

(Be)coming Out in Comics

Navigating Liminality and Queer Identity Formation

Sasha Sanders

I suppose the first time I “came out” to others was in a footnote of a graduate seminar paper written during the first year of my Master’s program. Buried at the bottom of the page was my confession that I had been secretly questioning my (a)sexuality during my first long-term relationship. Here I was, once again, pushing my (a)sexuality down into something marginal, a mere footnote. Down and down and down I pushed it. I allowed it to seep beneath me, beneath everything. My (a)sexuality continued to trickle into the gutters. I had trouble navigating my (a)sexuality in the “real world” so I turned to the world of comics. Creating comics allowed me to seek refuge in the gutters, to face the tough questions, overcome my queer anxieties, and gradually (be)come out to myself and others.

In comics, the “gutters” are the spaces or gaps that separate the panels and image sequences. Gutters are an important aspect of comics because they incite “closure” and contribute to the mental construction of continuity between the sequence of images (McCloud 1993, 67). The gutters engage all our senses and allow readers to imagine movements, sounds, smells, and tastes — in addition to the sight which is inherent to the visual format of comics (McCloud 1993, 89). I wanted to play with the idea of existing in a realm without borders or frames. Accordingly, I initially avoided panels so that I could be free in the gutters [see “(Be) Coming Out Entry #1” and “(Be)Coming Out Entry #2”], and later used panels to symbolize constraint and confinement (see “Haunted Aces”). I immersed myself into this space to seek a different kind of closure. All my comics are centered around movement and liminality. I draw myself into the comics and navigate the space as I move towards transitions in my life beyond the pages.

When approached as a method for (be)coming out, comics can serve as a material liminal space to exist in, one that welcomes the process of change and the fluidity of identity. The concept of (be)coming out acknowledges that coming out is an ongoing dynamic process in queer identity formation. Comic diaries allow me to explore my sexuality and grapple with how it intersects with my race, gender, identity politics, and mental health. Navigating between the panels, in the gutters, and across the pages allows me to imagine new ways of being and moving in the world. Comics are a unique form for expressing queer anxieties. In my first entry of “(Be)coming Out,” for example, I explore my feelings of alienation through the metaphor of alien abduction. In my second entry of “(Be)coming Out,” I illustrate my anxiety over whether I am “queer enough” through the depiction of literally walking a tightrope at a Pride Parade. In my “Haunted Aces” comic, I manifest my fear of the stigma attached to Black women’s asexuality into a recurring nightmare of a haunting mammy figure. In “Haunted Aces,” I also question if I can be a Black feminist and reclaim my asexuality.

Creating diary comics is an intimate and vulnerable experience. I continue to make them because they help me process and become more confident in my (a)sexuality in the “real world.” KC Councilor argues, “drawing comics is a very good way to own your experiences instead of suffering from them” (Councilor 2018, 4). Through creating comics, Councilor learned that he “was trans and wanted to transition” (Councilor 2018, 3). Similarly, my journey through comics has provoked new realizations and possibilities for me. It has been a few years since I first started (be)coming out through comics and I am no longer sure what labels work best for me, as I continue to learn more about myself through this process. I am content however with being back at the drawing board to explore my sexuality further.

References

- Councilor, KC. 2018. “Drawing the Body In: A Comic Essay on Trans Mobility and Materiality.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 41 (4): 441-453.
- McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Northampton, Mass: Kitchen Sink Press.

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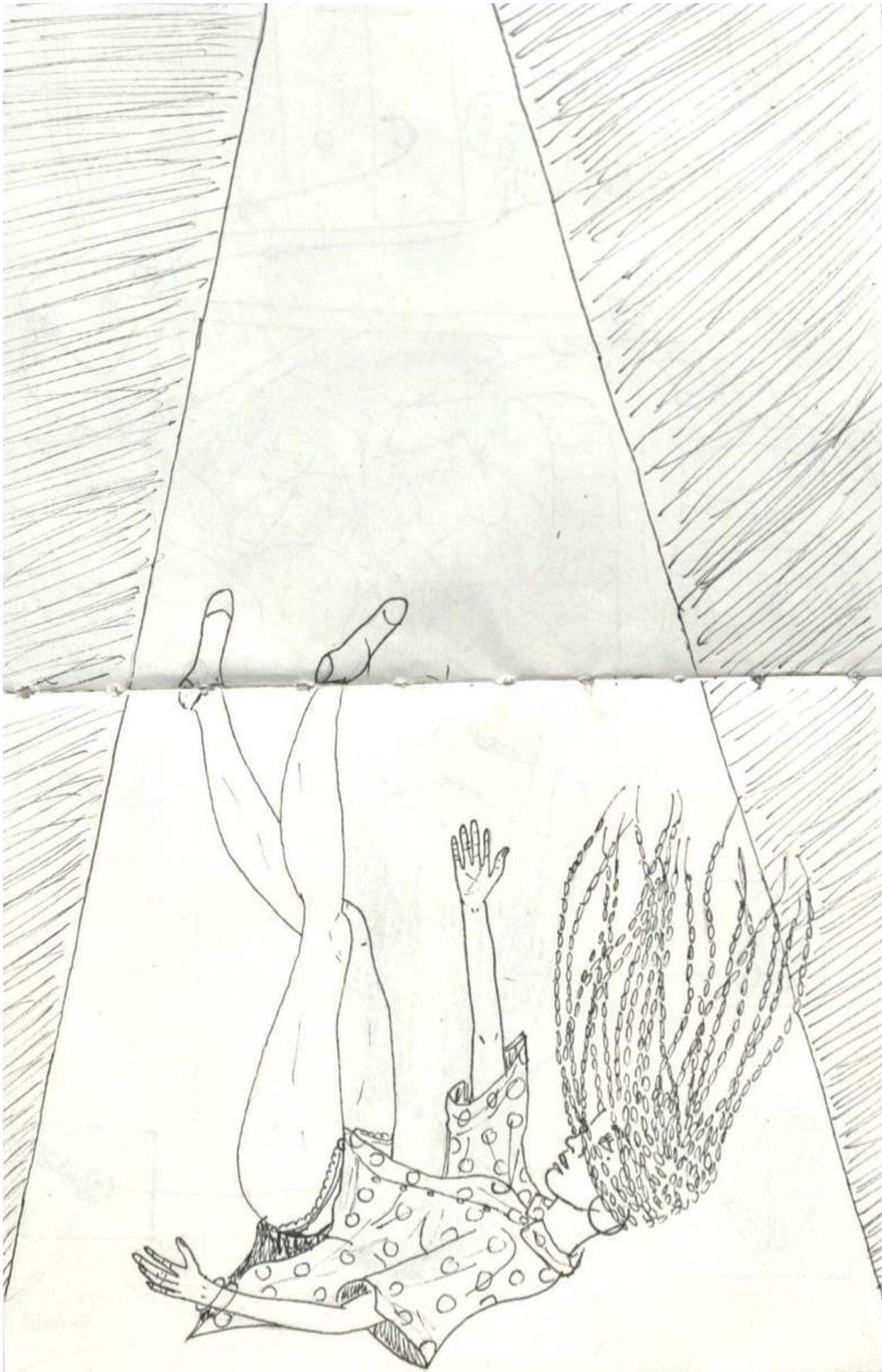
- 41 “(Be)Coming Out Entry #1”
- 50 “(Be)Coming Out Entry #2”
- 59 “Haunted Aces”

