

GENDER SENDER PODCAST #4

Lesley Whittaker

[*Owl hooting, wings flapping*]

Kai: Katinka, did you just send me your gender by owl?

Katinka: Yeah, don't you remember Kai? Today we're hosting the Gender Sender.

Kai: Gender Sender is part of the anti-discrimination project Trans*Visible, from Trans*Inter*Queer e.V.

Katinka: Funded by Demokratie Leben! a federal program of the Ministry [*Owl hooting*] for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Kai: Gender Sender is a storytelling podcast that explores the ways gender norms affect all of us.

Katinka: Stories that are personal, political and from the heart.

[*Owl hooting*]

Katinka: Our storyteller for this podcast is Lesley Whittaker. Lesley is a genderqueer writer living in Berlin. Her mother from north St. Louis had a dream for her baby girl that didn't... quite... fit. And as Lesley grew up, she surrounded herself with Greek myths of women who misbehaved, trying to possibly find any other black queer character roaming through the world. This story was recorded in Berlin.

Lesley: Hello, my name is Lesley. And my mom picked out this name when she was 12 years old. My mom grew up in North St. Louis, which is not too far away from Ferguson, Missouri. If you've heard of Ferguson, it's where the Black Lives Matter protests really kicked off in 2014 after a police officer shot an unarmed black man maybe sixteen times in the back [*LW: I have since googled this, Michael Brown was shot 12 times*]. My mom grew up there in the 50s and 60s and she doesn't talk about it really. She rarely talks about it at all but I can imagine what it was like.

My mom is super smart. She excelled in school, she skipped a grade, she got a scholarship to go to a college out of state and packed her bags at 17 and never lived again in Missouri.

I didn't realize how much my mom and I had in common until I ended up going to the same college. It's a type of place that attracts a certain type of person, and as I got there I realized that we are this same type of person. In addition to loving this school, Oberlin, we both have an insane sweet tooth, we have the same silly sense of humor, and above all, we both have a deep love of language and stories.

When my mom was a girl, she read tons and tons of fairytales and Greek myths. She was the type of girl who dreamed about what her wedding day would look like and who would be the one to propose to her and what kind of dress she would wear. And when I was growing up she read a lot of these stories to me. But I really fell in love with the Greek myths, I loved how random they were, and I loved all the stories about the women who misbehaved, like Atalanta, who refused to marry anyone who could not beat her in a foot race. And Artemis, who just decided to run wild and be this huntress in the forest with her

badass gang of nymphs. And I read this book, it was called the *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*. It had a yellow cover when I was growing up in the 90s, and I must have read it through and through, hundreds of times by now. And I just memorised all of these different ways to interpret the world and all of these mysteries.

And as I was getting older I realised that there's one thing that my mom and I just do not have in common, and that's the fact that I'm just really, really queer.

And when I first realized this about myself, I didn't tell anyone. And I looked into the myths for inspiration and understanding. And I spent I don't know how many months just poring over Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and my *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* and anything I could find to see some instance of homosexuality in the myths. Because, I mean, teenagers tend to be a bit melodramatic, but I was fifteen years old and hormonal and lovesick and questioning... but it really felt like I was the only black lesbian to ever exist in the world. When you don't see representation of yourself it makes it really hard to imagine what your future is going to look like. But having these myths in my back pocket and finding instances of lesbianism and homosexuality in these myths — they're not many, but they are there— and knowing that that existed and knowing that these stories were old and true really gave me a sense of hope and a way to frame this world that seemed to deny my existence.

So I came out to my mom as a lesbian, and she said to me,

“So long as you're not trans.”

“I don't want to lose my baby girl.”

“I've always wanted to have a baby girl.”

And what she meant by that was, she was afraid I was going to come home from college with a buzz cut like on the back of a motorcycle and a whole bunch of tattoos, or dating someone who was on a motorcycle and had a bunch of tattoos.

And my first instinct at that moment was to assure her like no, don't worry, I'm still me, I'm still your girl, and like, nothing's gonna change. But I internalized those words for over a decade:

“So long as you're not trans.”

