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Oral History Interview with Su'ad Abdul Khabeer
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.42
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on September 26, 2018
on the campus of University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan

ALI: Today is Wednesday, September 26, 2018. I'm Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society and the Project Director of the Muslims in Brooklyn project. I am here with Su'ad Abdul Khabeer in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and we are recording this oral history for the Muslims in Brooklyn project. Su'ad, if you can introduce yourself stating your name and when and where you were born.

ABDUL KHABEER: Mm-hmm. My name is Su'ad Abdul Khabeer. I was born in Syracuse, New York, much to my chagrin, on [date redacted for privacy], 1978.

ALI: What much to your chagrin?

ABDUL KHABEER: Well because I, you know, am Brooklyn. I'm -- you know, I -- I was raised in Brooklyn. We moved there, I think, when I was really little. I don't remember the age, but I remember living with one of my aunties, and, you know, we're Black people, so she's not a blood relative, but she is a blood relative. Her name was Jameela Jalal Uddin or Judith Flaherty, and she lived in Tivoli Towers, which is on Crown Street and Franklin in Brooklyn in Crown Heights. And when I was a little kid, we moved there, and we lived with her for a little bit, my mother and I. I was my mother's first child, and I was a single -- only child for 10 years and then one day, all that joy ended. I'm just kidding. [laughter] Just kidding, I love my sister, but I was a single child, the only child for 10 years, and so we lived with Auntie Jameela.

And so I just -- you know, Brooklyn is all I know and so I am -- 'cause we -- we left Syracuse. My mother and I left Syracuse when I was three months old. I'm pretty sure that that's how old I was and then I think for a short amount of time -- my mother actually is from Jamaica, Queens, so for a short amount of time, she moved back home with her mother and my grandmother Carmen Weeks, and -- and we lived at the house,

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but I don't remember any of that obviously. I just -- I just remember being in Brooklyn. Like, my earliest memories are there, and one that actually is so fun -- Auntie Jameela, she has passed away now, Allah yarhamha [God's mercy on her] but -- and she used to say -- like, she used to do my hair, so my mother could not do my -- my mother could not do hair to save anyone's life, and when she would comb my hair -- I have a lot of hair, and it was thick, and I was, you know, what you called tender headed, right, and so she would, like -- you know? So, the way you're supposed to comb Black hair, right, you're supposed to hold it at the roots, comb the ends and then work your way to the roots. My mother would just be like root, end, and I [laughter] was ready to die.

And so, she -- Auntie Jameela would do my hair. And I -- my earliest memories of that are like she would -- I guess they were cornrows, and she would put beads in my hair, and I used to love just shaking my head with the beads. I remember that, and she used to say that. She -- "You used to walk around and just shake, shake, shake, shake, shake, shake, shake." Little girls don't wear beads so much anymore. It's kind of sad but -- yeah. So anyway, yeah, so all I remember is Brooklyn. That's all I remember is Brooklyn. Everything, all the significant moments of my life until I was almost 18 were in Brooklyn.

And then in January of '96 -- so my grandmother's brother, Bernard Inniss and her father Edgar Inniss had bought a house together in Jamaica, Queens, too, but the area is called South Ozone Park in the mid-'60s. And Bernard lived in that house until he died in '94. And Bernard fought in Korea, and so we used to say -- my mother said he was shell-shocked, and I guess now that they call it PTSD. And so, he lived in that house. It looks like a barrack. It was, like, just full of stuff, and my grandmother just took care of him until he died. So, basically, she would come, you know, bring him groceries and so we would visit. You know, there would be like a little piece of some -- a little piece of couch for you to sit on [laughter] in Uncle Bernard's house. And he would

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give me, like, I think, Entenmann's Cookies probably, and, like, he would give me $10 or something like that, you know, whatever.

But anyway, when he -- when he passed away, my grandmother had the house kind of, you know, remade so that we could live in that. At that time, it was me, my mother, and my little sister Sharifa Avery, and -- who actually was born in Brooklyn. She wasn't born in Brookdale Hospital, so she --

ALI: Is there some envy there?

ABDUL KHABEER: There is a little bit, but she's a Queens girl even though she was trying to claim Brooklyn. But we moved to Queens when she was about 8, almost 8, and we moved when I was almost 18th, so if anybody's gonna [laughter] do that, right. And then anyway so --

ALI: So no, show me the birth certificate.

ABDUL KHABEER: No, no, no.

ALI: [inaudible]

ABDUL KHABEER: So -- but she -- yeah, so we moved there and then I spent about six months, I guess, until I graduated from coll-- high school and then I went to college, and so I really -- to this day, I still don't really know Queens like as a place. Like, I -- I don't know where to go. I have to, like, Google Map everything 'cause I don't know where everything is when I'm there, yeah.

ALI: Be-- besides the -- and we -- of course, we'll get into your history. Besides the history that you have in Brooklyn, is there any other reason why it's important for that not to be mistaken for people in -- in knowing who you are?

ABDUL KHABEER: I mean, no. I mean [laughter] I don't know. Well, one is, like, as New Yorkers like the borough that you come from, there's a lot of borough pride, so that's one thing. So, it's also like a cultural custom, I guess, where it's like, you claim. You know, it's, like, Manhattan keep -- [laughter] It's like -- you know? What is it? What does it say? Manhattan keep on -- well no, no, no. What is it? How does it go?

ALI: Somebody's making it, somebody's taking it.

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ABDUL KHABEER: No, no, no. Brooklyn people are taking it, I know that but -- say that. [laughter]

ALI: Somebody's taking --

ABDUL KHABEER: I think --

ALI: -- Manhattan.

ABDUL KHABEER: No, no, Manhattan keep on makin' it, Brooklyn keep on takin' it, the Bronx keep creatin' it, and Queens keeps on fakin' it.

ALI: Yeah.

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes. There you go.

ALI: Because I [inaudible]

ABDUL KHABEER: Right, right that. So --

ALI: The bridge wars [inaudible]

ABDUL KHABEER: The bri-- exactly, the bridge wars, and so -- and Brooklyn -- and my mother said -- it's funny. So, she -- she used to say that -- You know, she grew up in Queens, and she said, "Growing up in Queens, we used to be afraid of girls from Brooklyn." 'Cause they were, I guess, rougher or something like that. I don't know but -- but Brooklyn people are takin' it, you know, Bucktown, all that kind of stuff, you know, [laughter] like whatever.

But yeah, so I guess -- I mean just I think it's both kind of, like, my own personal experience there. Like, all of my formative experiences were there. And I think that's important, too, because the Brooklyn that I was raised in was very Black, very pro-Black, which was like the household I was raised in, very pro-Black in a Pan-African, diasporic way, which was also like the household I was raised in. And, I guess, it was dangerous, too, in certain points, but it was just a place that I think, for me -- and actually one day, I'm gonna do -- I keep saying one day. I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna write something like when I left Brooklyn. Because I think that -- like I always tell people when I got to college, and I don't know if this was like on a c-- on a visit or when I actually got there. But, like, I was walking down -- so, Georgetown has this um, when

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you -- so, the front gates, I guess it's, kind of, like -- I don't know. It's not a quad. I don't think it's technically that but, you know, a place where there's grass. And so, kids ae on the grass and they're, like, playing volleyball, and they're all -- they look like people on TV, like White people on TV. And I'm like, "These people exist?" like, you know, [laughter] right? 'Cause like -- I'm like, you know, it's TV.

ALI: Like I walked into the set of *90210*. [laughter]

ABDUL KHABEER: Literally. I'm like, "What is going on here?" Because, you know, you watch TV and stuff, but you always know that, like, it's TV, right?

ALI: Right.

ABDUL KHABEER: And it's not meant to be real or whatever. And I realized, like, in New York, like, nobody cares what other people are doing really. And there are so many different kinds of people living in so many different kinds of ways. And it's not that you don't have pressures to look and conform, I'm not saying that -- but it's just like no -- everyone -- the thing is everybody looked the same, and I was like, "Whoa, like, what is going on here?" And so, I feel like in some ways --

Like, I remember, I used to tell -- I was telling this story to a friend and, like, "I probably came to Georgetown in like, you know, purple, like, wide-leg cross-colored jeans or something or -- you know, what I mean -- and like a crazy hat. And I left Georgetown in a black skirt and a salmon-colored, like button-down, you know? And I didn't even know how that happened because I remember one day I was like, "What the hell is going on here?" Right? But, like, my kind of Muslim version of, like, I guess, preppy wear. I ended up -- and I didn't, like, totally lose everything, but you know, there was thing that happened. And so I feel like -- you know?

And, you know, 'cause, like, you know, I grew up in New York. I went to Islamic school from kindergarten to the eighth grade then I went to a public high school. And my Islamic school was Black and Latino, like, right, Latinx. My public school was mixed, but there were Black people and Latinx people and Asian people and White people and

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whatever. But then my college was White and then my graduate school is White. So, it's just like an elite White. Like, I'll never forget I had this f-- a fr-- or whatever -- I shouldn't talk about them -- so-and-so, anyway, somebody that I knew. Like people driving, like, Lexuses, like, people who have money for real, like, I didn't know what that was, right? People had, like, m-- money for real, like real money, not -- not play money, [laughter] like real money. And you you're like, "Oh, that really exists too," you know, like, whatever.

So, I think in Princeton, too, it's just, like -- although I was a graduate student, so I wasn't as much involved in undergraduate scene, which I think a lot of those things are much more, you know, apparent. But I was just like, "Dang, like, it's just --" you know?

So, I think in Brooklyn -- Brooklyn affirmed me, right? And so, everything around me affirmed who I was, like my school, my friends, the community events you -- we went to whether it was Eid or the Kwanzaa celebration or the African dance class. You know what I mean? Like the music on the radio -- like, everything affirmed who you were and I think -- so I think that's also probably why it's important.

ALI: Okay. So, I look forward to hearing more about that. Tell me -- as we get into your Brooklyn story, tell me a little bit about your family's background. Where is your family from?

ABDUL KHABEER: Right. So, my -- so my mother's family. So her -- she has two -- her paternal grandparents were immigrants to New York from the island of Montserrat, which is still a part of the British -- I guess, it's still, I think, a -- I don't know, colony but whatever. But it's still a part of the -- the -- what did they call it the --?

ALI: The commonwealth?

ABDUL KHABEER: The commonwealth, yes.

ALI: Yeah.

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ABDUL KHABEER: There you go. And then her maternal grandparents were immigrants from Barbados. My father is an immigrant from Panama, so. And his family, like a lot of Black Panamanians were Jamaican before they were Panamanian, you know.

ALI: And your parents, were they both born here or your father --

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, so, no, he was born in Panama.

ALI: Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: He came to the United States, I think, when he was like 13. My mother was born here because her parents were born here.

ALI: Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: So then she was born in Harlem. Her parents were born in Harlem and she -- where did she say she lived? She used to tell me, and I have to look it up. It's like 145 [145th Street] maybe Convent Avenue. It's at a -- there's a park across the street up there. So, she was there and then how she have -- oh, wait, I can -- can look at it?

ALI: Mm-hmm.

ABDUL KHABEER: Can I look for the --? Just because I think I have a picture. No, I didn't bring it with me. Forget it.

ALI: Okay, yeah.

ABDUL KHABEER: Okay. No, I have a picture from -- from when she was a baby or like a toddler and they -- Her -- her g-- her father seemed to be very much the documentarian, and so, like, he took lots of photos and he marked everything, like -- with, like, names --

ALI: That's awesome.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- and years. And then, like, for example, it was, like, outside of this address, like, this kind of stuff or this park or whatever and so. So, I have some of that.

ALI: Oh, that's cool.

ABDUL KHABEER: That -- yeah.

ALI: So, tell me, growing up, you're -- so, you said you moved to Brooklyn with your mother?

ABDUL KHABEER: Mm-hmm.

ALI: What was your relationship with your father during this period?

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ABDUL KHABEER: So, nonexistent. From what I know, so my mother and my father -- so, my mother became a Muslim in '75, and think my father might have become a Muslim at the same time but separately or maybe earlier. I -- I have -- I recently asked him about this. I forget when he said. He -- in Brooklyn, he became a Muslim. She became a Muslim in prison, but she wasn't a prisoner actually, yeah. [laughter] She used to visit, she used to visit political prisoners in Ossining, a penitentiary in New York. It was the Green Haven Correctional Facilities, Facility rather. And so, one time, she was there and they were having a Mawlid at the prison, and she took her shahada then.

So, they met -- he told me they met -- so, they met, I guess, in '77 at -- he said at the MSA conference in Indiana. And then they got married in November of '77 in Brooklyn. So, see as -- you know, I just start in Brooklyn.

ALI: Mm-hmm. That's such an interesting story with your mom. It's -- it's a very different prison conversion story, right?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes, right. But -- and this is, okay, I know I'm not supposed to analyze but, but I -- I did a little thing about her conversion in around -- there's a book that's written about this. It was called the Sankore Masjid in the prison. And then this -- the -- according to this one book, they said according to the prison records, like in the year that she converted, so, like, she converted in '75. So, maybe, like, '74 to '76, they said this masjid had the most conversions of any in the country. And a lot of the people were not inmates. They were people who are visiting.

And so, they -- so, anyway they met at this conference and they got married in November of '77, and my mother told the story. She's like, "You know, the wedding in November was actually the wedding basically for the non-Muslims." It was, like -- it was actual-- like a wedding reception type of thing. Although, she said they did do, like, an actual service. So, the wedding was at Pratt Community Towers, which I don't even know if that still exist. But it's about Pratt U-- Pratt -- Pratt University had housing over there.

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And Auntie Aaliyah, Aaliyah Abdul-Karim who was like -- so, she said she met Auntie Aaliyah outside of -- so on -- on Hoyt and Schermerhorn where -- like on the other side of Fulton Street, there used to be a gro -- a store A&S, like a department store. So, she said she was in A&S, and she saw this sister. She's like, "Are you Muslim," and she's, like, "Yeah" and then they became good friends like that. And so, she said Auntie Aaliyah got her to Pratt community center for the -- for the reception.

But they, got married before then probably 'cause she says she got pregnant. 'Cause she was pregnant at the -- at the wedding in November, so I guess -- and I was born in June -- so like maybe September. So she said September they got married, and they got married. Well, she said -- she actually said when she got married, three times she said. First was by this brother in Staten Island, but the second time was -- this is in Brooklyn -- was by -- she calls him Baba Sheikh but Imam Daoud Faisal. And so, he married them in September probably at State Street [Mosque], I'm not sure. I just forget where she said it was at, but he also signed their marriage license. So, I have a copy of the marriage license that I found, and his signature is on it and then, of course, Auntie Aaliyah signed it and this other brother Daoud Ahad who was a friend of hers from like, I think they went to, like, middle school together or something like that. He's also from Queens, and he was the one who -- who started -- he started Medina Incense. So, you see those incenses? So, he started that. So he -- his signature is on it and Auntie Aaliyah and then Daoud Faisal was the officiate 'cause he was --

ALI: Right, yeah.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- registered as a, you know, officiant. And so, they had gotten married. She moved to Syracuse because my father was in law school at the time. But their relationship didn't last super long because she told me by the time I was six months old, I guess, he was just like, "I'm not --" Well, she told me he was like, "I don't love you." Or something crazy like that. And so -- I know [laughter] -- so, like, like, the drama, so. And so, you know, she left, kind of, brokenhearted and went back to New York.