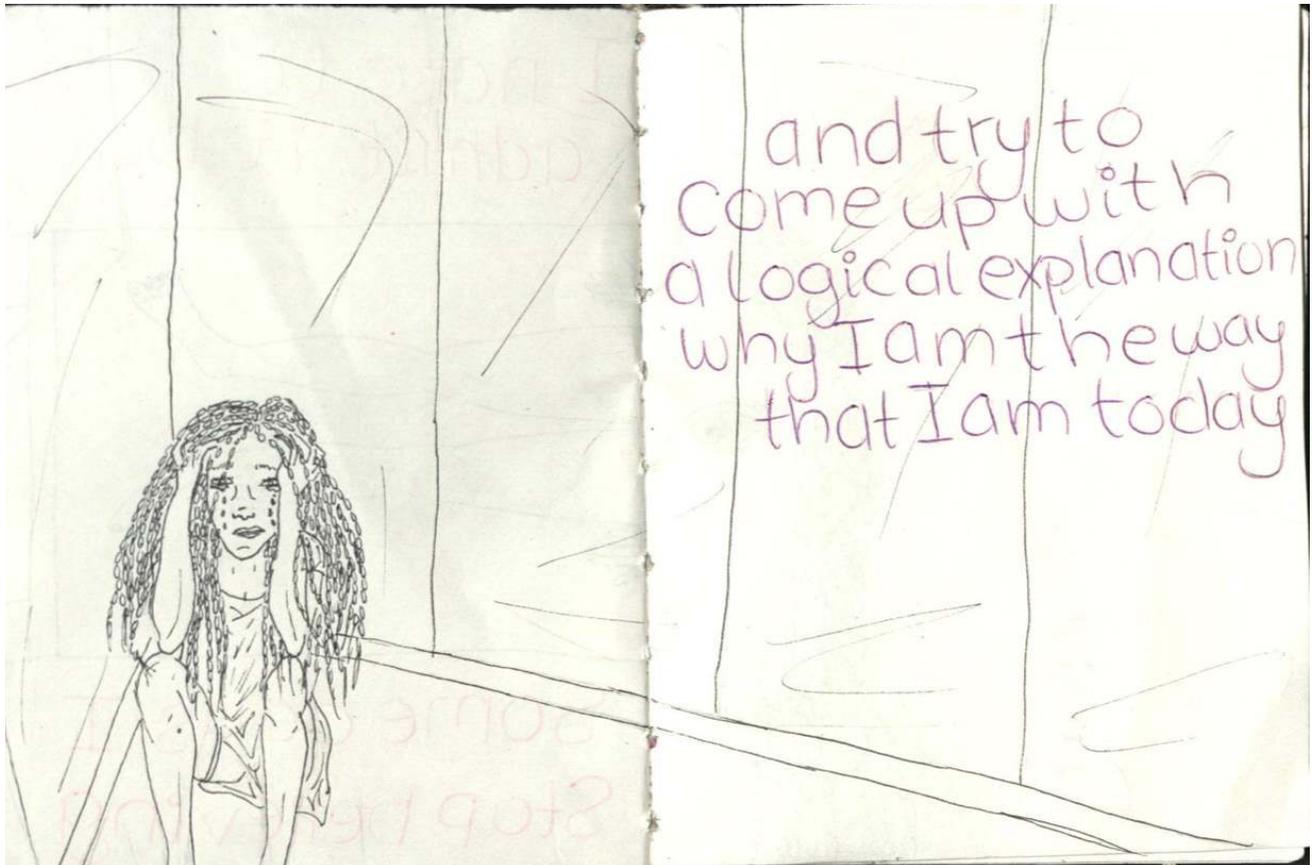
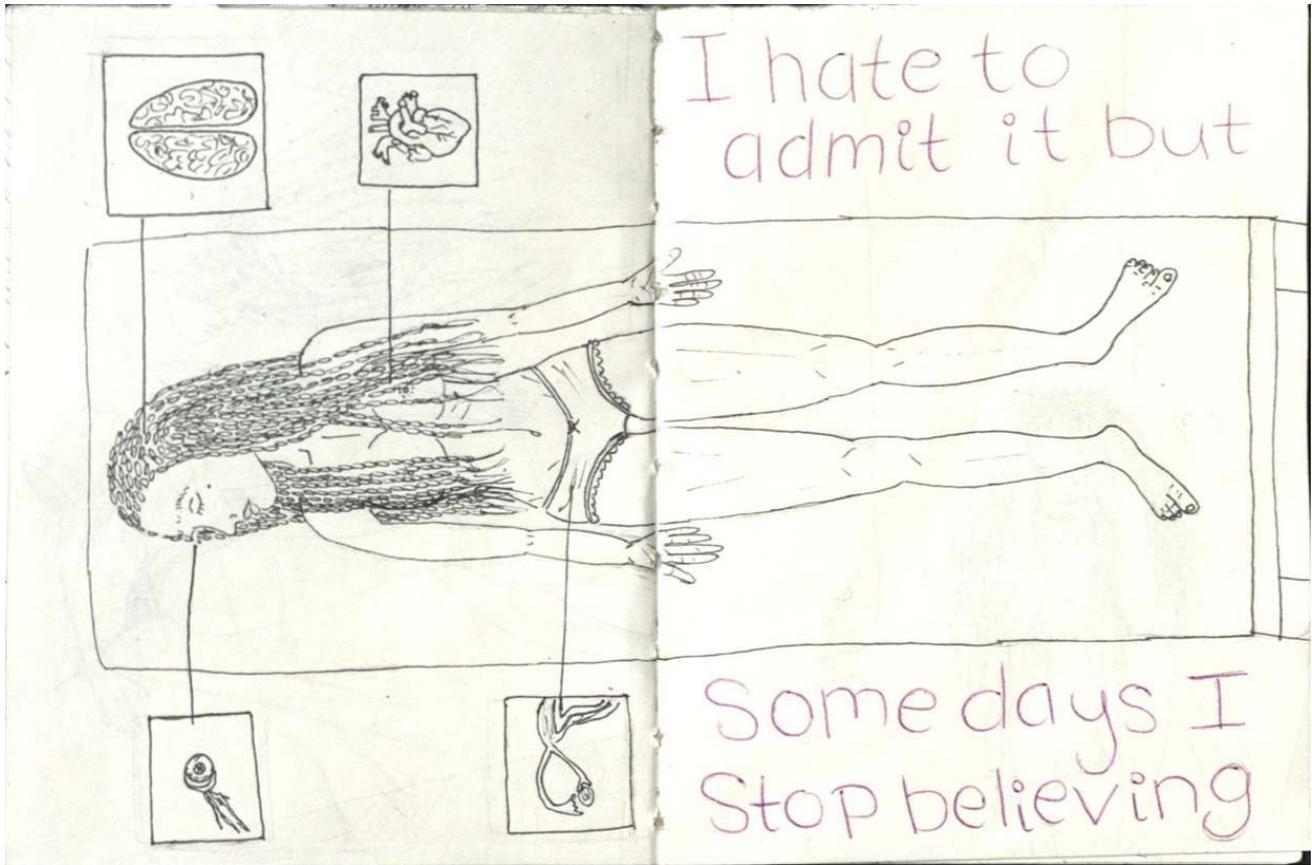
(Be)coming Out Entry #1

