—one part of it is help—is helping FGLI students. And also like Barnard has such a huge, like, thing with fashion that it's been really nice to help students who don't necessarily have access to really expensive clothing, get expensive clothing from students who don't want them anymore.

Mariame ([07:55](#)):

Like we had one student come in with a suitcase full of, like, Zara clothes, like, so much. And they had tags on them like that. There had to be like a thousand dollars worth of clothes in there. And they just gave it away and the suitcase too. And then also doing the binder drive has also been such a, like a point of like, like good. It was stressful, but being able to like give binders to non-binary/trans students through the SGA was really nice. I don't know what to say. It was just like satisfying 'cause I feel like my activism or organizing always ends up being surrounding my identity. And, like, the three things that I did—binder drive, being non-binary community closet being FGLI on campus. And then also organizing through BOSS and getting the Zora Neal Hurston lounge refurnished this year, well, it's going to be opening in the fall fall, the, the upcoming fall in 2022,ufor just being Black,uat a PWI has all been very tiring, very stressful, but very fulfilling. Uand I would do it again. Ubut probably like I would do a repeat of this year

again, just because I feel like the end result was worth it, but I won't be doing that again next year. 'Cause I feel like part of organizing is realizing when you need to like do self-care and take time away.

Carson ([09:19](#)):

Absolutely.

Mariame ([09:20](#)):

Yeah.

Carson ([09:21](#)):

Completely. Yeah. Thanks for that response. I think you answered my next question on how organizing your organizing specifically intersects with queerness and transness on campus. Mm- Hmm <affirmative> if you wanna say anything more about that, feel free, but I think you certainly checked that box.

Mariame ([09:37](#)):

I, I think because being, being queer at Barnard has—it's gotten better in the past couple of years, but not being trans in that sense. And I think because I hold that identity and because I'm in such prominent places such as, like, student government it becomes kind of like, it feels like it's, like, the next frontier, like everywhere specifically, like this, this being such a point of contention, but especially at Barnard more so than I think it would, it would be at Columbia or any other school that's not, not a historically women's college, but also the Seven Sisters are a bit better than Barnard <laugh> in terms of this. And so it just ends up with me being in these meetings kind of like <laugh> being the only non-binary student facing administration for the most part. And that

becomes very, very stressful because it's not like, oh, like, cute. Like, this student is, like doing something for the community, like, amazing, but it's like, yeah, you're doing something for the community. But like, this also kind of goes against like it's like their essent—goes against what Barnard wants to promote their image as mm-hmm <affirmative> and, like, it really is an uphill battle. And I think that like being, being non-binary is probably one of the more difficult identities to hold in an organizing space on campus. Especially if you're, if you're focusing on how Barnard treats and recognizes trans students.

Carson ([11:19](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that also really resonates with Autumn's experiences and doing research right now and connecting with trans alums. So thank you for affirming that. I think it's important to have that on the record. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> so next up, what work do you think needs to be done to strengthen the queer community at Barnard? This can either relate to organizing on campus. It can relate to the actual social aspects of being in community with folks at Barnard, answer that in whatever way you feel comfortable.

Mariame ([11:52](#)):

I say with the queer community at Barnard, one, there's so many queer people that it's like, it's like, a lot of the Barnard community. I think my issue with sort of the queer community at Barnard is, like, if we're talking about, like, an official thing, it's like, it's very, the face of it is very white. And it's, it's so strange to me because I don't know one Black person here at Barnard who like, I know a few, but, like, most of the Black people, I mean at Barnard are students of color I meet at Barnard— are queer as well. Mm-Hmm <affirmative> and yet that is not highlighted, highlighted or showcased. A lot of the times when we're talking about queer

students at Barnard even with like, this is our fir—the, like this year—this was our first Lavender Graduation. And like you don't, you don't see a lot of students of color attending Lavender Graduation and I'm like, I know there are gay <laugh> and like queer, lesbian non-binary students of color who are seniors <affirmative> who were seniors.

Mariame ([12:49](#)):

And, like, I don't know the reasons for that, but I just think that there could be a lot more to be done to uplift that intersectional, like, that identity. Especially because it's, I feel as though it's not like there's a lot of separation less so now, more so when I first began and before I came to Barnard being told of how straight BOSS used to be very straight cis-het, and then like the separation between like Black queer students, not really knowing where to go. And now BOSS is really gay. The E-Board especially. It's really gay. But so that's a space, but it's still like, there's still, like, a very much a—there's still not a—there's still like very much 'queerness as whiteness, which is not true. But I, I, I don't see how, I don't know how that can change. I, I don't know.

Carson ([13:42](#)):

Also sorry. Did I? Totally just,

Mariame ([13:43](#)):

No, you're good. No, you're good.