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And so, my father, you know, I've made my -- I've co-- Like, as an adult now, I've, kind of, come to a place where he and I have a relationship of -- of sorts, which is still kind of awkward but trying to figure it out. You know, I had to, kind of, come to terms with, like, his absence and -- and, you know, he has issues that I -- that I kind of -- you know, I begin to understand. And so, that explained his absence -- it doesn't excuse it, but it explained it but -- so I, kind of, make my peace with that. And so, he and I have a relationship now that's, kind of, growing. But at the -- but growing up, we didn't really.

And, like, so he would come into town. So my father, people know him in Muslim communities, particularly, around, kind of, sort of, like, dawah stuff in Latin America 'cause he's Latino or what have you. He's Black, Afro Latino, and he speaks, and so he did a lot -- he does a lot of work like that. So, like, there's this group IslamInSpanish in Texas, so he does a lot of translations, and he translates a lot of stuff from Arabic into Spanish. And so, he will go around the world doing all those kind of dawah stuff, and so every now and again, he will show up and I will see him here or there, that type of thing. But he wasn't around, like, at all. So, I didn't -- so, he was just not there.

ALI: I mean when did you -- so, were your feelings towards him whenever he would show up, were they like, "This is my father, I'm excited" or just --

ABDUL KHABEER: I don't --

ALI: -- like "Who are you?" -- or -- ?

ABDUL KHABEER: No. I mean to be honest, I don't remember. So, I feel like -- so, I feel like -- so, one thing I'll say is I think my mother -- so my mother was never -- you know, you're told stories of women who are like, "Oh, your father's no good." She never once said that 'cause she didn't actually have to. You know it's like -- it's like he was absent so it wasn't like -- she didn't have to tell me anything about that. She was always really insistent that she wanted me to see him if he was around, this kind of thing.

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Like, I tell the story, you know. When I went to Egypt in college -- I went to study abroad in Egypt in college and my mother was like, "I want your father to go with you?" And I'm, kind of, like, "What?" [laughter] Like, "Why? Like, who is this guy?" you know, whatever. But he did or he did sh-- somehow it just ha-- I guess they just coordinated, and so that actually happened. So, she was like that. So she's like, "This is your father. He has a responsibility to you." This kind of thing. So, she was always, like, wanting that to happen.

I think, for me, my feelings were -- so, initially -- 'cause I remember one time he said he was coming, and I waited for him, and he didn't show up. And I feel, like, in my memory that's suppo-- it was, like, really tragic I guess but more like an after-school special tragic not like -- you know? [laughter] Like, I didn't -- I wasn't, like, destroyed, I think, but I think it was also the kind of thing where it was, like, I kind of knew that might happen but anyway. But -- but -- but I remember it. I remember it. So, I remember that and then I remember -- and then I think I remember -- so, I remember that. So, kind of ambivalent maybe and then angry.

Because for me, like, I was raised Muslim and I was raised -- like, my mother was a practicing Muslim, and I was raised to be a practicing Muslim. And so, I know all the things you're supposed to do as a Muslim and taking care of your children is one of them, right? And because -- because of my father's, sort of, like, skills or education as a Muslim, someone that p-- someone who would translate things, someone who was, I think -- people would say -- you know, people -- so, he -- he was prominent in a particular kind of way, right? He wasn't always around, so he wasn't a prominent like that, but he was in a particular kind of way. And so, for that reason, I'd be like, "But you can't, you can't be doing this, and you're not that," you know, that kind of thing.

So, I remember once, I went to the -- so, we used to have this thing. It was called the Expo. So, the Expo was this thing that happens every May for a really long time. I

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forget when the last Expo was. And it used to be at -- over on Tillary -- what's that school over there -- Jay Street. There's a, like tech -- some school. So, they used to have it over there, but one year when they moved it, they moved it over. They had it at Medgar Evers [College] that's close to my house. And I remember someone, like, came up to me, "Oh, look, oh, you're Abdul Khabeer's daughter." And I was, kind of, like, "No, I'm Amina's daughter, thank you very much," right? Because it's like he would claim me, which I guess, he's supposed to do in a sense that, "These are my kids, like, I'm not --" whatever.

But it's like -- but because of my accomplishments, it's like -- okay, I'm, like, but you can't claim that, you know what I mean? Like, my mother did that, you know, that kind of thing. So I'll be, like, "You know what? No." Okay, whatever. But like-- but -- but yeah. So, anyway, so I think -- at first, I think, I was kind of ambivalent. I didn't really understand. And to be honest like, I tell people, I used to say this. I don't know. People say a lot of stuff about girls, particularly who were raised without their fathers. But, like, none of that happened to me. You know, people be like, "Oh, like, you know, you'll get pregnant." I wa-- you know, I was a virgin when I got married, and I got married at 27, you know, or whatever. [laughter] You know what I mean? Like, I have advanced degrees. You know, I was really active. I traveled. So, like -- not that I don't think his absence probably had -- has some, you know, whatever. I've -- I've -- I've tried therapy to figure that out or whatever. But I also feel like, you know, I didn't -- like, I don't feel like I missed it as a kid. I -- I -- I mean the way I th-- the way I -- way I feel about my childhood and the way I think about my childhood, like there were men in my community that were around. Like, I know what a goo-- what a good man is or what a good man looks like, you know what I mean?

And, you know, I feel like -- I feel like -- yeah, I feel -- I don't know. I just feel like it wasn't -- yes, he should have been there. Yes, that's the way things are supposed to be, but I don't -- but I didn't feel -- I don't feel, like, I felt like pining or this kind of thing.

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You know, it was, kind of, like -- because I just never knew. I mean, I guess, it'd be different, I suppose, if it was, like, you know, he had been there for a while and then he left. But he was never there, so I was just like, “Okay.” You know? So, I -- just for me that wasn’t something that I felt -- I feel like when I was growing up was this kind of, "Oh my god, I don’t have a father." This kind of thing.

Even, like, now, people just talk about divorce and stuff 'cause my mother was married six times, and even now, people talk about like, people are like, "Oh, my parents are getting divorced." I'm like, "Okay." You know? Like, what am I gonna do? Like their world is falling apart. And, like, I get it because I think they have that kind of -- but to me, I'm like, "People get divorced. It happens, whatever." I don’t think you should get divorced if you don’t have to, but I also don’t believe you should be -- 'cause, like, for example, I watch a lot of novelas, right? I watch lots of novelas. And there's this whole thing of, like, this theme that comes up about divorce. Like if you -- oh, you had a kid. Like, so, say a couple -- like there's one I'm watching right now. The -- the husband is, like, abusive or whatever, and the woman gets pregnant, and it's like, "Oh, well, you can't get divorced because the child can't be raised without their father." And it's like, "What are you talking about?" you know? Divorce doesn’t mean you're raised without your father. It just means there's a different kind of configuration. So, like, why would you stay in a relationship that's horrible? For what? Like that's stupid.

So, I feel, like, I have a different -- yeah. So, I don’t know. So, I feel like -- yeah. I mean, like, so he was absent, and that's what -- it is what it is. But I -- but I don’t necessarily feel like my life outcomes were really affected, and that is, you know, all due to my mother.

So, my mother, I remember. So, I used to go to these -- so, by the time I was like 10 I wanna say -- so, my mother was always really active, and I was active, like, sort of in my local community, and so I went to Islamic school. My Girl Scouts was like, Muslim

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Girls Scouts or whatever. And we used to go to Camp Kaufmann, which is Upstate New York, and they'd take their troops. And different mothers, like my mother, other people's mothers would bring all the girls. And I remember one time we went to Camp Kaufmann -- I think I was eight or something -- and those mosquitoes bit me up, oh my God. And I remember like I couldn't -- it's, like, my whole, like bottom half of my leg, and I could not sleep. It was just, like, "Aah," anyway.

And so, she also used to send me to camps, like Muslim Youth of North America. They would have summer camps, too, and so she would send me to those camps, too, which were different 'cause she wasn't there, and it was not -- not Black and -- you know, it was mostly like -- probably South Asian, now that I think about it, maybe some Arabs too. But -- but so -- so, she would send me to these things. What was my point? There was a point here.

ALI: You were talking about all of the community things your mother was very active.

ABDUL KHABEER: Right, right. And so -- but there was a point --

ALI: I think you were talking about -- we were coming off of the conversation of you not feeling the absence of your father.

ABDUL KHABEER: Right, and so I feel -- I don't know -- I just feel really active. You know, there was a really important point. It's gone for me now.

ALI: It will come back.

ABDUL KHABEER: It will come back. Yeah.

ALI: Yes.

ABDUL KHABEER: But just in terms of, like, I think -- I guess, in terms of like going to these things and these activities and these camps -- yeah, I don't know what it was, but anyway.

ALI: Okay. Well, let's -- let's track back to that. Tell us -- tell me about the schools you went to. You said you went to a Muslim school --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: -- all the way through eighth grade?

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ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: So, what were the schools you went to, and -- and what were your experiences?

ABDUL KHABEER: So, the first school I went to was called Bismillah Learning Center. And it was started by Rafiq and Tauheedah Shaheed. And it's funny 'cause Brother Rafiq, actually, was a fireman too. And my grandfather was a fireman, although he had died before I was born, so I didn't know him. But I remember Brother Rafiq telling me and my mother because he was a Black fireman, that people knew of my grandfather 'cause he was so early, like, as a Black fireman. So, Brother Rafiq, Sister Tauheedah and then Latifah -- and her name was also [Shakir], right, I think? But she wasn't -- they weren't, like, married or anything like that. She had her own husband.

And so, they lived in like a brownstone or something in Park Slope, and they started this school. And from what I remember, I was five when I was started there because before then I was in like in pre-K stuff and then I went to the school. And I remember we used to be in sister's -- I think it was Sister Tauheedah's house in her living room, and it was small. It was like me -- and so Sister Tauheedah, at that time, and Brother Rafiq, they had -- at that time, I think, it was just the -- because they have four kids, but I think, at the time, they had two -- Khalilah and -- and Zakiyyah and then Sister Latifah and her husband, they had two kids, Nafeesa and her brother whose name I'm forgetting now. And there was me and then there were other people's kids. I think like Sister Omi's kid. There were other people's kids who were there too.

And I remember that that school, they used a homeschooling curriculum as this the -- as the curriculum for the -- for the school. And so when I was basically, I think, from -- I think the very first year, maybe first two years, kindergarten, I remember we were in the brownstone and then we moved -- then the school moved to Masjid Al-Farooq on Atlantic Avenue, and they had -- there's a third floor that the school was in. And so -- and I remember -- I remember, like, for example, the classrooms were kind of -- It was -- I guess it was kind of shotgun-y the space. The classrooms were next to each other.

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And I remember -- I remember one class, we learned -- it was so funny, too, now that I think about it 'cause I don't know how we learned, but we learned how to wash bodies for janazah, and so we had -- we had, like, dolls, you know [laughter] and, like, we, kind of, just do that. I remember that clearly, and I guess -- I'm not -- I'm not sure. I guess -- I'm not that stu-- And that's the other thing. Just a side note, people who have kids they'll be like, "Oh, I don't want my kids to hear about Trump." I'm, like, "What are you talking about? Like oh -- [laughter]

ALI: I was washing bodies when I was five years old.

ABDUL KHABEER: That's right. I'm, like, you know -- [laughter] It's like -- or people who will be like, "Oh my god, my kids feel so left out because they don't celebrate Christmas." And I'm, like, "When I was a kid like --" So, one I went to Islamic school but like -- I mean, I got Christmas presents because of my grandmother, and it was, kind of, like that's your grandmother or whatever. But, like, I, also, was taught that, like, the Christmas tree was a pagan symbol, and this guy slept with his mom and when he died -- [laughter] You know, that's why the tree, you know? And so, like -- so there -- there's no myth, right, in the way I was raised. We didn't have any myths, right. [laughter] It was just like, "Here's what happened. Everybody was Black, that was important, you know what I mean. This is a lie. And you know what, Santa Claus ain't real." And I feel like I was not the worst for it, you know?

ALI: So, growing up was your entire -- besides your -- your grandmother and ex--- and the family in that way, was your entire, kind of, social circle --

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, yeah. I used to say -- like, I have this poem that I wrote and I say, like, I grew up in Dar ul-Islam [Abode of Islam] 'cause, like -- like, everybody was Muslim. So, like, my grandmother, my uncle, right, you know that. My -- so my extended, like, sort of, bio family was not. But that's not who you spent most of your time with. I mean I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, yes. Like probably every weekend, I was at her house. But, like, in terms of like the social circles, everybody -- everybody was Muslim. So I was, like, I grew -- I -- I was like -- I would say I grew up in a Muslim country, you know? [laughter] Like, whatever, you know, it was, like -- so, I

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remember. It was Habibullah Day Care I think it was called and -- but they had a summer camp. I remember one time we were marching, like literally, I guess, we were marching. Maybe we were walking, but I remember. And we were singing like, [sings] "Everywhere we go, people want to know, we are the Muslims, the mighty, mighty Muslims." I remember that. I remember, like, you know, walking through Prospect Park or whatever and, like, singing this song, at Habibullah Day Care. And that was, like, Brother Rashid who's now Shaikh Rashid, and his wife and I'm forgetting -- or [inaudible]

ALI: We interviewed him in this --

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: -- in this collection, so.

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes, and his wife, yeah. So, yeah. So, we did that at Habibullah. And they used to live -- because they used to have a house on Herkimer, and that's I think over where Yasin [Masjid] used to be. And I remember we used to go there, and I used to hang out with her -- their daughters. They were friends, so we'd go around and stuff like that. But, yeah, no, it was super Muslim. So I'm always kind of like -- Like, I didn't have non-Muslim friends, so, like, basically I think --

So when I went -- so we mo-- we moved from 1720 Bedford Avenue to the next building in Ebbets Field, moved to the 22nd floor. And I had a f-- a friend and my friend Ayele. So, Ayele, I probably met when we moved there. We moved there I was like 10th, 11 or something like that. Now, there was a guy, a kid I used to play with on my grandma's block Anante. And it's funny because I think they were, like, Hindu or Buddhist or something. They were Black. I remember they used to wear these beads around their neck. There were certain things he couldn't eat. And so, we used to be friends on my grandma's block. And, you know, my grandma's block -- she's in Queens. You know, it's different. It's Queens. There's houses, fireflies, all that kind of stuff there, [laughter] right?

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But then -- but I think Ayele, probably, was my first, like, non-Muslim friend friend, and I was, like, 11 or something like that. And she was also -- like, her parents were immigrants from -- from -- from West Africa, so she was non-Muslim but, you know, there were similar kinds of, like, I think, social -- just ideas about like, you know, what you do, where you go, that kind of stuff in terms of protecting. Like I -- 'cause I definitely was protected, I think. My mother definitely sheltered me or tried to shelter me.

So, I grew up at Ebbets Fields and Ebbets Field was built -- so, Ebbets Field, itself, was where the Brooklyn Dodgers used to play and -- and Jackie Robinson used to play there. And I think when the Dodgers left Brooklyn, I wanna say -- I don't know -- I didn't actually look this stuff up but like -- in, like, the '60s or so, they converted it into these high-rise apartments that were meant to be middle-income housing. And, you know, New York has lots of rent control and that kind of thing. I wanna say -- at least, this is what the folklore is. I don't know if it's true or not. Like, it was mostly White, probably a lot of Jewish folks who lived in there. Black people started moving in, like in the late '60s or the '70s, and the quality of the management declined.