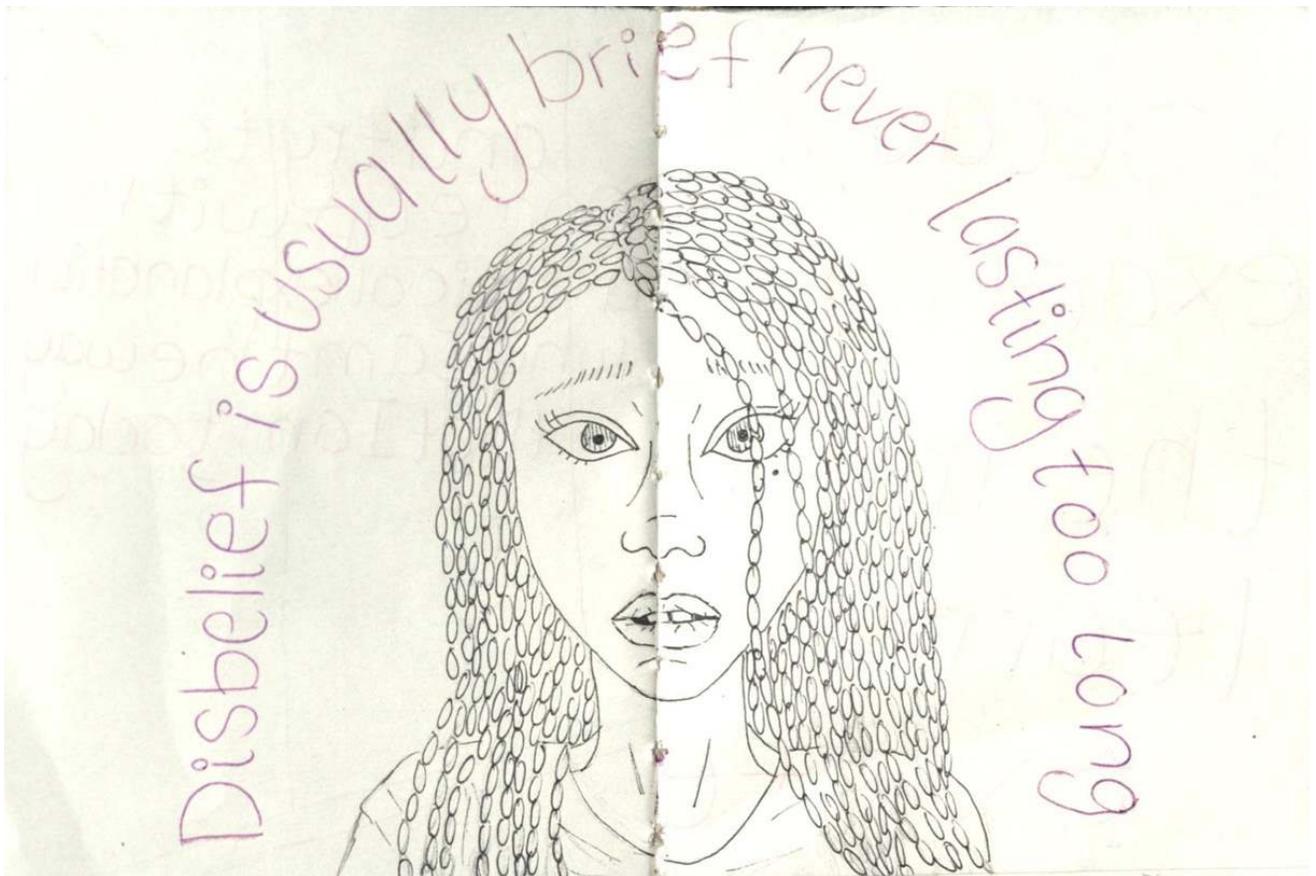
By: Sasha Sanders

It wasn't
until my
early twenties
that I found
out they
exist...