Carson ([13:45](#)):

Yeah. We've been having a lot of conversations in the archives too, about trans masculinity and relation to whiteness at Barnard and how that is such a sticky spot because androgyny and being kind of conceived of as transmasc is so linked to whiteness. Yes. So when you're in those spaces,

there's certainly a lack of affirmation that's given to people who don't fit into this box of white androgyny and it really fucks with you. Yes. Like it really, it like hurts. And I, I watch my friends who are queer people of color also feel that discomfort, but at the same time, it's like the white queers aren't really saying anything about—it's really a hot mess.

Mariame ([14:25](#)):

It doesn't—it's, it's—it's so strange because I've never felt more affirmed by my queerness in, at than at Barnard and in certain queer spaces. But it sometimes feels as though those same spaces don't affirm my Blackness in the same way. And it's a bit, like, it's a little, it's a little upsetting and it's a little bit of a contradiction. And, but there are spaces here on campus for Blackqueer students, specifically Proud Colors. And so like I can find those spaces and I have been in those spaces and that's really nice to have them both affirmed, but those spaces are not nearly as big as they should be. And not nearly as, as prominent as—they, as they,—as they deserve. And they're not as uplifted by like Barnard as an institution. Well, I don't expect Barnard to uplift any queer people, but specifically like <laugh> Barnard as an institution, not really pushing that identity to the forefront.

Carson ([15:28](#)):

Right. I think that's brilliant, is all I have to say. Cool. So we're gonna move into the last part of our conversation about queer joy. I think it's always nice to sort of wrap up conversations about the trials and tribulations of being queer and having multiple intersecting identities on campus with, I don't know, kind of settling into yourself and feeling affirmed in your experiences and just having the space to share that. So I want to ask how, if at all, does the term queer joy resonate with you?

Mariame ([16:04](#)):

I, I, it's funny when I think of queer joy, I, I think of you know how they always say that like people, especially lesbians, always like have like, they're so—intimate relationships in a way that it's like, are you dating? Yeah.

Carson ([16:21](#)):

Yeah. That's so real.

Mariame ([16:23](#)):

Yeah. And so I think part of that queer joy comes from the fact that like, I have been able to form such intimate relationships that are platonic with so many close people. What, with so many people that, like, a lot of my joy does come from that just because it's like, those are not the type of relationships that I ever thought I would be able form growing up. Or you'd think you would need to be in a relationship to have those types of relationships or that to have that type of intimacy. And to be able to experience that platonically, just because I feel like that is just in queer itself because it's outside of what cis-het, like the normative around cis-het relationships between women or between men allows us to do. And there's like a freedom in that that I enjoy. And then also, like, I feel like the only reason I was introduced to film photography through my relationships with other queer folks. And that has brought also a lot of joy and being able to also capture those moments of, like, intimacy between friends and like those moments of joy and have them kind of preserved in a way that looks cool and has been very, very nice.

Carson ([17:32](#)):

Yeah. so this, this part is optional. If you wanna share a time that you also touched on this right now, but if you wanted to share a time that you've experienced queer slash trans joy at, you know, in your undergrad experience, if you have an anecdote or a story we can also use that kind of question as a prompt for you submitting film images, if you would feel comfortable sharing any of them to put into the installation. That is entirely your call and entirely predicated on your comfort levels.

Mariame ([18:02](#)):

Uh I will let you know 'cause I have so many that I could probably send you, but it's funny because of the anecdote that I have, I don't actually have pictures of because I wasn't into photography at the time, but it was probably the first time I wore a binder. So I worked on the Undesign The Redline exhibit in Milstein and we were doing our opening event and I just didn't have anything to wear at that time 'cause I just didn't feel comfortable. I have—I had the dilemma and I still have the dilemma of, like, trying to find professional clothing, that's gender-affirming, 'cause all the clothing that I find aesthetically pleasing is very feminine mm-hmm <affirmative> and yet I can't—don't feel comfortable wearing that. And so I had a friend who's also genderqueer and they gave me their binder and, like, also like this, like, nice—this tweed jacket that was like the perfect level of, like, queerness. And, like, we were just like doing my makeup and not in like a way that was like, super feminine mm-hmm <affirmative> and like, right beforehand. And like, it was just like a moment of like, 'ah, I feel affirmed.' Like I had like a square cut, like, top that's, like, I recognize is like, perfect for like hiding the binder, but also like being yeah, yeah.

Carson ([19:15](#)):

<Laugh> yeah. Nothing like a blazer to really hit you with that gender euphoria.

Mariame ([19:20](#)):

Yeah. I was like, I was like, I feel like I was at my, like I had a peak of gen—, like, it was like my first peak of gender euphoria. I was like, ah, this is—this is perfect right here. It also was like the inspiration for the binder drive 'cause I was like, I can't afford a binder.

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

So <laugh>, I mean look at all of the queer joy that you have helped incite. Yeah. It's awesome.

Cool. I'm gonna stop the recording.