And this thing is really interesting, too, thinking about Black people and Jews because, like, you know, I grew up in Crown Heights, so Hasidim everywhere. Now, you don't really know them because they don't interact with you, but they ran our building, right? And so, it was funny because you think about how people just talk about the idea about anti-Semitism in Black communities, which to me is, like, laughable, but it's also, like, can we talk about the predatory way, right? And -- and not nec-- I don't know if it's all Jews, but the Hasidic Jewish community in Crown Heights, like, they were predatory to me. Like, that's what they was. Like, I live on the 18th floor or 22nd floor. You know how many times I had to walk up to the 22nd floor? You come home from school, you come from whoever, you got grocery bags, and you're walking up the floor because the

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elevators don't work. And there's no reasons for the elevators not to work, right? It's just the management is not talking care of the place.

And so, it was, like -- so we -- you know, so we -- so we, kind of, grew up, and we were raised there in terms of -- let's see. I lost my thought -- train of thought again. 'Cause I wasn't gonna talk about that, but it came to me. So, I was like --

ALI: But you were talking about Ayele was the first --

ABDUL KHABEER: Right, so Ayele was -- so, so, anyway, so -- oh this is my point, so protection. So, like -- you know? So, because -- because the -- so, the Ebbets Field itself, the management wasn't taking care of it as well and then crack, right? So, I remember, you know, you're walking by, and there's crack vials on the street, all that kind of stuff. You know, I got that story like everybody else. But -- so, my mother wouldn't let me go there 'cause I -- like the Ebbets Field is, like, there's a huge kind of, like, patio that connects all the buildings. And kids will go down and play. My mother would not let me play downstairs. I wouldn't do that.

You know, like, instead, like, for example, my friend, her friend -- she had her friend Sister Jamillah Adeeb who they went to high school together. She went to Jamaica High. Neither of them were Muslim. They meet each other later, and they both had become Muslim. Although, Sister Jameela who was an interesting story too -- you probably should interview her, 'cause her -- although, she's from Queens anyway but -- apparently, her grandpa-- her -- her last name was Adib because her grandfather had converted to Islam. And she wasn't raised Muslim, but that's how she had this Adib name. But later, she becomes a Muslim and her -- she had a daughter Aleesha who we were the same age. And so, for example, my mother would take me -- I spent a lot of time with Alisha and she had stepsisters. And they lived in a brownstone in Bed-Stuy, so I would, like, spend a lot of time with them or she would take me places. But, like, I never just hung out, like, in my neighborhood kind of thing in -- in that way, you know, what I mean?

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ALI: Like, what kind of things will you do for recreation growing up?

ABDUL KHABEER: So, like -- so, let's see. So, yeah, I mean hang out. Well, when I went to Alisha's house, we would make up dances, right, because that's what you do. [laughter] And so, whatever the song was at the time, make up these dances. Oh, yeah, and Alisha's house, too, was great. Sister Jameela's house was great because they would have these iftars during Ramadan that were like -- and so, they had -- had a brownstone, so it's the basement -- you know, the basement ground level, your first level, second floor, third floor. I don't know if there was a fourth floor to the brownstone. And they would have this iftar, and I used to come and help and prepare, and it was just, you know, everybody running through, all kinds of foods and like -- and you go up and down the stairs. And it was just this like, you know, really -- I don't know. I can't -- when I think about it, I just have these images in my head of like people, grapes, [laughter] and different kinds of food, you know, and just real -- just real jovial, I guess, and communal.

And, you know, it's interesting, too, 'cause, like, folks talk about Muslims -- 'cause what I was gonna say about Ayele, and this is the point 'cause I was -- there's actually a book that just came out that I wanna read 'cause it's about an Afro Latina. It was, like, based off of *Pride and Prejudice*. And I'm also an Afro Latina girl in Brooklyn, and I'm like, "Wow, that's crazy." But I have this narrative I wrote that I haven't published yet but probably will about -- I was really, really into Victorian literature. I think that's Victorian. I don't know the period. There are different periods, right, Regency, whatever, but I --

Like, so I -- So, Ebbets Field is like really close to the central branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. And you could get 11 books every time you went. So, I walked to the library, and at some point, I probably wasn't walking by myself, maybe someone with me, and I would get 11 books. And I read a lot, and I used to watch *Masterpiece Theater,* and I once found this book *Where -- Where Angels Fear to Tread.*

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Like,[*Masterpiece Theater*] they would these, like, you know, series. And so, I was fascinated by it, and I would go get books. And so, I -- and I read some of the stuff I probably shouldn't have read 'cause I feel like I read *Lady -- Lady Chatterley's Lover* and I didn't know 'cause I was just like, "Oh, this looks like it's the same kind of thing. And I was like, "Oh, I probably shouldn't be reading this." I didn't stop reading it, but I was like, "I probably shouldn't be reading this," right? [laughter] I read a lot of books. I mean I read like *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret,* I read *Sweet Valley High*. You know, I read, like, you know, Maya Angelou stuff. Like, I read a lot. I read -- I read a lot.

ALI: Where -- where did -- where do you think that interest in reading came from?

ABDUL KHABEER: The interest in reading?

ALI: Or, just, like, you know, most kids are watching TV or --

ABDUL KHABEER: Well, I mean, we have --

ALI: [inaudible]

ABDUL KHABEER: We have a TV, but first of all, I don't think TV was interesting back then to be honest. I don't remember my mother being like, "You can't watch TV," in a way. I remember certain things I couldn't watch. Like when *Schools Daze* came on TV, she was like, "You can't watch that." Or like, to this day, I have never seen *Boomerang*, and people are, like, "What?" I'm, like, "Nope," 'cause she was, like, "No," you know?

Like, actually my -- my favorite -- one of my favorite memories, on Fulton Street there used to be Metropolitan Theater, movie theater. *Juice* came out, and I went. Yeah, to this day, best movie-going experience I've ever had. So, me and my friend Nasiha, we tell our parents we're gonna go see *The Little Mermaid,* [laughter] 'cause it was playing at the same time, right? And we went to go see *Juice*. Oh my god, it was just -- it was -- what do the kids say today? It was lit. [laughter] Right? It was the best experience ever. So, first of all 'cause -- and then first of all, so Khalil Kain was fine, right. And everybody was, like, "Oh, Khalil," whatever, whatever. And then Tupac was fine and then it was just like -- You know, it was a great story. The music was really good, and I guess, you know, it was, like -- you know? And you could just relate to it, like --

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Because they were -- I mean they were -- where were they? They were in uptown, I guess, in -- in *Juice*? And so, like whatever, it was so funny too. I felt so guilty, and -- and so I told my mother. I was like --

ALI: You told her?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes. I felt so guilty. I was, like, "Oh my god," and so I was like, "Remember the --?" I was dra-- I remember -- I remember, it was so -- I was so extra dramatic. And it's funny 'cause Nasiha's mom, Sister Faiza was like, "Okay, whatever," you know? Like -- But she also had more kids, and so she probably was like, "Whatever," you know? I remember -- and my mother would be -- I think she was disappointed. I -- I remember being, like, "Oh my god, you know, I'm so sorry but I really went to *Juice*." I mean, I don't regret, right? [laughter] But it was great.

So, like -- And e-- even with movies, too, like, I remember when -- when *House Party* came out -- So, at that point, I was older -- a little bit older, and so it was -- My friend -- So, my mother had a friend from college Sister Aisha and her husband. I think -- maybe she was friends with her husband in college. Anyway, they had moved to Brooklyn, and they actually lived in Ditmas Park, hella far out, a huge house. Sister Aisha was a lawyer. Okay. Remind me to tell you after this story about the [Six Flags] Great Adventure story with Sister Aisha.

Anyway, so we would -- So, *House Party* came out and so she took all of us. It was like with me and Aisha, her daughter Amani, Nafeesa, Saleema who were like -- so -- and Alisha. So, Alisha and Nafeesa as I was saying were sisters, right, and then Amani and then me, and we -- we all went to -- they all took us to go see *House Party* or another time, there was this group The Boys, they were like a pop group and they were Muslim. And so like -- and they were playing out in Jersey or some place, so my mother took -- So, it was, like, Sister Jameela and Sister -- Sister Jameela I know and then my mother. I don't know who else came, but we all went, and they took us to see The Boys.

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And, like, every year for a while, there would be trips to Great Adventure in New Jersey. So, you would take these trips to Great Adventure. And I'm not sure who -- I don't know if it was through a school, like madrasa or through the masjid 'cause I know there was these trips. Like, the masjid would have trips like -- My sister was talking about this. They would go to like Bear Mountain or different things, like around there.

But one time we went, and I remember this. So, like -- okay. So, we're going to this trip. We're going to Great Adventure, so we gotta get, like, our gear together, you know, whatever. So, we all had white jeans, right, and then we had -- [laughter] And then -- and then we went to The Gap, and we all got different colored T-shirts, right, that -- I think I had an orange one and then it was like, you know, hot pink and royal blue, whatever. And then we got our matching scarves, and I think we had, like, matching, like, fitted caps, like white caps 'cause we had -- We gotta get our stuff together to go to Great Adventure. [laughter]

And I think on this trip in particular, so we go into -- we go to Great Adventure, and it was some ride, right? So, some of us were up there, the rest of us coming, so we cut the line to get to our friends. Of course, you're not supposed to do that, but everybody does that, so, like, whatever. So, somebody complained, and this is when I realized -- so, the thing is, you know, I grew up -- my mother was, like, you should be pro Black, -- White supremacy, all that kind of stuff. And it's funny 'cause I tell people, like, I think hegemony is a regular word, and they are like, "That is not a word -- regular word," and I was, like -- I was, like -- And literally to this day, I'm like, "Why is hegemony, like, not a regular people's word?" Because I guess 'cause I didn't learn that in graduate school, right? Anyway, so I learned about all that stuff.

But anyway -- so, this is when I had the first experience and I was 14, and I was, like, "Oh --" And I always remember this. It sticks to my head 'cause it was, like, all this stuff

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I had heard about, I was experiencing. So, basically, somebody told, the security at the place came and got us, and we were ejected from the park. And before they ejected us from the park, I remember sitting in some room. It was like some dark room with, like, one light bulb hanging in the middle And, like, I guess, these, like, people kind of interrogating us with no adults around. Nobody called the people we were with, and they put us in the -- in the -- in the -- like, the school bus that we came in. We had to wait until everybody else came on. And I was like, "This is really messed up." I was like I -- I was like, "This is what they're talking about," right, because they were obviously criminalizing us for cutting line? Are you kidding me? Right?

And so then later on -- so Sister Aisha was a lawyer, so they heard from her and then they sent us some tickets or stuff like that -- I guess to come back to Great Adventure.

ALI: Did you have a conversation with anyone to process that experience, or how did you at the time -- it was -- that it clicked for you? Like, this is what I've been learning about?

ABDUL KHABEER: I know. I know because I know it clicked for me because sitting in that room I was like, "This feels like television or like a movie." Because, you know, literally it was, like, a dark room with, like, a single light bulb maybe kind of flickering, you know, hanging in the thing. And somebody was talking and we were in there. And then I remember we were sitting in the -- sitting in the -- sitting in the school buses waiting for people to come out. But I don't remember -- I don't remember exactly what kind of conversations we had, but I d-- I do know that none of the adults in our lives were like, "What were you doing?" They were all like, "That was wrong and why did they do that?" So, you know, like, I -- I know that. They were, like, "Oh, oh, hell, no." Right? Like, it wasn't one of these like, "Well you shouldn't have been cutting line --"

ALI: Right.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- none of that. [laughter] Because their response outpaced, right, what actually happened, right? So, that's the thing. It'd be different if they were like, "Yeah, you shouldn't be cutting line," and they said, "You can't take this ride." But to eject you

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from the park and then make you sit and wait for everybody else to come back? That's crazy. So yeah.

So, we would do stuff like that. So, it would be like -- So, she would -- so we would do -- So, it would be like going to your friend's house and, like, making up dances to the latest song or, like -- like, I said, we had Girls Scouts, so we would go to Camp Kaufmann or, like, just your local Girl-Scout thing. I remember, like, Sister Tauheedah by the time I was like a -- a junior I guess, like, we used to do stuff. We'd go to her house or Sister Adele's house, my friend Saudah's mom and -- you know? I remember one time, we -- we made like fried shrimp and, like, soda floats or something like that at Sister Adele's house. We would do that. Like I said, either the masjid or the school would have these annual trips to Great Adventure, and so you would go, and you would do that.

And then -- and then like -- like just things, like, you know, iftars and Ramadan. One of the things that was really impactful, too, for me is that. So, Auntie Aaliyah Abdul-Karim, every year, you know, probably was. It wa-- I do-- I think it was New Year's Day night, so not the thirty-first but January first or whatever -- whatever that weekend was. She would have a gathering at her house. And so, she lived in Clinton Hill, and it was her -- so -- so, Auntie Aaliyah was, like this -- a community -- a significant community figure in Brooklyn. She was an educator. It's, like, a lot of the women were educators. My mother was a teacher. She [Aaliyah] was an educator, and she really was about, you know, promoting and pushing, kind of, the education and the progress of Black people through Islam, right? So, seeing Islam as like -- kind of seeing Islam as like having the answer to the kinds of things that Black people were subjected to. But not in the way people talk about it in some ways where it's, like, this kind of, like, piety. Not -- not -- not, like, if you live your life better. I mean, that's there, but more like, you have to know who you are, where you come from, and when you know of that, like it'll affect

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everything else type of thing, and so -- And she was also a poet, and she was a well-known community person, like, in New York City and in Brooklyn and stuff like that.

And so, she used to have these events at her house, and she had three girls Lisa Fatima, Aisha, and Majida. And basically, it was like a potluck, so people would bring food, and you would -- people would just sit around and talk, like, all night into the wee hours of the night about, you know, like, you know, our condition basically. And from a child, I would go to that. And -- and it was -- you know, it was mixed gender, you know, young people, old people, male, and wo--women, and, you know, everybody, and, you know? And we would just have these really -- Like, Brother Amir Al-Islam would be there, just different.

And it -- so -- so, it's interesting 'cause it's like this -- My mother used to say, you know, she -- the sisters that she hung with like -- so there was like her, like -- like, Auntie Jameela, Auntie Kareemah Abdul-Karim who's from the Bronx, Auntie Aaliyah, her, some sisters from Jersey like, thi-- this -- there was this crew of women. They were all educators. They were all educated. They're all educators. And she says that people used to say stuff like, that they were lesbians was one thing that went around or something like that. Because they were very much like -- they were about community and about community development, about community building. And they were not gonna let, like, the idea they were women or something like that prevent them from doing this kind of stuff. Like they had run --

And so, Auntie Jameela -- like so, they had this one year, and I forgot the -- I'm still mad. I'm still mad. They had this rites of passage program. I was too young for it. I'm still mad 'cause it's only one year, but I was waiting for it. And so, they would have them -- they -- they would meet at Auntie Aaliyah's house, and they let people, kind, of talk about different things about, like, our history and this sort of stuff, and they had a ceremony at the end. I remember it was like -- I think it was at -- I don't know where the

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ceremony was at, but anyway, it was some place. Maybe [Bedford Stuyvesant] Restoration [Plaza] now that I think about it. I'm not sure. But they had the -- they wore white and there were, like, candles, and they, kind of, did this thing that kind of like crossing over, you know? And --

ALI: Was this just for girls or --

ABDUL KHABEER: No, no, it was --

ALI: -- boys and girls.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- boys and girls, yeah, boys and girls. So, like, Sister Ummul Khair's sons, Kiwei and Jamal, I think, were in it as well. I know Auntie Jameela's son Omar was in it, my friend. So, Anika Al-Uqdah Sabree, her parent -- her sister -- brother, Brother Saleem and Sister Umita. They're, you know, members of -- they're from Trinidad, and they're members of Masjid Muhsi Khalifah. So, I know Anika was in it. I wanna say Sister Shanice was in it. So, there were a lot of people, but they were --

'Cause, like, I was so -- People used to make fun of me. Actually, my friend Khabirah still does this. She's like, "Are you--" She's like, "Are you finally 18?" Because, like, I was hanging out with people -- So, by the time I was in high school in my local community, I was primarily going to Masjid Muhsi Khalifah, and the -- we -- there was a youth group called Muslim Youth on the Move that would have different kinds of programs that we would put together. But everybody in that was older. Like, they were, like, probably -- I don't know. You know, back then, it was, like, a lot, the age, but I wanna say four or five, six years older than me, but I was hanging with them, and so -- You know, so of course, they were all in this [Rites of Passage] program because they were probably all juniors in high school or something like that, right? And here I was, like maybe eighth grade, something like that, and I was, like, "Oh, it would be my turn," and then it wasn't, anyway. Some I'm still mad but whatever. Gotta let that go.