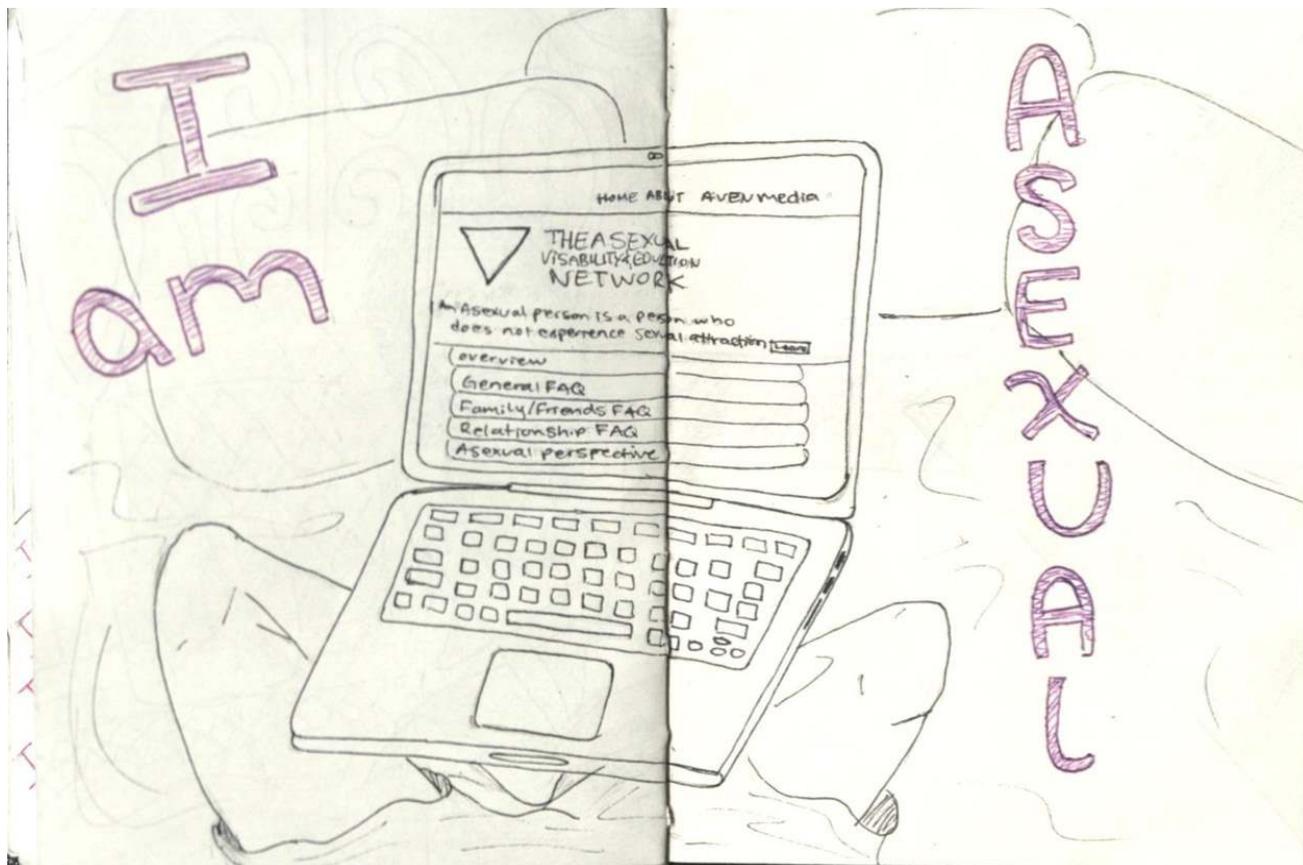


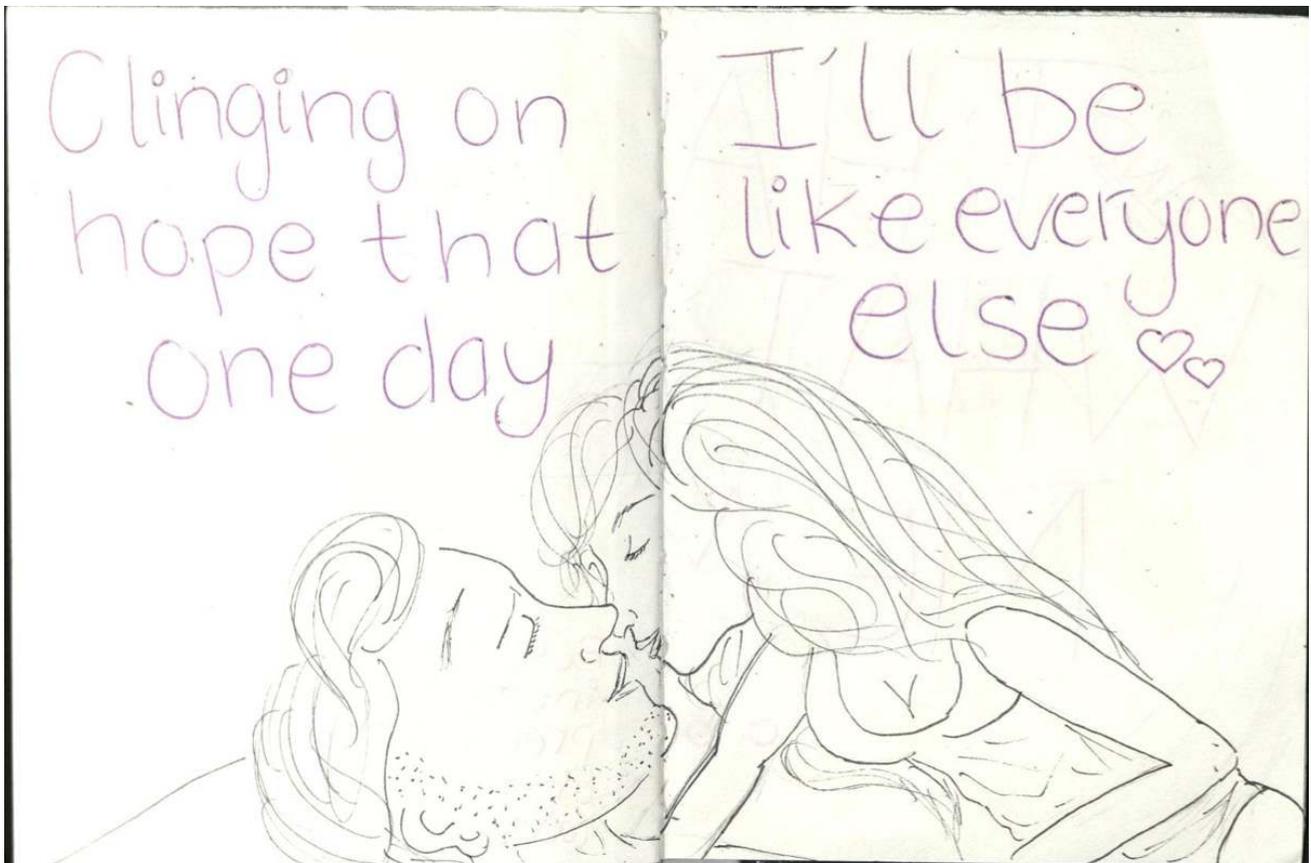
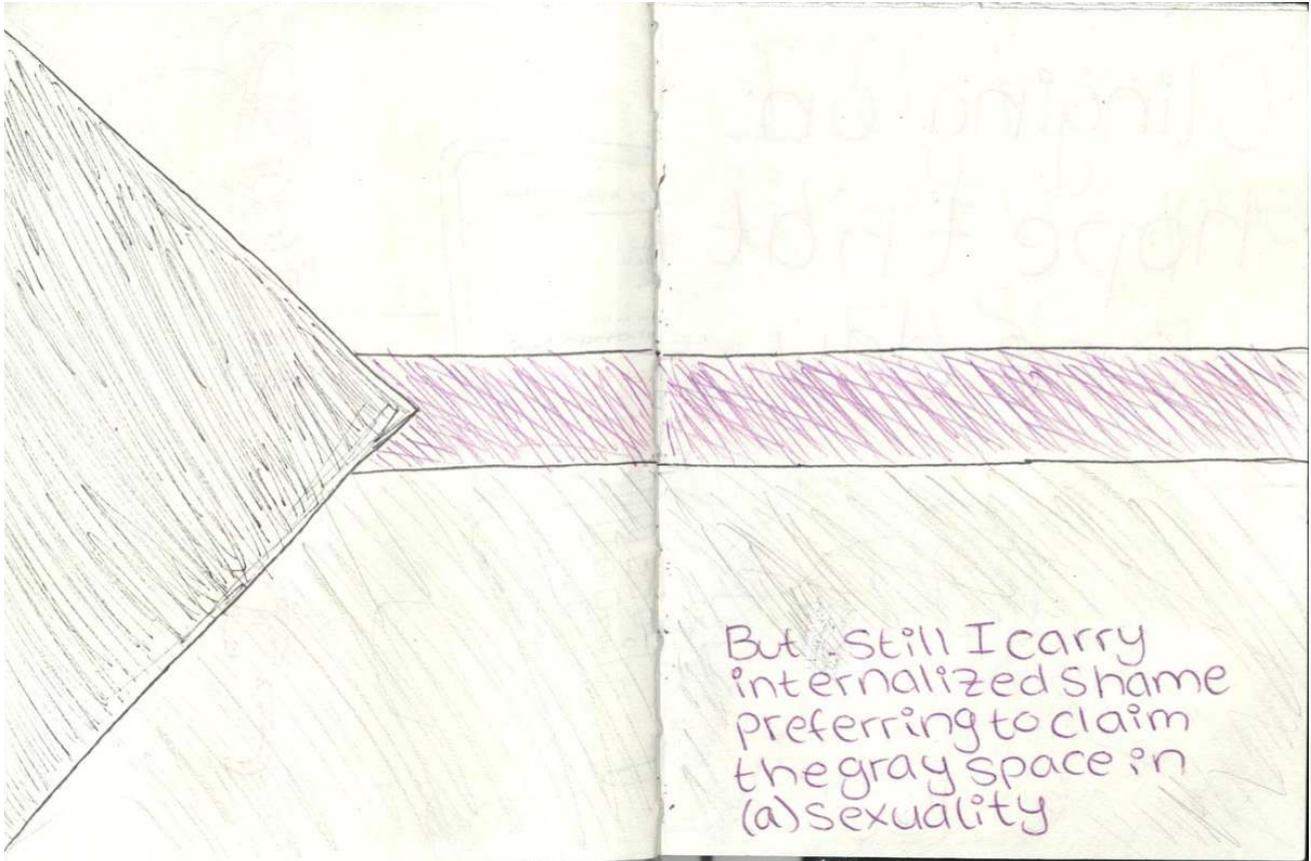






Because I knew exactly who I was the instant I learned of their existence





~~AND~~ THAT'S
WHAT SCARES
ME MOST
...