I came out as bi a couple years later. I did it over the phone, so I couldn't see my mom's face, but I could virtually hear her sigh of relief, that you know, there's still a chance, there's still a chance that I could find some nice guy and bring him home and get married and have a whole bunch of little brown babies that she could just spoil.

Because my mom, for being a girl who always dreamed about the proposal and the wedding and everything, she didn't get the wedding herself. She and my dad got married in a civil ceremony at city hall. No big dress, no reception, no guests. Just the two of them, unpacking their first house together.

When my brother was born, my dad named him after himself, just as he was named after his father. My mom didn't really have a say. So when I came along, my mom, she said, you know,

"I'm naming this one."

"I picked out her name when I was twelve."

"My daughter is Lesley."

And we have this like running joke in my family, where my mom will say things like, if I get a compliment on my smile, my mom will say like "Oh, I made those teeth," or "You have such nice hair" "I made, I made that hair!" Even now like walking up four flights of stairs with all my groceries, I hear my mom's voice saying, you know: *I made those arms!* Obviously, she didn't, like I swam varsity though college, like I made these arms... but this is still a funny thing that always happens when I'm with my mom.

And while that always is humorous, there's a flip side of that, where she would say things when I was growing up like,

"Lesley, you have such nice arms, you should wear a strapless wedding gown when you get married."

Or

"What baby names are you thinking of?"

Or

"What city do you imagine raising a family in?"

And more and more, I'm realising that I have to have another conversation with my mom. Because I've just been thinking, what if I don't want to get married? What if I don't want to have kids? What if I'm not a girl?

The past couple of years, I've found myself delving back into these myths again, not so much the Greek myths, because they are very gendered in their own way, all of the gods are paired. You have Zeus and Hera, you have Echo and Narcissus, and Hades and Aphrodite [*LW: Persephone*] and Cupid and Psyche, and there are always these pairs, these binaries. And so I've been looking further back, to try and find some instance of transness. And it does exist in some of these ancient mythologies that I've found where there are these goddesses that don't belong to the domestic sphere or just, you know, a goddess of love. You know, it's like these are creator-destroyers who embody like some of the very mysterious things about the world we live in. And I think about the sky goddess Nut in ancient Egypt who brings forth the sun every day. And Cybele, in pre-classical Turkey, who's the reason the seasons change. And my personal favourite of Innana, from the oldest legend of Sumerian mythology, who was this warrior sex goddess, who decided she wanted to conquer the underworld from her sister and gained immortality as a result.

And just like when I was fifteen and confused and questioning, these myths have given me a framework, a sort of way to look at the world and people and myself as more expansive than this very binary world that we live in, binaries that increasingly do not apply to me.

And I think now it's time for me to have that conversation with my mom again. And I think it's gonna be ok.

Because the last time I was home, we went shopping, which is one of the things my mom loves to do. And instead of going to a department store or one of the places she really likes to shop, I took her to a boutique that I like, it's like a super feminist brand, they have 'Smash the Patriarchy' slogans on all the T-shirts and like Lizzo is playing on the speakers. And we walk in there and my mom finds the most femme article of clothing in this store. And it's a crop top. And she's like, "Lesley, try this on. You're gonna, you're gonna look great in this." And I'm just like, "Mom, I'm never, I'm just never gonna wear this, I'm just not... I don't want to wear this crop top." I was looking at the button-ups and the blazers. And I said, "Mom, you should try it on!"

And she's like, "Oh you know, they don't make things like this in my size," and "oh, it would just look better on you" and she was grumbling, but then we both went into the dressing room and I put on my button-up and she put on the crop top. And it fit. And I could see she was so surprised it fit, she was like, "It fits!"

And I saw her eyes in the mirror, we were looking at each other in the mirror, and it was just like, yes, of course, it fits.

And it made me think that now we can talk about all the things that best fit us. Thank you.

[Applause]

Kai: So that was it, another Gender Sender podcast.

Katinka: Yes, and we hope that you listen again. All our media and podcasts are available on our website

Kai: www.gendersender.org

Katinka: And that's it!

Kai: Thanks for listening!

Both: Bye!