ALI: So, tell me about the Girls Scouts. Was this -- was this a kind of --? I don't know how this works. It's like a chartered Girls Scouts --

ABDUL KHABEER: Well, yeah. No, yeah, with Girls Scouts, yeah --

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ALI: -- that were all Muslims?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes, so, yeah, so yeah.

ALI: How -- how did this work?

ABDUL KHABEER: I mean, yeah. I mean, I don't know. Anyway, I hadn't -- I was Troop 2 --

ALI: Like did you have to do --

ABDUL KHABEER: No, yeah. Yeah.

ALI: -- you had a troop number?

ABDUL KHABEER: Troop 2129 was my troop, and, yeah. No, we were part of it. I remember once we even went to some thing, like at the headquarters in New York somewhere. So, no, it was -- it was like a legit Girls Scout troop.

ALI: And I was just saying --

ABDUL KHABEER: You were like -- you were like, what's this janky Girls Scouts?

ALI: No. [laughter] I didn't mean to question it, just the question of -- of -- of --

ABDUL KHABEER: No, you earned it --

ALI: -- the relationship it had to --

ABDUL KHABEER: No, I mean you earned your badges. I mean because Kauf-- Kaufmann was a Girl Scout camp.

ALI: Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: So, it was like you did -- we had the little uniforms. I remember we had the ceremonies. We had the Brownie ceremony and then -- so it was Brownies -- what was it? -- Cadettes and then Juniors? Because I fazed out by the time I was, like, about junior high school. And so, I had my -- actually I still have somewhere my little -- like something I won, so one badge for something -- I don't know. But when -- when you were wearing in green, which I think is the Cadette. I think that's what it's called, the Cadettes.

ALI: Was there anything that you -- did you have to sell cookies?

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, yeah. I mean it's the Girls Scouts. [laughter]

ALI: Was there anything that you -- you did as part of that troop that, you think, reflected the fact that it was a Muslim -- predominantly Muslim group?

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ABDUL KHABEER: To be honest, no. Because I remember there's a song. [Sings] There was a boy and a girl in little canoe with the moon shining all around. And as he paddled his paddle, you couldn't even hear a sound. So they talked, so they talked till the moon grew dim and then he's like -- he said, "You better kiss me or get out and swim. So, what you gonna do in the little canoe with the moon shining all a -- the boy paddling all a -- the girls swimming all around?" I remember that song when we were a kid.

ALI: And what was the answer to that?

ABDUL KHABEER: No, she's swimming all around --

ALI: Oh, she swam. She was just, like, "I'm gonna swim."

ABDUL KHABEER: What? Deuces! [laughter] So that like -- I mean, it's like I'm saying, like that's a song from Girls Scout camp --

ALI: Right.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- right, that we learned there.

ALI: Right.

ABDUL KHABEER: And I remember being at the camp. We were just a Muslim group at this camp, right, and so it was Camp Kaufmann, so it probably didn't have pork there, so -- Because also, you had a thing -- remember this. I'm in New York, right, and so there's a huge Jewish community. Like for -- I always tell people, til this day, I'm legit surprised that Jewish holidays are not off, like there's school on like Rosh Hashanah and Passover. I'm like, "Really?" You know, because I grew up -- it was part of the thing. So, I think, you know, that part wasn't weird, I guess, for people.

But I remember us just being like the Muslims who were there but we were little girls, so like -- whatever, you know? So, it was -- we were our own crew, but everybody else had their own crew, right, when they come to this camp. But we just did the activities like everybody else did activities. Like, I don't remember it being anything particularly Muslim about it. Except maybe, like, with our uniforms, you wore a scarf or something. But no, it was -- it was pretty -- pretty standard, I think, in terms of Girls Scout troops

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go. Yeah, mostly -- yeah, no. I don't -- I don't think anything -- nothing stands out to me, at least, as being particularly --

ALI: So, let's talk about you're -- you were at Bismillah Learning Center until when?

ABDUL KHABEER: So, I was at Bismillah Learning Center, so we did -- So like I said, they were at -- they were in the brownstone in Park Slope the first, like, year or two then a couple of -- so a set of time at Masjid Farooq and then in which -- You know, my mother said and Auntie Jameela confirmed this. She was like, "They used to have to come on Sundays to clean the school for us," because the people who were -- I guess, the regular community there were using the schools on the weekend, and they would trash the place. And there were, like, parents rotated coming to clean up, so the school will be coo -- clean for us from Monday through Friday.

And then I wanna say by the time I was in the fourth grade or fifth grade, I think, the school was -- I don't what was happening. The enrolments were down, but we moved out of Farooq. And Brother Rafiq's mother had a brownstone in Brooklyn, and so we moved into her brownstone, and we spent either a year or two there and then BLC closed.

When BLC closed, I had taken an exam to get into Philippa Schuyler, which was like an accelerated, or whatever, junior high school program. I was really excited. My friend Alisha also took it. We both got in. I was very excited -- "I'm gonna have a locker." It was gonna be like, just like TV or something like that or the books that was I was reading. My mother was like, "Eh, you're going to Muslim school." And so the oldest Muslim school in New York City, I think, continuous 'cause I don't know about the Muhammad University and, like, how that was, and the Sister Clara Muhammad School, but the oldest continuous because they're still on, right? So, some of these other schools opened and closed, but it's still on.

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It's Al Madrasa Al-Islamiyah that was established, I think, in the '77 in Staten Island. By the time I was in junior high school, which was, I guess, '89 or '90, they had moved to Brooklyn, and they had set up shop on top of this building -- in this building that was across the street from where I was living. So, it was -- I could walk to school and everything. So my mother took me. She's, like, "You'll go to Madrasa." Yeah, so that was sad [laughter] because I didn't get to Philippa Schuyler.

ALI: Did you have -- did you have a -- a --? And there's no such thing as a negotiation between a child and a parent but -- you know --

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, no, there's -- no.

ALI: -- a conversation?

ABDUL KHABEER: No.

ALI: You were just like, okay?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, I don't remember any conversation. I remember just being like, "Okay, I'm going to Madrasa." I mean -- yeah, no. Yeah, I don't think. I probably would have pleaded with her though, but she probably was like, "And?" You know, or whatever. [laughter]

But to say to her thing, you know -- you know you have to think about my mother, she's a single parent with two kids now, and she used to pay for that, whereas Philippa Schuyler was free, right, 'cause it was public school. But she -- for her, it was really important, I think, that I'd have a Muslim identity and that kind of stuff. And to be honest, I mean looking back, I think, she probably made the right decision. Madrasa, like, and BLC were different in terms of -- like BLC was very much like, I was there since I was five, and so, I knew everybody and we were really close. I spent time with them outside of school. Madrasa was different because I didn't know all the kids. I was bullied some in school.

ALI: How and why?

ABDUL KHABEER: I don-- well, I don't know why kids bully, right?

ALI: But what was the --

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ABDUL KHABEER: But I just felt -- there were two people. There was me and this other girl Shaheedah. And so the other girl Shaheedah had eczema, and so she was really, sort of, the one that would get the most, but sometimes, they would choose me. I'm not really sure. I was shy. Up until that point, I was shy, and so I was quiet, and I didn't know everybody, so I feel like people, you know, picked on you. I had a teacher I could complained about it to, and she just -- was the wrong answer. She goes kind of like, "Oh, that's how kids are," and I told my mother and she was, like, "That's stupid." And my mother was kind of like "That don't make a lot of sense. No, that's not how kids are. Like, what is that?" And I think about bullying today, and I'm, like, what is going on? Where people are like -- why are kids doing this to people, and no one is saying, "Don't do that." Right, anyway.

But what happened for me is that so when I was 10, so yeah -- so I must have been -- so it must have been '89 that I started at Madrasa, it had to be or, '90. But in any event, when my sister was born, the -- when my sister was born my mother and my sister's father divorced, and my mother -- This is how I remember it. She started -- she took -- there was a sister named Jawariyyah who was a therapist. She lived in Clinton Hill. She had her own brownstone, her own practice. I think my mother was going to Sister Jawariyyah for her own issues but then she thought, "Let me take Su'ad" because she was like, "I don't know if this will negatively affect her." Which is funny 'cause I hated my sister's father. I was, like, "Yes, hallelujah!" [laughter] anyway.

So anyway, she took me to Sister Jawariyyah, and I saw Sister Jawariyyah from 10 to, I guess, 12. And I know that because she helped me write a valedictorian speech, and it's either the sixth-grade speech or the eighth-grade speech 'cause I was valedictorian both years [including] when [Nelson] Mandela was released from jail. And so, I had wrote about him in my speech. But I credit Sister Jawariyyah and my mother's, like, own awareness for -- Sister Jawariyyah to really help me build my self-confidence. Because I was an only child, I was always with my mother, I was always with adults, I

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read a lot. I think part of the reason why I read a lot, too, is that I can't go outside, right? I don't know. I guess there probably were some restrictions on TV because I don't -- because I don't -- because I do feel like I don't have free range of the television. That is -- I know. I don't remember what it was, but it wasn't like I can just go whenever I wanted to do that. I also had a babysitter, so I spent -- so I was, like, so I was home often, you know?

It was funny. I had this friend. It's funny. It still scarred me to this day. She was kind of like, "You read about the stories, but I live the stories." Something like that when I was like 13 or something [laughter] and so -- But anyway, but so, like, I think that she -- Sister Jawariyyah really helped me, kind of, build my own sense of self.

So in terms of the bullying, so there was the other girl named Shaheedah who was short -- she was shorter than me 'cause I was tall, and she used to, like, beat me. Like, not like -- not like ha-- I guess it wasn't, like, I wasn't bruised, but she was kind of bullying, whatever. And I remember at one point after Sister Jawariyyah for a while, I was, kind of, looking at her like, "Are you -- are you -- are you for real right now, 'cause this is not happening anymore." And it stopped." [laughter] I'm like -- that was like that the end of that. It was, like, "This is not happening anymore 'cause -- are you kidding me?" So, I think -- I think that, like -- you know, so that was really important for me.

And so, she was the Black Muslim woman who had a practice in Brooklyn. I think she was on Vanderbilt, like, yeah, Vanderbilt and Clinton. I wanna say at the corner there is where her -- her office was. And I saw her for, like, two years, and it was really -- it was really good or whatever, and so -- And that was at a time I was at Madrasa and then I gradu--

ALI: I'm -- I'm somewhat -- I guess, maybe I shouldn't be 'cause I shouldn't exceptionalize all Muslim experience, but one would imagine -- at least, I'm imagining a Madrasa being

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an Islamic school like any other religious school that there's an appeal to some sense of ethics that -- how's bullying happening?

ABDUL KHABEER: I don't know. Madrasa to me was like public school, and I hadn't been to public school, but that's how I used to talk about it.

[Interview interrupted.]

Now, I will say this about Madrasa. Of course, everyone is committed, right? It was a larger school, right? They have a group of students, and we had more than one language. So, in BLC, we had Arabic, of course. With Madrasa, we had Arabic and Spanish. We would have like -- so this Imam Ibrahim, like imams in the community would teach us Islamic studies. We had like a science fair. We didn't have science. And we had, like, things we would do, right, the kind of thing. And -- But it was different, like the energy was different to me, but I think -- I don't -- But again, like, I said, I don't remember being bullied at BLC, but also 'cause it was, like, my family, right, like, literally 'cause I was with everyone since I was five. So, if there was a clique, I was in it. Right? So, maybe I don't remember it happening at the other place, right, 'cause I was in the clique. Whereas this, I wasn't necessarily in the clique in the same kind of way.

But, you know, it was great. Like, we used to do stuff because like -- you know, how they have these groups now that come around and they, like, Islamicize, you know, like, hip-hop songs and which is like -- I'm like, "That's the corniest thing I ever heard in my life" 'cause we used to do that as a kid. So, we had this one. It will be, like, you sing, "Can't get it out of my mind, never can make my salah on time. Can't get it out of my head, fajr isha magrib, shaitan is poison." [laughter] And then you do that like -- we used to do that. Here's the other one. It was like [sings], "He's got the power," you know that kind of thing we did. And then it was like -- it was like -- it was just something like [sings], "Rolling down the street, something, something, reading Qur'an and Sunnah." you know, like, stuff like that. So we were -- but we were kids. You would do that, like, in

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your classroom, you know, like, whatever type of thing. We would do these kind of things or whatever. So like --

ALI: So -- so that -- that's an interesting -- well, you raise this interesting point about growing up in a -- a fairly -- I don't wanna say self-enclosed but you called it Dar ul-Islam, and so this fairly self-contained --

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: -- Muslim community. Your -- how was your inter-- you know, interaction with non-Muslim culture --

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: -- culture and especially non-Muslim Black culture?

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: 'Cause I'm getting a sense of this --

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, no, no. Oh, yeah.

ALI: How -- how --

ABDUL KHABEER: No I mean --

ALI: How could you --

ABDUL KHABEER: Brooklyn --

ALI: -- and --

ABDUL KHABEER: -- which

ALI: Yeah, tell me -- tell me what about it--

ABDUL KHABEER: But you see in Brooklyn --

ALI: -- because hip-hop is like --

ABDUL KHABEER: But you have to understand --

ALI: -- is going through a second wave that you --

ABDUL KHABEER: -- but you have to understand --

ALI: - that you're coming of age --

ABDUL KHABEER: -- you have to understand. Brooklyn, like, so yes, all of my friends were Muslim and that kind of thing, but we were not secluded. Like, it wasn't like that. So, it's, like, that's who your social group was, but, like -- you know? And particularly, I

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wanna say, like, again, because of this cohort of women that my mother was a part of, right? So, like -- you know, like -- You know up until, like, I was like 13 probably or so, like I was doing West African dance, right, with these people. Like, I used to do recitals and that kind of thing and then, like, you know, if there was Kwanzaa happening somewhere, we will go to the Kwanzaa program or like the East. So, the East is huge, right? They call it now the African International Festival or something. I called it East, my mother called it the East 'cause that's what it was called when they first started. And so, every other -- East was July Fourth weekend, and -- and there would be just this festival. And there would be performances and food and people selling stuff.

And the East was, like, this thing you look forward to every year, and we were just a part of it. 'Cause it was like Black people, and, I guess, the cultural Black people probably, right? So, the people who are, like, into, like, Kemet [Ancient Egypt], you know, or people who are, like, Muslim or they were vegetarians so like, Queen Afua. Like that whole set was like, we were part of that too. So, it wasn't, kind of, like -- Yeah. Like, I remember once -- I'll never forget, it was so funny -- so Boys and Girls [High School], so the High, Boys and Girls right? So, the High was in Bed-Stuy. I really wanted to go to the High 'cause, like, everybody went to the High, right. It was, like, when you graduated from -- 'cause -- 'cause there were no [Muslim] high schools. So, when you graduate from Muslim school, you go to the High.