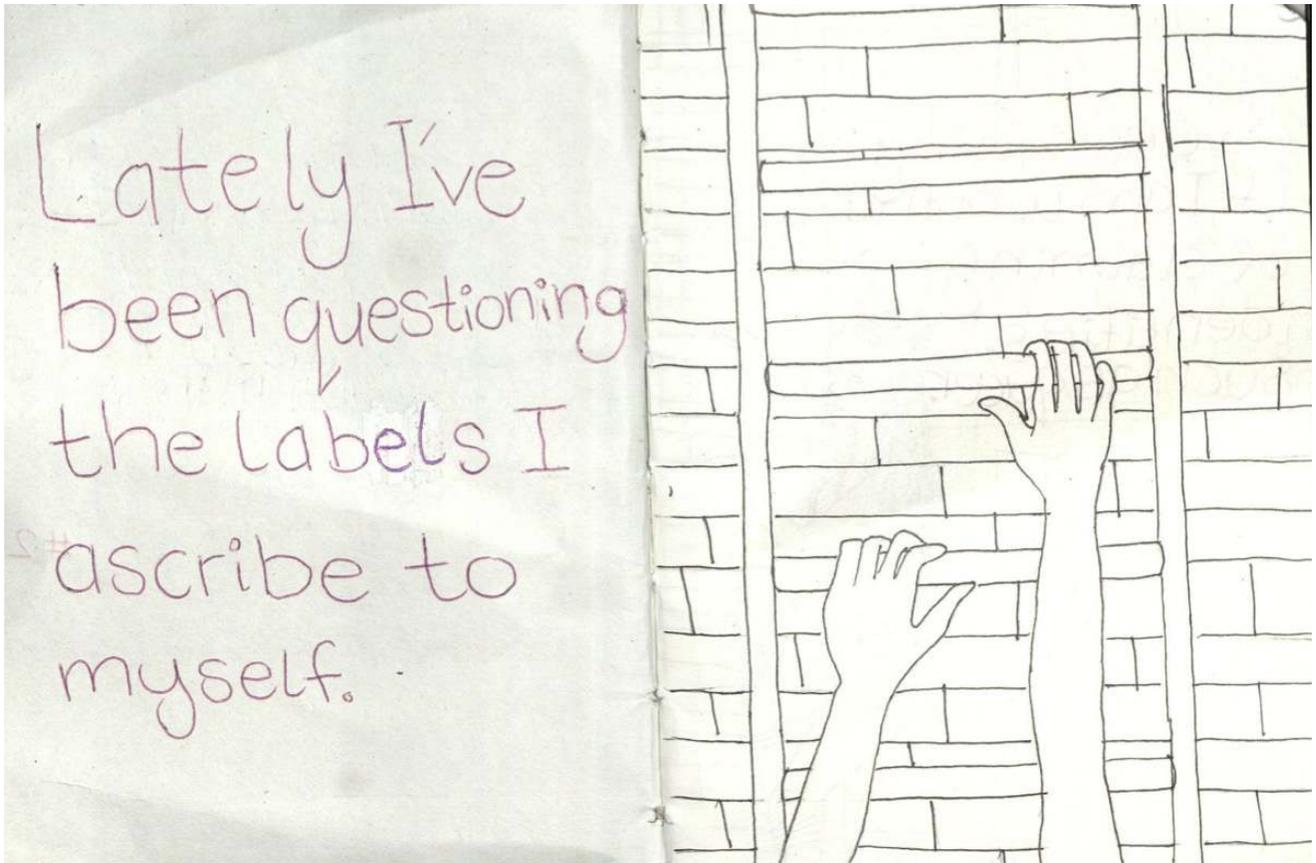
...my
desire
to
no longer
feel
alienated

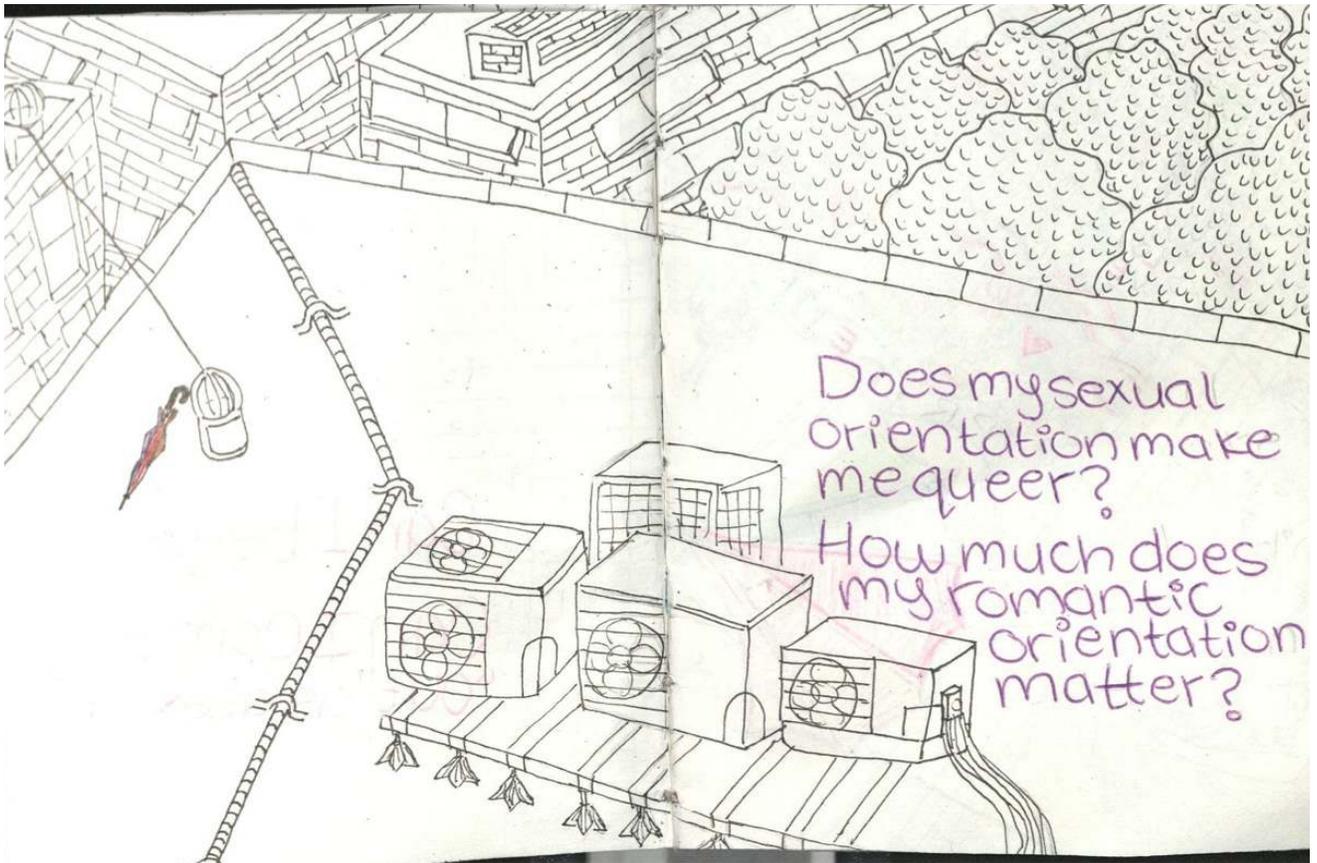
A hand-drawn illustration of a woman with long, textured hair, sitting on a patterned surface. The drawing is done in black ink on a light-colored background. The woman's hair is composed of many small, overlapping circles, giving it a beaded or braided appearance. She has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a simple, light-colored top. The surface she is sitting on is covered in a pattern of small, dark, curved lines, resembling a leopard print or a similar animal print. The drawing is positioned in the center of the page, between two columns of handwritten text.