And once, I remember we went -- because I spent a lot of time with my friend Alisha and they were in Bed-Stuy. And so, I wanna say there was a concert at the High and there were -- what was Big Daddy Kane's little brother, Little Shane or whatever or somebody? So, he did this show at the High. I remember going -- and I remember somebody trying to hit on me. It was him or somebody. We went, like, to McDonald's after or something like that, whatever. It was funny, but like -- so yeah -- so we -- I mean like -- it's just you're a Muslim.

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There is also the story where, like, I was b-- I was with Alisha, and we went to, like, the Chinese restaurant near in her house, and not No Pork [Halal Kitchen], which is, like still best Chinese American food in the planet, so -- like you know. And funny 'cause No Pork -- we used to go there and Brother Musa who was the owner used to give my mother sodas for me, like, we would order food or whatever. But anyway, we went to this Chinese restaurant, and we're in there waiting for food or whatever. And so, this Black guy, yeah, he was older than us. I don't know how much older, but we had to be like preteens. And he went to cuss this guy out, and he turns to us, and he's like, "Excuse me, sisters, but I'm about to cuss this guy out." Right? And it's just like one of those things where and it -- I wasn't surprised when he did it because we're Muslim, and so people know this is how you treat and you interact with Muslims.

And so, we had our own social worlds for sure, but we were part of our communities, I think, definitely. You know at that time, too, and I only remem-- I only know this, kind of, from the distance 'cause I was really young. You know, that time too, like, Taqwa [Masjid At-Taqwa] was doing their stuff on the streets, like, kind of, the drugs and stuff like that. Like, we were very much involved in our communities, like hip-hop. You know, I was -- I tell people, you know, like, hip-hop my -- like one of my -- not my earliest, one of my early hip-hop memories was, like, with Alisha, and -- and I had to be like 14th, maybe I guess. And she's, like, "You have to hear this tape. You have to hear this tape." and it was Wu-Tang. It was Method Man, and it wasn't on the radio yet or something like that. And she's, like, "You have to hear this thing or whatever." And so, very much -- yeah, well very much a part of our sort of communities for sure, but it was just, like, "Well those are the Muslims, you know. Oh yeah, the Mus-- she's Muslim." Like -- like -- I don't know, like, "She's doesn't eat meat." Or like, you know, "She is Jamaican." You know? It was -- like it's -- it was a variety of Blackness as opposed to something, I think, that's singular in that kind of way. And it was a positive association with it. And people didn't know a lot of stuff.

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Like when I went to high school, a lot of people asked me questions about Islam and stuff, which were not hostile or anything like that. Just people were just like, "Oh, what is that?" And it was fine 'cause I knew 'cause I went to Islamic school, so I had answers. [laughter] So, I wasn't like, whatever. But, you know, high school, you know, a lot of people talk about high school. There's like a motif around high school where it's, like, this really hard time. I loved high school. I had a great time at high school.

ALI: So -- so talk about this is -- this is your -- you wanted to go to High --

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: -- but

ABDUL KHABEER: So, I didn't. I wanted to go to High, and my mother was like, "No." I'm -- I'm --

ALI: Why -- why --

ABDUL KHABEER: I'm pretty sure --

ALI: -- why is that?

ABDUL KHABEER: -- I'm pretty sure she was like, "No." And I wanna say -- Why would she tell me not to go to the High? Because she actually sent my sister to the High, which my sister actually talks about as not a good thing academically. And also, the High was changing, I think, by the time my sister got there 'cause this had been 10 years later. You know, I don't know, but I think it was academics. I think I was a really good student. Like, I had -- took the test. Like, I think Stuyvesant was like, you've gotta do some summer program or waitlisted me and then Tech was a do a summer program. I was like, "I'm not doing none of that. I'm going to Murrow." And my friend Nasiha went there, and she liked it. And so, Murrow was a good school. It had good -- like out of the public schools or whatever. So, I think it was because of that.

And I remember -- I don't know if it was my first day of school or not, but -- So, I lived in Ebbets Field, and so I'm going to school. 'Cause before see before, so like when -- when -- Before I went to Madrasa and BLC had went to Brother Rafiq's mother's house in Bed-Stuy, I had to get to school. My mother was a schoolteacher, so she couldn't take

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me. So, her friend Sister Hanan would ride the bus with me, which I -- it annoyed me like, "Why can't I be on the bus by myself?" But obviously I couldn't take the bus by myself. I'm, like, nine years old, [laughter] but I was, like, whatever, right?

And so, at this point then I was going to school across the street but now I had to go to school on my own, but I took the train. So, I lived in Ebbets Field, so really close to the D Train. D Train used to go to A-- Avenue M. And I have this memory of -- So, I don't know if it was the first day of school or whatever, but I have -- I went out and I had -- got these shoes that were like -- I guess they're kind of, like, men's shoes, now, I guess if you think about the style of them. They were suede. I think they hurt my feet a little bit. They were this suede, like tie-ups, and I had jeans. I had this green shirt and probably a matching scarf and -- No, this is actually later, but I'll tell it anyway because it's later why.

Because this is, like, right before I graduated, I guess, actually because I had my Walkman. I was listening to The Score on the train, on the D Train going to school or something like that. I remember that. I remember being like -- oh, yeah, I remember. I just remember listening to The Score, like, on the train on my way to school. But this train took me 15 minutes to get there, and, you know, it was just really like -- Oh, yes, Mister Halperin was -- so, I guess it's -- I guess it's the equivalent of homeroom, but we call it SCS, and you would go every year. So, they would make you stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and I was like, "I don't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance," and so, he was, like, "Well, you're gonna have to leave the room," so I did. I think for three years, I left the room, and I sat down outside the classroom. And wanna say in my senior year, he was, like, "Everyone has to stand except Su'ad" because you kept the same thing [homeroom] until then. I remember that. I'll be like, "I don't stand for the flag." So -- And --

ALI: Why -- why didn't you stand for the flag?

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ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, because we don't stand -- oh, I -- we don't -- [laughter] I didn't stand for the flag because I understood, the way that I understood -- and even today, right -- is that I didn't consider myself American in the sense of like a patriotic American. Because, you know, for me, the flag represented the oppression of Black people. And it was a hypocritical and a symbol of all this violence, and it wasn't -- didn't represent me, so I'm not standing for it, right? Because to stand for the flag is to say that you respect power, and I don't respect the power, so -- So, like, I don't stand for the flag. And so it's ab-- like from freshman year. It wasn't even, like -- I was like, "No, I don't do that. Sorry."

But -- but yeah, but, like, people -- Like, anyway, so -- but, like high school was great. Like I had friends,, you know, I was in the student government, you know, I took AP classes. I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And it's funny too because, like -- I'd be like -- When I was teaching at Purdue, I was teaching African American studies, and I called myself being slick, right -- not slick but clever. So, my section on Black religion, I was calling it *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and none of my students knew the book or who [Zora Neale] Hurston was, and I abo-- just about died. I read that book in my junior AP English class, and I'm like, "How is that even possible?" And I had all White teachers except one teacher back in high school, and -- you know?

And I remember actually, too, in high school for the junior AP English, right, or senior AP, one of the two. There was like a top tier and a second top tier, and I chose the second top tier because it was reading the multicultural stuff. So, the top tier was only rea-- reading British literature, which now that I think about it, I probably had already read it in junior high school anyway. [laughter] So, we read, like, *Siddhartha* and, like -- We read *Siddhartha*, we read *Les Misérables*. We -- and I remember we went to go see that actually, and I -- I love musicals. And that's so funny because like --

ALI: Was that your first musical that you --

ABDUL KHABEER: *Les Misérables*? That I saw live?

ALI: Mm-hmm.

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ABDUL KHABEER: Probably. You know, it's funny I used to wa-- As far as being pro-Black, I watched all the White people on -- you know, on TV, [laughter] and so -- But wait, one of the things that I was gonna say before is that I felt like the reason why I liked Austen and all that kind of stuff is because the social mores really, kind of, really reflected how I was also thinking, right? So, like, you know, if you see some guy you like and then he said salaam-alaikum to you or not, yet you pass by, you know, this kind of thing? Because you can't -- you can't directly go and do that because that would be inappropriate, right? SO I feel like the kind of social mores are, like, this kind of Victorian, you know, Regency or whatever the age is, England, sort of, matched my own experience, which I think was partially why it was so interesting. As well as I think, you know, we -- Anyway, I don't -- I won't get into that. I'm sorry. [laughter] But I think that that's kind of it related to that but --

But, yeah, we read stuff like that, you know, and so I re-- I remember. That's where I read Hurston. *Invisible Man,* I read in that class. *Autobiography of Malcom X*, we read in that class, and so yeah. Like I had a good time in high school. I had friends. You know, I had my people. Oh god, it was so funny. I had the hugest crush on this guy named Dashawn. I wonder where he is now? I loved me some Dashawn, right, but it was funny because I, kind of, feel like it might have been somewhat mutual, but because I'm Muslim, right? I can't date you, right? And so, there's always this kind of, like, thing, but I really liked Dashawn.

ALI: Did you interact with him? Did you --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ALI: Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: No, no, I mean we were friends, like, you know. But he was part of the really, really cool clique. So, the clique that they had the -- like, the dopest clothes, right? So, they were on the third floor intersection, like, of the hallways and he was on that clique. And there was a girl named Camille who, I think, ended up actually being his girl. But people treated me -- like he treated me -- It was like, "She's cute, but she's

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Muslim, so I have to, like, honor and respect her." Like, that was --, you know, that's the kind of thing that happened there.

And then once Dashawn, like, got on the knee in, like, the middle of a -- of a -- of a hallway, and it wasn't like a proposal but he gave me something, like a bracelet or something. And then one of his friends came, and he was like, "Well, I have to give that. I have to take that back because it wasn't his to give." Or something like that. And he was like, "He's an Indian giver." I was like, "No, he's not an Indian, he's a White-man giver." [laughter] I remember that 'cause I was like, "You can't be saying that. We don't say that." [laughter] Like, we don't do that. We don't do that, you know.

Like, my mother -- like, it's funny, too, 'cause even with the bullying and stuff, too, I think about it like, some people will say like, African booty-scratchers all that kind of stuff. Like I was raised, you don't say that kind of stuff because Haiti is like the first, free, Black republic. Like you don't do that. Haitians are -- like -- and so, it's funny to me that, like, sometimes I think about it 'cause, like, the kinds of things that people say, that people say to kids or people say to each other, like, I -- there was ex-- expressly in my household that you don't do this. Like, "You don't say that. That's not right. This is -- you know, we're all connected," all that kind of stuff. It was very, like, prominent or whatever. But yeah, I had a total crush on Dashawn.

And then I had a crush on other White boy, too, once Ken, I think his name was. Yeah. And then I had a crush on the other guy, but I think that we're friends on -- on Facebook, so I'm not gonna mention him. [laughter]

ALI: Did -- were you -- as a teenager, how did you deal with those crushes? I mean were you frustrated that nothing can happen or it's like --?

ABDUL KHABEER: So, I think -- so, I was -- It's funny too. So, I was sort of -- sort of overweight, right? Like, so, I've always kind of struggled with my weight, although it was interesting 'cause, like, being thick is not an issue. But I think I felt like it was an

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issue, probably more than actually it was to be honest. Like I don't think -- I don't think anybody thought that [laughter], but I felt that way about it. So, I think sometimes my frustration was less about being Muslim or more about whether or not they liked me, because whether or not I'm, like, attractive enough, you know?

And then -- but the Muslim guys, I don't remember any of them being too interesting.

Oh my god, then my friend's brother, and I can't mention him either because it'd be hilarious. And so, I used to -- this Troop song, "All I Do is I Think of You Now," that was my song for him, right, and so I would listen to that song because I had a crush on him. But it's funny because some of these men now, you'll be, like, it was some hard living, so you're like -- so I was -- it was good but I -- I -- All-- Allah is protecting me from that. But I'm not -- [laughter] I think it was just, kind of, like, this kind of pining thing that you did and you're kind of like, "Oh, whatever, and does he, like, me? I don't know."

I definitely have friends who their, sort of, crushes ended in actual kind -- some sort -- some sort of – semblance of a relationship, not necessarily anything significant, but something like that. It didn't happen for me. I think I was shy. And -- and I think -- I think I was shy and -- I mean this could be -- People say that about when I was older and, like, really pursuing relationships -- this also was a reality -- I think men are intimidated by strong women and although I was shy, I was really smart. I was an overachiever, you know, and so I think it's kind of, like -- you know? Like, "Okay, that's not --" You know, I feel like that kind of thing was also part of it, but it was funny. But, like, I definitely felt it. Like, "Man, you know, like, whatever," but -- you know? I wasn't -- oh, oh, 'cause --

Oh, wait, but wait, but then there was this one time. [laughter] I forgot. I was like 14th, my abuela, my father's mother. I had just recently met her. So, we went to, like, somebody's barbecue, and I met this guy named Pookie or Pook or something like that.

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[laughter] And another guy -- all the -- all these -- his name was Pook or something and then -- and -- or Andre or Andre or Pook whatever, two guys, I got two numbers. So I'm like, All right, I got my numbers, right? So I'm like, "Don't call my mother's house. I'll call you, right. And so, I'll call -- I'll call you." Of course, this fool called me, right? And so my mother's funny -- because she's like, "Here's the phone for you." So, she was giving it to me. I'm like going -- I'm like, "Oh my god, [inaudible] [laughter] I'm like, "Oh my god, I told you not to call me." And she's like, "Don't be having no boys call my house." And that was basically it, right? And I was like, "Okay," 'cause I wasn't -- whatever -- because I already knew that, so I wasn't doing that.

But what happened with him and them, too, I think I went to a camp. I wanna say it was a weekend camp but like sleepaway something. It wasn't a MYNA [Muslim Youth of North America] thing. It was more like a local, Black Muslim thing or whatever. And so, two things happened at this time. I think it's around the same time. I don't know. I also was doing this summer program. Pratt University had a summer program, and one of my friends, she used to leave her house and take her scarf off. I never did that. I got my hair done, and so I did that once, right, I had gotten my hair done, whatever. Like, you know, it's -- -- I just did it for, like, a little bit with her 'cause I -- 'cause I, kind of, like, started wearing a scarf -- I mean it's part of the uniform in school. First, we used to do the thing where you would have your scarf on then you have your bang. And you have your bang and your curlers and you have to curl things out and the thing that you put it in. You have the curlers in, and you have this big hump in the top of your head, [laughter] like whatever. But then by the time I was like 10 or so, you just kind of wore it all the time.

But we wore our scarves just, sort of, tied. You -- you would have a -- a tri-- like, a triangle scarf. You have -- I mean a rect-- a square scarf. You would tie -- you would fold it into a triangle, and you would take the two long ends, and you would tie them, and you would leave them hanging. Or you would take one and you would wrap it, you

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know, and put it around your head, and do stuff like that. And so -- but -- so basically, I was just, kind of, wearing a scarf all the time. It wasn't a big deal. And so I did that.

Anyway so arou-- I think this is all around the same time or close to the same time. So, I went to this camp, and they were talking about jinn, and they were talking about how these houses burned down, and the only thing that stayed was the Qur'an, [laughter] whatever, all this kind of stuff. And that basically spooked me out, and I was like -- I remember about the scarf thing. So, actually, there's two different points. So, one with the scarf thing, I was like, I don't want to die -- what if I die without my scarf on? Oh my god, I don't wanna do that. So, I decided I'm gonna do that. With the guy thing it was like some other -- that might have been a MYNA camp 'cause I was a little bit older. And I was, like, this is not right. I can't have these relationships because I don't -- you know, whatever. And it wasn't like relationship, I was just talking on the phone but whatever right. I was like, "I can't do this." And so, I kind of, like, I guess, self-corrected, so to speak, because of the things that I was telling you. It's like, this is not appropriate, this is not what I should be doing, so I don't do that.

The thing about the scarf thing was that one time, this sister told me, we were on -- No, no, no, my mother told me. We're in an elevator, and she was like, "You know, Sister So-and-So told me she saw you at the park." And that's, like, all she said, right. And this is awhile -- after it happened, which basically meant that Sister So-and-So saw me without my scarf on at the park, and my mother knew, but she didn't say anything about it. She just, kind of, mentions it later, and it was, kind of, like, "Oh, okay, yeah, sure," you know? So, there was no -- I think that's just interesting 'cause there wasn't like this -- There was no like, "You should be doing --" You know, it was kind of like this -- even with the boy, "Don't have boys call my house." Because on some level -- like my mother never had, like, the talk with me, like, about sex or stuff like that. But I also felt like -- it's interesting. But I felt like I knew about sex, and I knew if you have sex, you get pregnant, and I don't wanna get pregnant 'cause why would you get pregnant? 'Cause

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you can't finish what you gotta do, so -- And I don't remember ever -- anyone ever sitting down with me about any of that, but I just knew that and I was like -- And I knew if you don't have sex with protection -- You know, I watched a lot of after-school specials, too, so that might have also been a part of the education that I got [laughter] where it's like, "Oh, you can't do that because he's gonna try to do --" you know or whatever. But there was never -- that.

Like, my babysitter Miss Adrienne when I was little, I felt like Miss Adrienne sometimes talks to me about stuff like that, even though I was no longer going to her as a -- as a -- She was no longer taking care of me 'cause I wasn't young, but I would, you know, see her and that kind of stuff. I feel like, sometimes maybe that happened, but I also feel like my community was very sex-positive. Like, that's the language they use now, but it just had to be in a licit relationship. So, like, when people got married, and you go to, like, ba-- bi-- bridal showers, and people get lingerie, and they talk about this. Oh, one -- one thing I went to, I think the cake was in a shape of a penis or something -- I don't know -- something like that.

Like, it was very like, "Yes you have sex, you should have sex, it's good to have sex, but you have to be married." So, it's the kind of thing where it's like, okay, you know, fine, you know? That's what I'm gonna do, like, you know, whatever. Everybody, of course, didn't do, you know, like whatever, and so there are these issues around, I think, when you didn't do that, what happens. But from my personal experience, I didn't do that, so it wasn't, like, an issue. And it was just, like, you know, trying to, I guess, wait to find, you know, some guy who you like and who actually likes you at the same time, you know?

When I was in college, I liked this one guy. It was funny this guy. He was Syrian American, I think, from the Midwest. And it was funny because he was like a year be-- below me in school, and he liked me, but I didn't realize it. And I was like, why is he

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always pestering me, you know, so, but also 'cause he was short and so -- at least shorter than me. And so I was kind of like, "I don't know what's going on here. Like, what is happening?" [laughter] And it's funny. It wasn't until our, like, relationship was over, I realized we actually had a relationship. Because, like, we would hang out -- well, actually, it's like -- there's two parts to that. So, we would, like, hang out. We would go to -- we -- we study together, like, libraries, this kind of thing, eat, you know, eat food or whatever. And then at a certain point, I realized that he liked me, then I was, like, oh, and he wasn't bad looking. I mean, he was short, but he wasn't bad looking. So, I was like -- I mean he was hella White but, you know, whatever. [laughter] I was like, whatever. I was like, oh, okay, whatever. So, we actually had a conversation. I remember once we were sitting, like, outside at school, and he was like, "If we had kids, they would be Black." I was like, "Yeah, they'd totally be Black." Because he was really into hip-hop, too, and I'm so Black, so it was like -- you know like, and not like color-wise but, you know, like, it's, like, whatever, so whatever. But it was funny.

So that summer, he writes me some letter and some like, you know, whatever. 'Cause basically, he went home to his parents I guess, and I think he was, like, broaching the idea, and they were like, oh, hell to the no, right, and so he just was kind of -- So, he kind of, like, broke it off with me like over a letter or something like that. It was funny, too, [laughter] whatever

ALI: Did the letter -- I mean did it touch on the --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah.

ALI: -- the parental thing?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, it kind of did.

ALI: Really?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah. It wasn't like explicit for when I remember, but it did, kind of, say like, "You know, this probably is not gonna work out 'cause --" you know, that kind of thing. It probably would -- probably email I guess at that time, this kind of thing because of that, yeah, definitely, I'm sure. No, 'cause I knew like this is what was going

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on. And so, it's funny to me because I think he is married now -- I haven't seen him in a really long time -- to a Syrian. And I think all of the -- So like, I -- it's funny because -- because of the way that I was raised pro-Black but pro-Muslim, so I saw other Muslims as all potential, like, objects of affection and marriage.

There was this guy Muhammad who's Palestinian that I had a crush on once when I was younger. Like, I crush on everybody, so it wasn't, like, whatever. It was that kind of thing. But, like, I think he -- not actually, Muhammad, I think, may-- actually may have not married a Palestinian. He might have married like a South Asian woman in the -- like in the future, you know, like, today. I'm not really sure. But this other guy, I had a crush on who was a Kashmiri when I was, like, in college or, like, out of college or something like that. He married a Kashmiri, you know?

And it's funny, I had this relationship with this guy, like my -- my first probably, like, real relationship when I was like 24 or five -- 26. I have to think what year is that. Twenty-six, 24, twenty-- 25, 26, something like that. And he was Puerto Rican from Queens. And I was, like, oh, this is why they wanna stick with their own people. And I was like that because it was really comfortable 'cause it was like we knew and understood --

ALI: Oh, you felt that with him?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: Okay. Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, with the Puerto Rican. So I was like -- you know, he's from New York, you know what I mean? And I had just -- came back from Panama for, like, my second time to spending the summer there. I had spent -- you know? So, it was like -- there this was, like, cultural, like, just all these cultural connections. And I was, like, oh, that's what that's about. [laughter] I remember being like, "Oh, I get it now." And not that you have to do that, but I was like, now, I see why they do that kind of thing.

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Now, I don't think that's why they're doing it. I think they're doing it because their parents are like, "You can't do whatever." But I -- but I could feel why that would make sense to somebody, right? 'Cause it felt really comfortable or whatever, that kind of thing, but yeah. So, he was funny and that didn't last. Allah protected me, too. But he was cute. [laughter] But, you know, I really was protected [laughter] from that as well. But -- but yeah. But I think -- so it was like -- you know, so in terms of like romance, like, I was always unrequited for, like, a really long time or whatever that kind of thing. But I was doing -- I was going -- I was going here going there.

I had a crush -- I had a crush on this guy in Egypt once when I was in Egypt, you know, like, whatever. But I was never -- I was not the type to, like, approach somebody because I didn't -- Because I think that's not what you do, right? It's, like, if a guy is interested in you, he pursues you, right, so this kind of thing. So, it's like, okay, you know, whatever and -- you know?

ALI: I -- I want to come -- come back to two things -- one, to talk a little bit about the -- the Muslim -- the mosques that you were attending growing up. But before then, you -- you talked about the journey of -- of wearing your head scarf and covering your hair. Did you understand -- what was your understanding of it at the time or say growing up, and did it change over time or what it's been to you?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah.

ALI: You know, 'cause you said, you pretty much were doing it from ever since. When did it, for you, become a thing that you were, like, this is --?

ABDUL KHABEER: Right. So, yeah. So, definitely, I think the fact that you cover your hair and your body, right, as a Muslim woman was something that was just was something you did, and all the women around me did it, my mother did it, so it wasn't like, anybody was telling me to do something they wasn't doing. So, it was just like, "Okay, you do that" and you -- and you were fly, so it wasn't like, you know? Like, it wasn't anybody -- it was out here looking crazy, right?

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So like -- you know, like, for Eid, like, you know, like, this one sister I used to get -- your outfit, get your Eid outfit made because we -- People made your clothes, right? I mean you'd buy clothes, too, but like special-occasions clothes, you get it made, and you have things designed and tailored how you want it to be, color coordination. Like I said, that's -- you know, you -- you'll be like, yeah, yeah, this color with that color. I mean it's very important, you know. I mean it was fly. Like, it wasn't -- we're Black, so you know. Like, we do-- we don't play with that. So, there was no like -- I never felt any kind of, like -- You know any kind of like, "Oh, this is annoying" or anything like that growing up because it was just my community. Everybody did it, and it was just about doing it well.

When I -- So, you know, how like, when you're -- you become like religiously responsible for your actions when you get into puberty. So, it was funny, too, because my period came when I was 13. I was the latest of my friends, and it came on Eid day. Talk about everybody knowing your business. So -- So, it was that Eid at Prospect Park, and everybody will come. Like, everybody will come out to Eid in Prospect Park. And so, my period came that morning, Eid morning, and my mother was like, okay -- and so basically, she's telling everybody, "Guess what --" I don't know. I was like, "Oh, lord, here we go," so anyway.

But at that point, I remember and this is around the time, maybe even of that like, I don't wanna die in the street without my scarf, thing where I feel like I was, kind of, like, all right, I'm Muslim. This is what you have you do. I have to do, like, the right thing, type of thing. You know like, This is what I'm supposed to do. I even think I started wearing my scarf a little differently for a little while, like maybe pinning it under my chi-- not under my chin like the Arabs do, but, like, at the base of my neck or something like that. I might have been -- I have some pictures like that. I'm not really sure. But like that was, like, a conscious thing. Like, this is what I have to do. I'm living as a Muslim, you know, this kind of thing.

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But still, like even in my -- I have this school picture of me when I was like 13, like, at -- in Al Madrasa, and I had like a blue -- Because we used to [wear] -- like, what do they call that material -- Georgette, yeah, so a blue Georgette. 'Cause this -- the -- the uniform was, like, dark blue and light blue. So, I had this navy Georgette scarf on that was, kind of, pinned to the back and then came to the front and then I had this light-blue scarf that I, kind of, tied like -- like turbanish I guess. I, kind of, wrapped it around. It had fringes, right, and I had a lots of bracelets, and I had earrings, you know, or whatever. [laughter] And so, there was never anything associated with that for me, like covering or something like that.

I did not actually even understand this thing around, like issues with it. Because even when I was in college, like I took these classes for, like, Islamic modernism, all those kind of stuff, and this conversation, I was like -- it's just foreign to me. I'm like, "I don't un--" Like hijab, like, I didn't even use the word "hijab," right? We call it my -- my scarf. We called it a scarf or a khimar. I'm, like, "What is this oppression? I don't understand."

And then I went to Damascus, and I was like, oh. I was like, "Yeah, they are trying to use this to oppress these women." [laughter] I was like, "Oh, I see what they're talking about now." It didn't change my opinion personally, but I saw the ways in which, you know, sort of regulating female modestly was a form of control. I didn't experience --

ALI: And how did you --?

ABDUL KHABEER: It just was being in that space. I don't know. It was like -- so, like, at the institution I was at, like, some of the girls -- So, I went to Damascus. So, I had graduated from college. I worked with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and -- and this opportunity to go came up. Imam Warith Deen Mohammed was sending groups of students to Damascus. He had a relationship with the -- the mufti Ahmed Kuftaro, and he was sending students to Damascus with the intent purpose of them learning, sort of, traditional Islamic studies to bring back, but to bring back filtered through the lens of our experience. Like, this was the idea.

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Most of the students would go and then the women will live in the dorm. I was like, "There's no way I'm living in that dorm." 'Cause they had way too many restrictions. And I had lived in Egypt, and I'm like -- and my grandmother had taken me on trips. I had traveled with her as a child, so it was, like, I need to be able to go places, and you couldn't go. You had to get permission. So, me -- so, I ended up getting an apartment. My friend Umbreen, she was not Black, she -- South Asian background from Albany. We met through MYNA, so she was my roommate, and so we were roommates. We rented an apartment, so I can have the flexibility to do -- like to go to Beirut, right, or to go visit friends in Egypt, right, and not have somebody's permission.

And so, the way that I experienced Islam, like it's funny that someone told me this story, and I don't know if it was Sheikh Muhammad [Al]-Yaqoubi or who it was, but someone told me the story about how this is -- this scholar, like Syrian scholar but who had either spent some time in the United States had seen some woman walking down the street in orange and he was like, "She must be American," and I was like, that's probably me. [laughter] All right? And so, I felt, like, the ways in which Islam was practiced in Syria was that -- Syrian -- Syrian culture, in general, it seemed was very conservative and reserved just in general. Like, I had lived in Egypt and, like, like, Masr is like Shabab. Like, people are just really -- like, they're loud and -- you know. Because there's a -- the energy is different. In Damascus, things felt -- and when you got into somebody's house, people were very nice and very open, that kind of stuff. But just in the streets and stuff, there was a sort of conservatism, probably lots of the politics, too, right, of the country?

And so, I experienced Islam in that way, too, right? That it was like women -- like, it was very conservative, and so what that meant for women, it just meant, like, women were like -- I don't know. I just felt like I didn't -- even though they have all these women studies, there was all this kind of stuff, I just-- it all felt to me, like, it was, like, studying

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to be disciplined in a particular kind of way. And -- and I could see, like, how -- like, if you're not, have not -- and even -- and even in Damascus, which is a place, I would have to say, like, you would see two friends walking on the street. One is no scarf on in like hot pants, and one has a scarf on and a manteau, which is this coat people used to wear. So, people coexisted. It wasn't, like, that kind of thing. But if you chose, right, to sort of, like -- sort of -- sort of be religious in that kind of way, it just felt, like, stifling to me. And so I was, kind of, like, "I see why people say this about that." Not that it has to be that way, but that it can be that way. I never experienced it that way growing up and then living in Syria made me see how that is the case.

Today, I'm ambivalent about -- what do I think about the, the legal ruling around covering. Because I recognize how people interpret the verse differently, and that's not really my area nor is it my issue, so I don't really spend a lot of time on it. So, like, I'm, like, "Okay, some people believe -- it's not something --" I was raised this way. It makes sense to me, so I do it. But I'm not really -- but I think one of the things that my mother -- like from her I used to kind of, like, push her on to, it's something I had to learn, was to not judge somebody's religiosity based on whether or not they wore a scarf. Because that was really how it would be interpreted. That if people -- women who stopped wearing scarves when I was growing up were basically not practicing anymore. There was this relationship to that.

And I don't actually think that that was incorrect, inaccurate. I think there was something else going on there, but the reality is today, right, there are lots of Muslim women that I know who I grew up with, you know, very religious, and they just don't cover their hair and it's just -- that's just it, you know? So, I think -- in some ways, I feel like a dying breed, right? This thing is like -- It's like me and my friends joke, another one bites the dust [laughter] like saying there -- somebody else is no longer wearing a head scarf, but -- But, yeah, so I feel like it was one of those things. So, now, I'm like, eh, you know?