It's a Process

(Be)coming Out Entry #2

By: Sasha Sanders



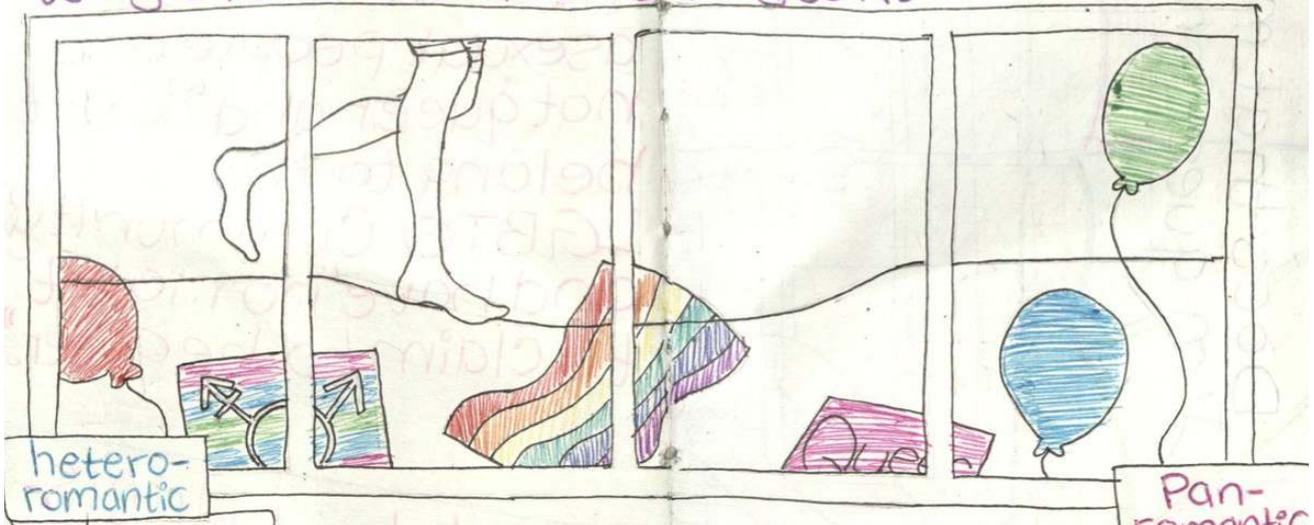




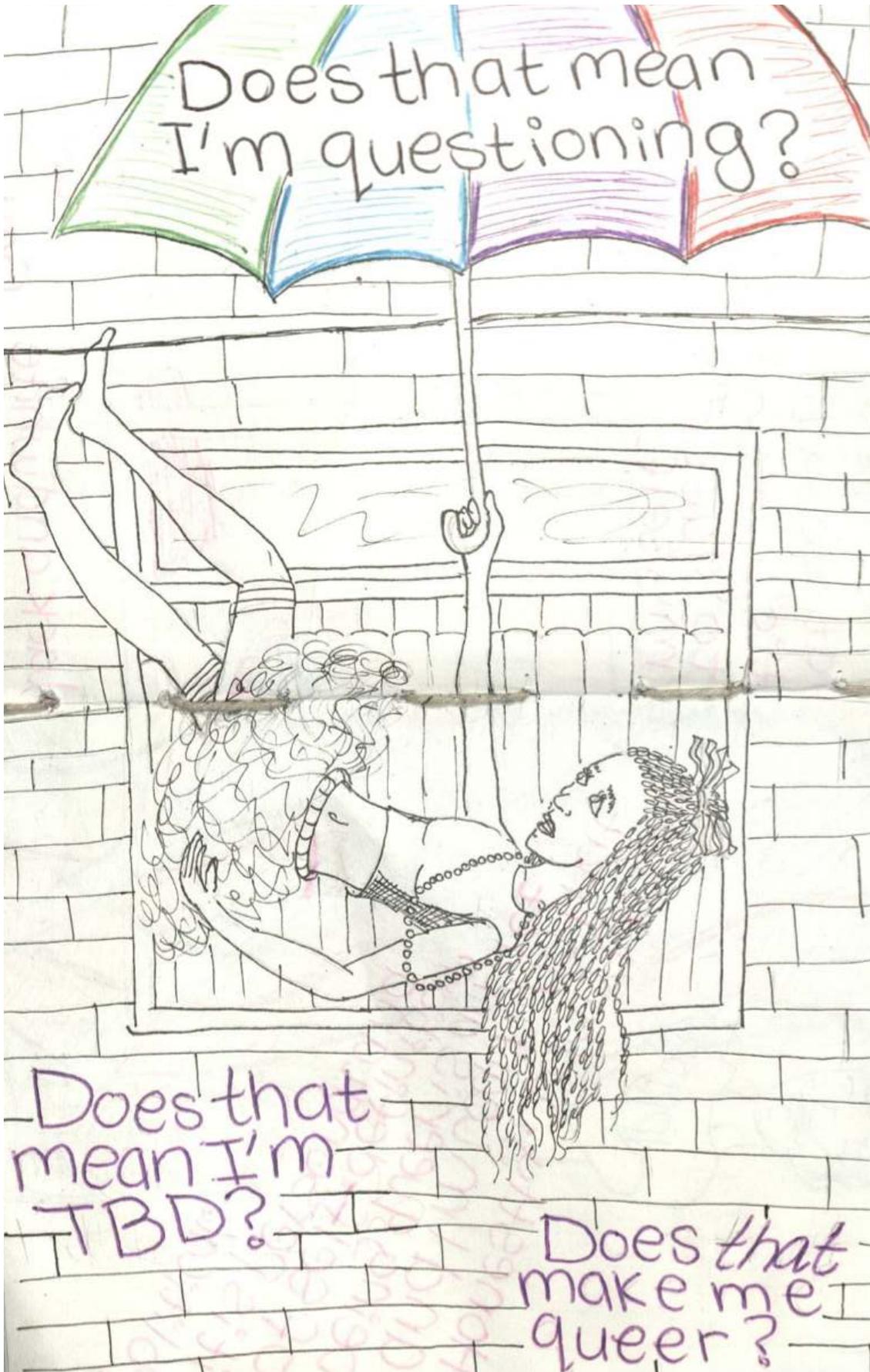
Some people say that cisgender heteroromantic asexual people are not queer and "do not belong to the LGBTQ Community" and have "no right to claim to be queer."

I admit I've only been with men ^{cis-}

Personally, It's not that easy to label myself "heteroromantic" which has made me gravitate to "queer" as my way of understanding myself.