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But again, it's like one of those things that I just don't -- I don't care enough to really invest a lot into that, so I just don't. But I -- I mean the thing that I do believe and know is that you're supposed to be modest in your dress and in your behavior. So, sometimes I'm, like, I don't -- I don't -- I don't care whether you cover your hair or not. I don't see how a bikini is modest. That's just -- I'm, like, I'm sorry, I'm not. I'm just not here for that. But, you know, outside of that, it's like, whatever, you know? Yeah.

ALI: So, tell me about the different mosques that you -- you've mentioned a few as you grew up, did it change?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, yeah.

ALI: Tell me what your --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, so actually --

ALI: -- relationships were with --

ABDUL KHABEER: So I think --

ALI: -- the communities.

ABDUL KHABEER: I think that -- So, my mother was very, I guess, sort of ecumenical in her religious practice, and so -- And what that means is that we didn't -- there wasn't necessarily just one masjid. I mean, so there was -- there were two masjids in particular, Masjid At-Taqwa and -- and Muhsi Khalifah that were homebases of sorts for me, but we also frequented other spaces and places, right? And so 72nd Street, Woodycrest, like these are places that we will go to for different types of things because it was the community. And my mother had a car and she drove, and so it was kind of like -- and it was funny. My mother did not take the train. Uh-Uh. She was -- I guess she was Queens through and through 'cause [laughter] she did not take the train. She was always in her car, always giving people rides, you know what I mean, like, whatever, and so, I wo--

But what I remember is that in terms of the homebases type of places, so Taqwa for sure. I remember being young at Taqwa. I remember, I guess, the area that is now their men's area was the only area that we had. I remember being in that area. I remember

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running in that area, probably not too much because we don't play that but, you know, like whatever. I remember them putting a curtain up in that area. But the curtain was permeable, so I felt like it wasn't -- you know, it was kind of -- it was there, and that was it and you, kind of, whatever.

ALI: And this was a curtain to do what?

ABDUL KHABEER: Oh, to -- sorry, a curtain to separate men and women. At a certain point, a curtain went up. It wasn't always up, but at a certain point, a curtain went up. I remember that. But I also remember it not being terribly like an impediment to anything. It was kind of like whatever.

Then I remember, they were -- 'cause Taqwa has always been fundraising, and they've always been like, gotta build more or whatever. And so, in one of these phases of building, there was a backspace that they opened up to create more room 'cause, I'm sure, the community was growing at that point and then they built a wall. And then I was like, "I'm gone." And I remember being like, no, and I don't know why I thought that way 'cause even my mother was never like that. She was never super -- So, she was super, like women should have access and that kind of thing, but she didn't really care about that kind of stuff. And I also think that she was one of these women, because she was a single parent, who -- what is that book that came out, [Ula Taylor's] *The Promise of Patriarchy*? So, I feel like on some level, my mother because she was raised -- her -- the way she remembers her childhood, which was not necessarily how my grandmother talked about it, but her father was the primary breadwinner, and, like, he took care of things. And I feel like she wanted to have that for herself.

So, I feel like while she was not going -- you are not going to, like, silence the women or that kind of thing. But if there was a wall or a cur-- she's like, "That's not --" That, she was like, whatever, you know, that kind of thing. She didn't care about that and stuff. I remember caring.

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And at that point, we were also going to Taq-- Khalifah. Now, Khalifah and Taqwa are like three blocks from each other. And from my childhood -- and I know there's -- there's, like, tensions 'cause Imam Siraj used to be at Khalifah and then he started Taqwa, but -- and from my childhood recollections, we went back and forth. There -- there was -- there was a kind of, like, this kind of thing there. Everybody didn't do that though for sure. But my mother, like I said, she wasn't -- she really wasn't, like, tied to a particular space and she -- you know, and she did lots of different stuff.

So, I wanna say when I was 13, I was -- I was a camp counselor. So we had summer youth pro-- program, and I got a job working. They had a camp at Khalifah and I was summer -- I was a counselor there at, I think, 13, 12? Twelve or 13. And from that point on, Khalifah became my prefer-- preferred place to go for like religious stuff. Like so, you know, when it was Thanksgiving, and everybody had their Friday off, for jummah, I'd go to Khalifah and that kind of thing. My mother followed me, but she also will go to Taqwa. She also will go here. You know, what I mean? She just kind of, like -- she did everything. But I was really involved with Khalifah, also, I think because I don't think Taqwa had this. There was Muslim Youth On the Move, it was a youth group that I was involved with and then that was a part of a collective of youth groups at Masjid Khalifah in Brooklyn, Malcolm Shabazz in Manhattan, Taqwa-Wa-Jihad in the Bronx, and even Yusuf Shah in Yonkers who were all under the Association of Imam [W. D.] Mohammed and we had the Muslim Youth, and young adult council.

And so, we used -- I used to do stuff with them, like I said, and I was younger, and they were older than me, but that was people -- I -- I was doing stuff with them, you know? Like that was my crew. I hung out with them. We did programs. You know, we had different kinds of programs. There used to be this radio show, *Al-Islam in America*. I think Imam Baqi ran that, and we used to do -- once a month, we will go and we would run the show, you know, for that kind of thing.

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So, Khalifah became my home, like a primary home space for me because there were lots of activities that I was involved in with them. And I didn't feel like -- and there has never been a wall. You know, it's, like, I can see the imam and all that kind of stuff, and so that became the space that I preferred to go to. And I just stopped going to Taqwa. Like, I don't even -- Yeah, I mean we'll go -- I'll go -- I'll -- I used to go up there still sometimes 'cause there was a brother named Shameem who had a Steak-N-Take place. We'd just go out there. It was really good. And I see my friends who are still over there, but like that's, kind of, how it ended up being for me, sort of, as a teenager in particular and then in college and that kind of stuff.

And to this day, like, if the masjid has a wall, I'm just not even gonna even pray in there 'cause like, I just can't. It just is too -- like, it ruins my experience 'cause I'll be like -- all I'm thinking about is, "Why is this wall here?" [laughter] And actually, I have a poem when I was in Cairo in college. My friend told me -- my friend Kamillah she said, "I'm a rabble rouser," she was a rabble rouser for a different reason.

Anyway, I'm in Cairo, and they had prayer rooms -- I'm at the American University in Cairo [AUC], and at that point, they were still downtown, in Tahrir. They have since moved, I've heard, to a different part, like, Maadi or something. Anyway, they would have prayer rooms on the campus, and so there was one prayer room on campus I will go to, to make salat, and it had a wall between the men and the women. And so, there were some brothers who were praying, but I couldn't follow them 'cause I really couldn't hear and I couldn't see them. And I wrote this poem about that that I later read.

So, they had this, like, cultural poetry event, a student-run thing, and I later I read the poem, you know, at this event at AUC, you know? And it was, kind of, like, bulldozers, there was bulldozers in it. There's -- there's a collection called *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak,* and I had a -- I kind of had a suite in there, and that

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poem was in there. And it was really like – you know and it's funny, too, because going to Egypt like there was -- I was in the international student's office and stuff, and I remember the woman who was running it, kind of, balked at me 'cause I was, like, talking to her about prayer accommodations that had a -- because the times of the prayer and the times of my class. And she was kind of, like, "What's the big deal?" And I'm, like, "I'm in Egypt. Like, I don't have these problems in DC. [laughter] Like, what are you talking about? Like, this is crazy." And it's not like -- I don't think -- And I don't remember, I should say, having any particular expectations about any kind of, like, Islamic paradise, you know, in Egypt 'cause I think I had met enough people to know that probably would not be true. But to be -- have to, like, negotiate to make prayer blew my mind.

I was like, "I don't have these problems in the United States." And that's, kind of, when I realized I was American. You know, people always say, like, "Well, you live outside the United States," and you're, like, "Oh, yeah, I kind of am," and not in the patriotic way still, but in the sense of, like, I've been really shaped by the place where I grew up, right, and then kind of my expectations about what is and what it shouldn't be, all that kind of stuff. And as a Muslim, you know, like, I'm like -- Which is different than other spaces. And so, it's funny, so, and that kind of thing, but yeah.

But in terms of Brooklyn, Taqwa and Khalifah -- Masjid Al-Ikhwa, I didn't really go there a lot. That was on Eastern Parkway. That's the one -- Imam Ibrahim's community. Yeah. And those were the two, kind of, main spaces that are most important --

ALI: And then --

ABDUL KHABEER: But everything wasn't masjid too. Like, so the masjid was important, and it was a space, but there were also things that, kind of, emanated from it at opposed to always bringing us into it if that makes sense. Yeah.

ALI: One of the things that you mentioned, I guess, maybe emanate or outside of the masjid was -- was Eid in Prospect Park. Can you talk about what that was like --

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ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: -- describe it for someone. Like --

ABDUL KHABEER: So -- so --

ALI: -- going there, what did you -- tell me about that --

ABDUL KHABEER: so yeah so I live --

ALI: -- experience?

ABDUL KHABEER: -- I lived in Ebbets Field, and I could see Prospect Park from my window. And at the time, Eid was in Prospect Park was always in the summer when I was a kid. It's funny, too, 'cause when I was -- turned eight, yeah, my mother -- it was Ramadan. My birthday was on Ramadan. My mother was like -- my mother made me a cake, and it was in the refrigerator because we couldn't eat it until she broke her fast. But I would sneak in the refrigerator and take a little icing. And she used to tell me -- and she'd be like, "In 30 years, you gon' be fasting or --" and she was right. Thirty years later Ramadan, it was my birthday again but --

So, you -- I would wake up in the morning and you'd wake up early and there -- it's almost like -- and it's funny 'cause there's no dew, I guess, in the tenement. But -- but it was like -- you know the -- the air'd be fresh and clean, and the sun would be coming up, and you'd be so excited because, like, it's Eid, you know? And, you know, I have a poem about that too. That's in that collection, right?

And, you know, you would get ready 'cause you had, like, an outfit made, right, for Eid. My mother never gave us presents, but you always got a new outfit for Eid, and we were always late, so my mother, Allah bless her, was always late to everything. And she would, like, make, you know, fried chicken or something and then we will walk over. And so, we -- sometimes, we would have like a cart 'cause we would have to have like the foods you've gonna eat and then, like, your -- the mat that you're gonna sit on or whatever. And you kind of, you know, weave your way to the park.

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And at that point, Prospect Park -- I don't even know 'cause I was just over there recently. I don't know. We used to be able to drive through the park at certain hours. And so I don't know, sometimes we would drive a little bit closer 'cause we had a lot of stuff or whatever. And so, you would get there, and it would just be -- and so there was -- I forget what part of the park it was, but there was this huge fields, right, grassy fields that kind of had a slope a little bit. And people would set up their rug, you know, just kind of the car-- carpets and stuff almost, like, picnic style. And you would be -- there would be the khutbah, and you probably couldn't hear because there really wasn't a good sound system. [laughter] And -- and then the prayer or the prayer and then khutbah and then there was always drumming, and so there was a group of brothers who would drum and -- And then you would sit out there all day, and you would eat, and you would talk, and you go from peop-- you know, from, like, kind of, like, picnic area to picnic area, get other people's food.

I remember one time when I was older, my -- my two girlfriends were interested in these two guys, and I was their chaperone. And so, they were, like, walking through -- you know, walking around the park, and we would go -- I was, like, walking with them, and so you would kind of go off and, you know, it's a park, so there -- you -- There was a gazebo over here somewhere and this kind of thing, and so you would, kind of, meander, but you will be there all day, just all day at Prospect Park. So, you make other prayers out there too, and it was just, it was just really festive and fun and relaxing.

And from what I remember, lots of different communities came in Prospect Park. It wasn't just one particular one. I mean they were all Black. I don't remember any non-Black people who weren't like Latinx right. But like -- but lots of communities came out for Prospect Park -- for Eid at Prospect Park, and yeah. I mean, like, I don't have any --

ALI: Did they have any other kind of programming or is it just --?

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ABDUL KHABEER: I don't remember programming. I remember like drumming and eating. [laughter] That's what I remember. And just relaxing and, like, you know, posting up or, like, sashaying 'cause you had some new outfit on.

Like I remember that year that I was the chaperone for those people, it was when -- you know, remember the -- the hip-hop artist Kwame wore all those polka dots? So, I had this palazzo, polka dot, like jumper thing that I had found, and it was, like, turquoise with black polka dots. I had, like, a black shirt, and I think I had a turquoise scarf. Yeah, so I was -- I was doing the most. And I think at that time I had finally gotten my mother to give me some patent leather shoes with the -- the silver on the tip, yes. So, it's, like, yes.

One year for Eid, I remember I wanted like a princess style dress, and so I like -- and it's funny, too, now that I think about, "What was princess about this dress besides the cut?" Right? Because it had that cut, but it was this African print that was like purple and fuchsia and lime. It was this weird kind of print, but it had the puffy sleeves and that, kind of, like, puffed kind of thing out, and that was my -- I forget who made that dress for me. But it was -- yeah, you get your Eid outfit, which is very big thing in -- I don't -- and I'm -- I'm assuming it was for both Eids we did this, but, of course, you remember Eid al-Fitr the most because it's Ramadan and all that kind of stuff.

But, yeah, Eid in Prospect Park was just -- It was just -- it was just a really -- It was a really communal space that was just really festive and wonderful, and again, I guess -- guess reaffirming, you know? I guess, like, everyone used -- And you would see people who you hadn't seen all year and this kind of thing, so it's, like, coming back together and -- yeah.

ALI: So, throughout your telling of the -- the -- the later teenage or early adult years, you -- you've mentioned a few things. And I'm wondering if you could talk about how they converge into -- to what you're doing. You, certainly, talked a lot about your love of

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literature and of a-- academics. You talked about dance. You've talked about poetry. Tell me how those things grew for you in terms of the kinds of activities you were doing.

ABDUL KHABEER: Right. So, I think, that the Brooklyn that I grew up in, the black Brooklyn, the Pan-African Brooklyn, the cultural Brooklyn that I grew up in was a Brooklyn that privileged, like, creative arts. There was always something happening where someone was performing something. [laughter], You know, like it just -- And whether it was a dance class you went to or a Kwanzaa event you went to or like Eid, like there was something creative happening.

And I think, for me, that made me feel like I could be creative, right? Like, I remember I -- I did this summer program -- So, NYU [New York University] had this summer enrichment program. I think it was called STEP that was sort of, you know, geared towards students of color or whatever that I went to for two summers? And I wrote a poem. What was that poem that I wrote for that one? It had a title, "I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar," something like that, I don't know, whatever -- that I wrote for that class. I remember the teacher who was actually one of my Islamic school teachers but who was also, like, doing the summer program remarking about, like, how good the poem was or this kind of thing. And so, I think like writing and writing poetry was something that was all around and easily accessible, and so I felt like -- I don't remember feeling like, "Oh, I'm gonna write poet--" You know, it's kind of like, I'm just -- this is what people do, you know?

And -- and I think, you know, like, in high school, I was a part of -- we had a black group called the African Renaissance Coalition, and we would do a show, I guess, every spring, and so I would perform in that. Like I would write poetry, and there's a Muslim brother -- Brother Umar Abdul Wali who was -- they send -- they have something called SPARK, which was some kind of, like, Student Peer something, something, something. Anyway, he was a SPARK person, but he also was the advisor for the African

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Renaissance Coalition, and he also was the advisor for what later became a Muslim group. I think it was called Mecca at the -- at -- at -- at my high school. And so, he, I think, also had a background in the arts and so, you know, he would, kind of, help us put stuff together.