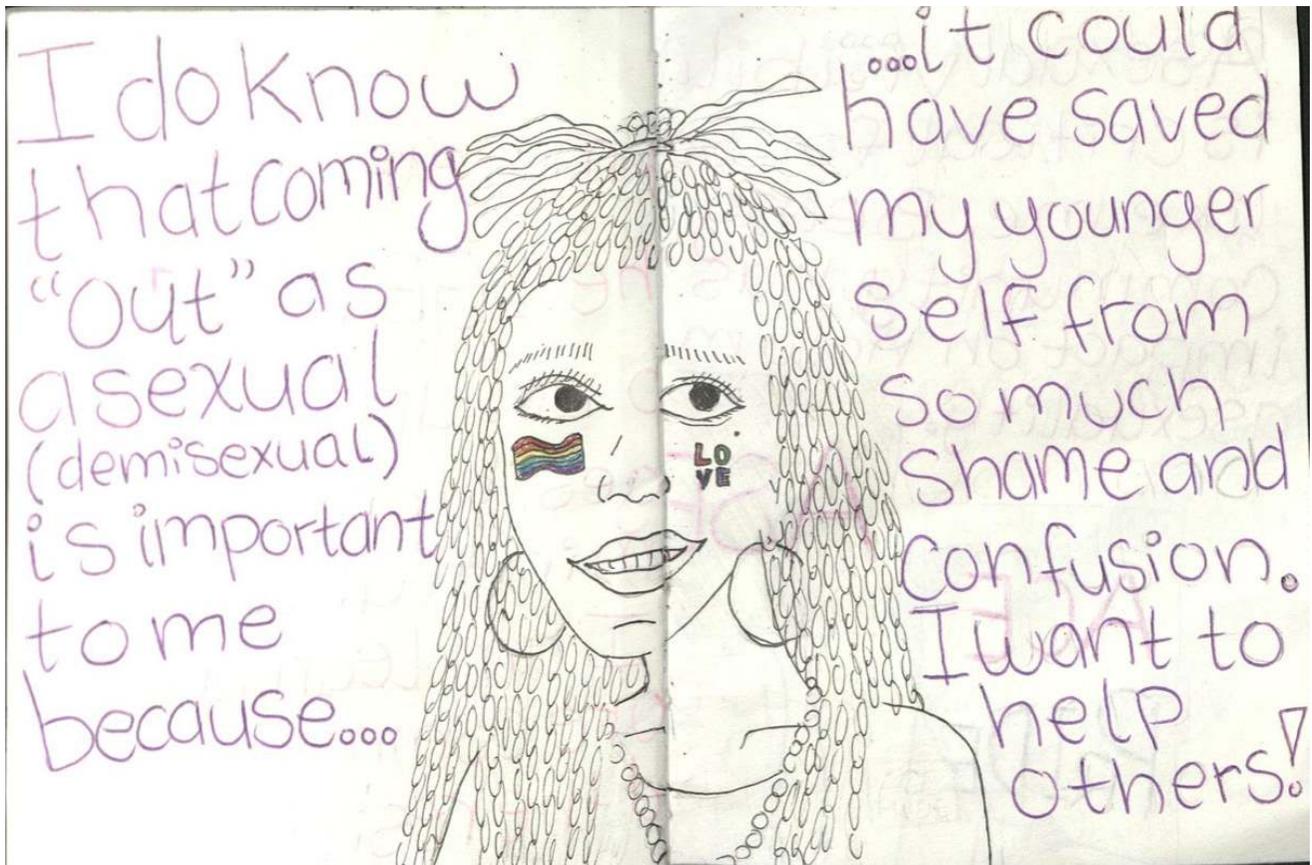


To me it's not black and white



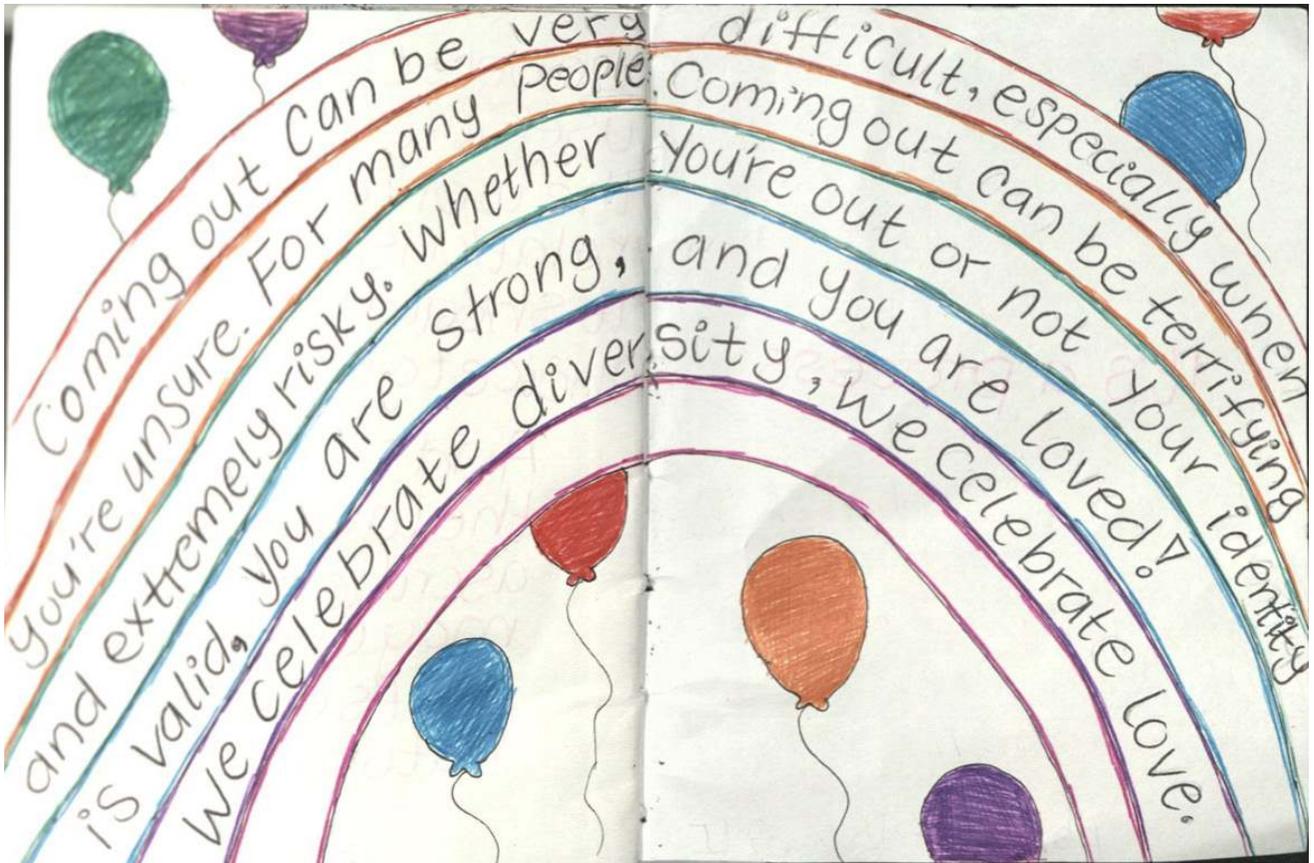


I am educating myself on queer theory and the LGBTQIA⁺ community. I try to not appropriate or let my privileges stop me from being a mindful ally and member. I am learning how I can be more committed to the fight and the resistance.





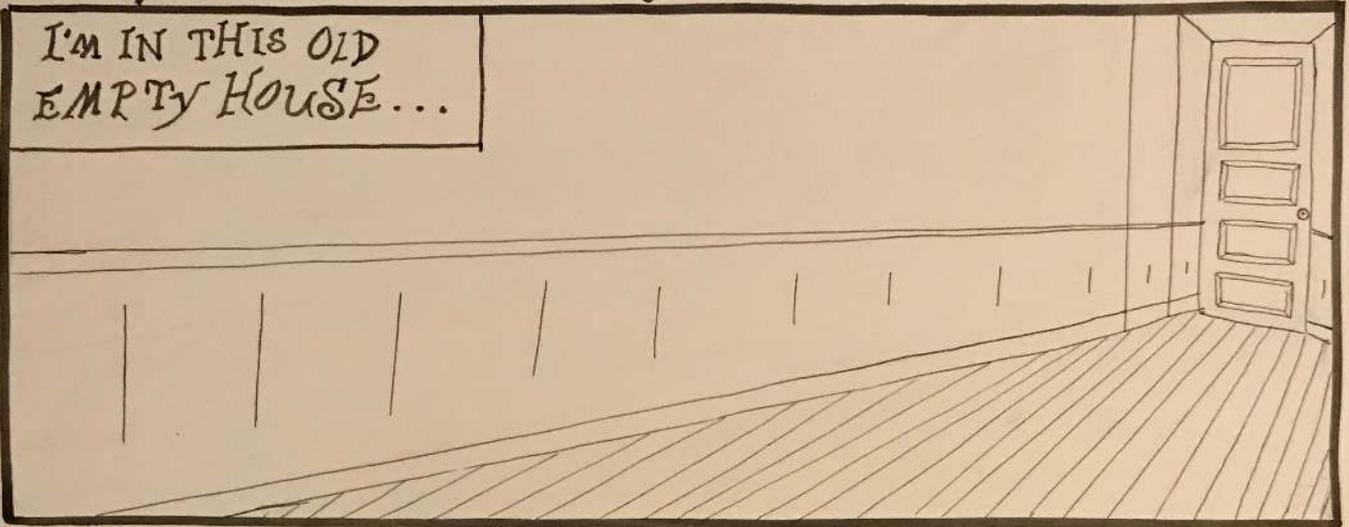
Labels can be useful for navigating the world and relationships but it should be your choice to use them. And sometimes the labels you ascribe to yourself may change and that's completely natural.



It's a Process

HAUNTED ACES by Sasha Sanders

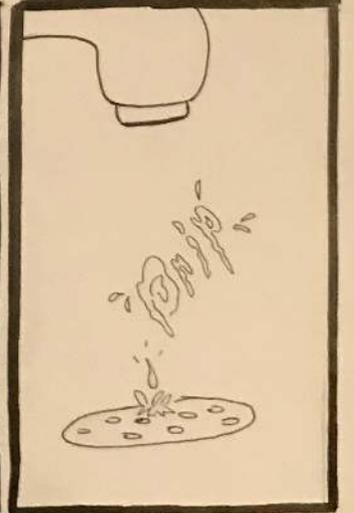
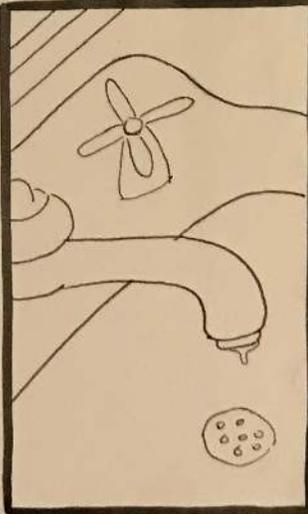
I'M IN THIS OLD
EMPTY HOUSE...

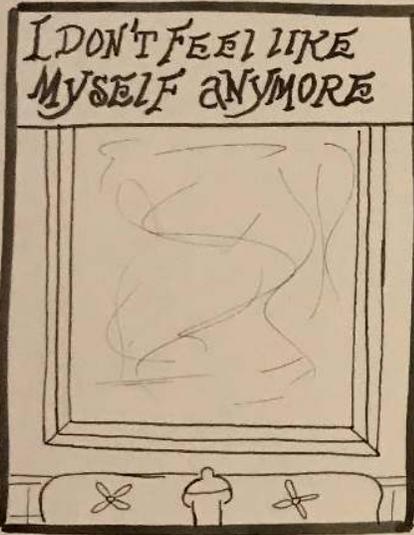


AND I FEEL SO ALONE

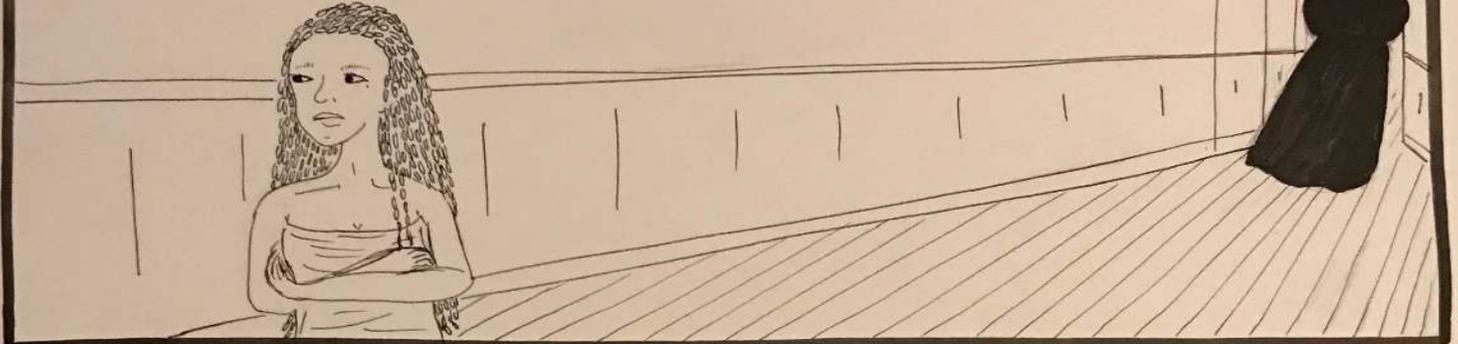


BUT THE HOUSE
ISN'T EMPTY



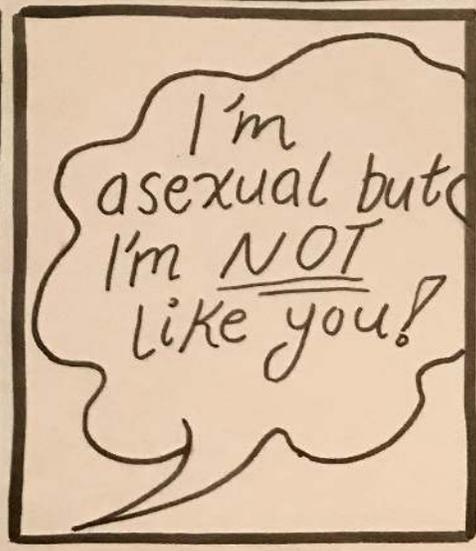


BUT IT FEELS LIKE THE WAY
PEOPLE LOOK AT ME HAS



I'M SUPPOSED TO BE A
BLACK FEMINIST

I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO
EMBRACE HER



I TRY TO RUN AWAY...



BUT SHE NEVER CHASES ME

INSTEAD, THEY WAIT FOR ME...



In dreams, a haunted house can symbolize that you need to address unresolved emotional matters.



End.