I think my senior year for the show, I had read *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. And I decided I wanted to do a part of it, and so I kind of selected the parts that we should do and put on -- put on it. And it was not the whole thing because this -- because it's like -- it was like a variety-ensemble show. But I was lady in red, and my friend Magda I think was lady in brown, and Latisha was the lady in yellow and then -- So we did some of the things, and we, sort of, acted that out and did that. And so -- I don't know. I feel like --

I never forget, too, some or one of my friends, Auntie Aaliyah's daughter Majida, she had a group. And I, actually, recently on Facebook was asking her about this song 'cause I'll never forget this song. And -- and I don't know -- I just -- I remember the melody really. It's something about war, but she was a part of some group of women who had some kind of, like -- I don't know what they were doing really, but they had a perform-- they had a program, and at the program, they sang this song, right, and so -- And there was always a program, you know, whether it was a at -- I think she went to A. Philip Randolph for high school, so it was up there, or there was a program at the High or there's a program somewhere. There's always some program, some cultural arts program and somebody doing some drumming and somebody talking about ancestors and libation and somebody doing a poem. You know, there's -- there's somebody dancing. It was just al-- there was always something somewhere.

And so for me, I think that -- So for me, it was just that was kind of part of life, and it was accessible. And so even in my own work, like one of the things -- like I have this one woman show that I do, and even though I do it and everything, I still have a kind of

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-- I have a slight hesitancy with the work because I'm not formally trained. Right? But that's not from my community. That's because of outside, right? So, you have other places like whatever. But, like, nobody was formally trained in that way, except you were trained because if you weren't good, people are gonna tell you that, too, right? Like, I mean, you only get away with stuff whack if you a kid. You know, when you're a kid you can do whatever you wanna do. [laughter] But at a certain point, you know, it has to be good. You know, can't just, like, whatever.

And so, I think -- But the reason why I even got into it is because it didn't occur to me that I couldn't do it 'cause I wasn't like -- it was like, but this is a way to express yourself, to talk about things. It's important. I -- I enjoy it. Like I get something out of it. People get something out of it. And I have this experience doing my show a couple of years ago where this young, black Muslim woman came up to me, and she was, like, had tears in her eyes. And she was, like, "You know, I've been having trouble with this, like, thing being black and Muslim. And your show really -- it's really important 'cause it's helped me see that I can do that." And it hit me, and I was like, wow, because that is what happened to me.

And it wasn't being black and Muslim because those two things were never -- I never ever had a question about the conf-- the -- the, sort of, connection between that. That wasn't my issue ever. Like, I've never even thought about that. But I realized that seeing black people perform and sing in this kind of thing, like I saw *The Colored Museum* on PBS, right, which isn't even in the community, right. Like seeing these things happen helped -- made me know, "Oh, okay, like, I can do basically whatever I wanna do, right? I can do these things, right?" Like, because they -- they taught me, like, what was possible for me, and so now, I'm -- I was able to do that for her, which was really powerful, and so I think -- yeah, I don't know. I think it's one of those things where -- and like even --

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And -- and -- and, of course, everyone isn't into it because my friends, we would joke, like, how I was always doing interpretative dance. [laughter] I'm like -- it's like, would do interpretative dance, [laughter] you know. That was like a running joke with some of my friends were like, "Well, it's time for interpretive dance." But it's -- but it's, like -- but it's this thing where, you know, culture and arts and artistic expression was always a part of my life.

And I think as a Muslim, I was aware of Muslims who didn't think yo-- that was appropriate, but that wasn't my clique. So, [laughter] like, "That's what they --? Okay, whatever," but like we're black people, we're Africans, like music and dancing, art, expression, like, how are we gonna live in this world if we don't do that? So, I think it was just, like -- You know, so, I always knew that was there, and there were these tensions, but m-- my mother, the aunties-- everyone I was around was very -- you know, they were very -- they very much encouraged that. Everything doesn't go because it has to have -- you know, the content should be appropriate. It should be about uplifting whatever, that kind of thing.

But there was never -- like there was never -- my mother never had a, I don't listen to music moment, that I know. I think maybe when she first became a Muslim that might have happened or something. But as long as I've been alive, she never -- that never was the case, you know? We were listening to music. Like I said, she took me to see The Boys, right, like, you know? Like, it's like we're not -- I just wasn't -- that wasn't -- this wasn't a thing at all.

And I think -- I don't know. I think it's -- I think it's important because, like I said, thinking now, I'm coming into an awareness. Like I feel -- sometimes I feel like, you forget how y-- that you -- everyone wasn't raised like you, and I think -- You know, there are black people who are Muslim in these streets not loving themselves and like -- being like, "I can't do --" Like -- like, you know, not liking their color, like, literally. And --

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and -- and to be -- and to be quite frank, like, yes, in the '80s, maybe. Okay. When y'all are trying to figure stuff out, and you don't know, well you got this where you're looking stuff on, but in 2018? I'm like, "I can't." And so, it's kind of crazy 'cause you're just like, "Whoa, there -- there is, like, work that actually really needs to be done to, like, do something about that because that is --" It blow-- it's bananas. Like, it blows my mind. I'm like, "How --? Like, why where you --? How is this issue?"

ALI: So, let's -- let's talk about your work. You -- you mentioned the piece. What was the piece called, and when was it first performance, and what was the --?

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah. Yeah. So, I have --

ALI: -- genesis.

ABDUL KHABEER: -- a one-woman, solo performance. It's called *Sampled: Beats of Muslim Life*. I first performed it in 2008, at a Community Café that was held by the Inner-city Muslim Action Network, IMAN, in Chicago. It came out of the research I was doing as a graduate student on Muslims and hip-hop in Chicago or more broadly speaking. I say that *The Colored Museum* and *For Colored Girls* were probably the two main in-- inspirations for how it -- its format. So, it's kind of has this like -- it's like vignettes that are, sort of, individual yet connected through a story that they tell -- they tell. I do everything myself. So, like, I do all the performing, which is different actually than *For Colored Girls* and *The Colored Museum* because they have actors for that.

But one of the scenes in my show is directly inspired from *The Colored Museum* because he has this one scene where this black woman and she has like an afro wig and a straight-hair wig, and she's -- she's, like, getting the rest of her face made up. And the afro wig and the straight-hair wig are arguing with each other about who she's gonna pick, right? Because, "If she wanna be strong and she wanna be able -- she wanna fly" this kind of thing, I never forgot that. It was hilarious as a kid.

And so, I have a scene in *Sampled* where a -- a Muslim -- a young Muslim woman who is, you know, she's -- she's not black, so she's -- she can be Arab or South Asian

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depending on how she's read. She's not someone who wears head scarf. She's gonna decide to wear a head scarf, so she's choosing between three different styles. And this one is traditional, which kind of looks like a gulfy Arab, you know, black, you know, sort of, glasses [phonetic] fancy. hijabi-lite, which probably looks like your average, young woman at a -- on a college campus and then hoodjabi, which is kind of like -- it's like a scarf and a bun, and she has the keffiyehs -- keffiyeh on and like a --, you know, sort of a Pride T-- you know, Black Power T-shirt or something. I don't know. You know, a Malcolm X T-shirt or whatever, some sneakers, hip-hop, headphones. And this is satire, right, it's mean to be, but the -- Sara who is the main character who's deciding, she interacts with each of these people, and I narrate their interactions.

And I did so to bring up the ways in which, you know, race and class come up in these decisions around how you're gonna cover, and what are the implications of that kind of stuff. So like -- so that part is there for -- for the show and then just different things that I did in the research, Like I have a -- a monologue where I play this "Muslim Dandy" 'cause that's from the research.

I have a p-- I have a part where I took press releases from the joint task terrorism force in Illinois where they talk about Muslim men that they have who have been indicted or accused or whatever or charged for terrorism acts, or attempted I should say acts of terrorism. In all of these cases, there's an informant involved, a cooperating source. And -- and so, I link that to -- I, kind of, read those as a new-- like newscaster voice with the recent stuff that's happened with Black Lives Matter activists, and then ending with reading from the FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] documents on surveillance of the NOI [Nation of Islam] to try to -- you know, to show this relationship between surveillance of Muslims and black activists across time. Yeah, so there's different -- lots of different things are happening in the show.

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It turned 10 this year, and I thought I was gonna be done with it because I was like, "Okay, I'm ready to move on." But I've actually never done the actual tour of it, and I think I wanna do that. I'm not sure or whatever, but the last performance I did it of it, I still wasn't completely happy, so -- Because you're always trying to get better, you know, and so I have a director that I -- So, I started working with a director Sonita Suratt, and so she helped me a lot in Chicago trying to pull it together.

I'm ready to do something new. I'm ready to create something new, but it's hard to focus sometimes, and so -- And actually, I just got a request to do it again in February, I think, at Brandeis so -- but, yeah. So that's *Sampled,* and I guess now, I think -- I think you said that I focus a lot on education, literature, and it's true. And I was a good student, overachiever, and I was good at that. I do think that there are other things that I'm good at that didn't get as much, you know, play. Part of that I think is about being Muslim because I think even though my community, it was, like, encouraged this kind of stuff, there weren't always as easy access to stuff just because, I mean, I have existed or how are you gonna figure it out and that kind of thing. I think part of it was being working class as well, and so I'm just, like, you know, my mother is a single parent and, like, you know -- again, like, you know, like, what types of things, how long or how f-- you know?

Because one of the things I was gonna say, actually, earlier was, like, with the thing about the MYNA camps, my mother would take -- send me to them, which she thought was important. And I remember I used to always go to MYNA East Zone camp in Thanksgiving weekend, and I remember hearing later on -- I didn't know this, at the time -- that my mother had borrowed money from Sister Jamillah, so I could go to East Zone because she couldn't afford to send me, right? So, like, I think that's also there, too, that sometimes.

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And then also, I think, you know, there's -- academic achievement is really important for black people, and so there's a lot of -- You know, I just think that it's -- it's and it's easy -- and it's easier. I don't know if it's -- it is easier. I don't know. To me, it's easier. Like, I feel like I tell people, writing the book versus doing the performance, performance is so much more difficult than writing a book [laughter] because it's just -- because you -- because you have to use your whole entire self in ways that writing doesn't require. It just doesn't, and so -- I don't know. I think a lot of different -- and maybe my own, like, insecurities or whatever, you know, that kind of thing.

So now, I feel, like, I'm -- I'm -- I'm trying to figure out -- I'm not trying to figure out, but what I'm trying to recommit to is, like, these other -- sort of the more creative parts. And -- and also just in our society, right? We -- you know, this whole thing about STEM, you know, you know what I mean? We super overvalue and privilege, like, you know, the kind of -- Like, even being anthropologist, some people are, like, "What is that?" you know. I'm like, "I chose anthropology, you know, look at me, so I can write like -- like a -- like -- like, I'm an ec-- economist or something," right? [laughter] I was, like, I chose anthropology as -- you know this is sort of our humanistic social science, right, as my area to focus on.

So, I think now, I'm interested in trying to, you know, reinvest and recommit to, sort of, the connections that I've always felt between the, kind of, academic-y work and the artistic work. Because I don't think that they were necessarily seen as different growing up. Everybody didn't do them. You may not have access to it, but the relationship between them was always really clear because the whole point of doing anything is liberation, right? So, like, in the arts for liberation, and the academic was -- and that's why we're -- this is why we're doing this anyway, so they weren't really disconnected. So, I think, now for me, it's what I want to do. Unfortunately, I can't do that in Brooklyn because Brooklyn is not Brooklyn anymore, and it's sad, and I'm still trying to come to terms with that.

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ALI: What -- and -- well, this might be connected to my -- I think maybe my last question --

ABDUL KHABEER: Last question? Mm-hmm.

ALI: -- which is why are we in Ann Arbor? [laughter]

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: Because we opened this interview saying I'm in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

ABDUL KHABEER: Right.

ALI: So, connect maybe what -- what are -- what are you doing here in Ann Arbor and --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes, so what am I doing --

ALI: [inaudible]

ABDUL KHABEER: -- Ann Arbor?

ALI: And how does that relate to what you just said about --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah. Well, I'm -- I mean in Ann Arbor because I work here now. I got a position at the University of Michigan. I'm an associate professor of American Culture and Arab and Muslim American Studies. I -- So, I think, what happens is that my mother's generation were activists and revolutionaries. And I think that they instilled that in their children, but they also instilled in their children achievement as a sign of your revolution and activism and that kind of thing. I think because of Reagan, state repression, the ability -- the resistance changed in what it looked like and what was possible. I think people had kids. My mother was a single parent, right, and so the struggle looked different.

I think -- so I think part of the way we continue to struggle and continue to see that there was hope was by encouraging their kids to do well in school, stuff like that. I think if you do well in school, in this country at least, you have to leave home. It takes you away because the opportunities are not here, right? And -- and actually, there's a poem that I'm trying to write now 'cause I was like thinking about like, "How the hell did I end up in here?" And it makes you feel like it's your fault that like -- of how am I here and not home? But it's, like, not your fault 'cause first of all, you're not supposed to be here in the first place, like, literally. You people were stolen and brought here. I

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mean like this is not your place anyway, right? Like, we begin with displacement, and so I'm displaced again, and it's, like, you know, well, yeah. Right?

And so, it's not your fault because you went to pursue -- you went to and -- and I think success takes you away from home because you don't have a lot of opportunities. They're not available to, like, everybody else. Like, you're not White, you're not male, you're not Christian, you know, like, whatever. So, like, few and far between, right? And this is -- and -- and think about, like, the academy, right? And now, there are few opportunities anyway, right, and this stru-- and again, that's not nobody's fault. It's structured to be that way, right? Like, they say, "There are too many PhDs." No, there are enough PhDs for every teaching position in this country, but universities don't wanna hire PhDs because they don't wanna give you benefits and salary, so they wanna adjunct somebody. So it's -- so it's not that you're not good enough to get that job. It's that there's not enough jobs because it's constructed that way.

So, likewise, I feel like opportunity, right, takes you away from home because there are not that many opportunities for you. And so you have -- and if you wanna be successful and follow them, you go where they are. The problem with that -- and that, in and of itself, is not a problem. What happens is that at the same time that I'm going away and I'm following opportunities, they have decided that they want your home now, and it's important again. And so, now you're away and then, like, folks are like buying up stuff.

And it's funny because they always told us that. Like, "They're buying up things, and we should buy up the things." But here's the thing about the buying-up thing, which I think is important too. It's, like, if you got no money, you can't buy nothing. And if you're being red lined, you can't buy nothing. Like, I remember someone told me. He's like, "My uncle lived in Harlem, he --" I was like, "When was he getting a home loan? Who is giving him a home loan?" Nobody. Right? So, like -- you know, so it's kind of, like, so all of this stuff that's happening at the same time. And so I think -- so I think,

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you end up -- you end up away pursuing success trying to be achieved, which they love and they're proud of, right? They're not, like, whatever, you know?

Like, a friend of mine was telling me this that I was saying, "You know, my mother has now since passed." And I was, like, you know, we were asking -- she was asking me 'cause she lives abroad, also, for opportunity. And she was, like -- and I was, like, yeah. I was like, you know, you feel like, you know, should I have been there, it -- it would have been different or whatever, but then she's like, yeah. But she was like, "But your mother -- but she loved to brag about you, right? And to be like, 'Oh, she's doing this, and doint that, and I do --'" you know, this kind of thing. So it's not like they're, like, mad at you because they're, like, "This is great what you're doing, right? But because we live in structures of inequality, right, your choices are, like, effed up, right? So it's like, "You can do this, but you've -- this is gonna happen."

And so, I think now, you know, and initially I was gonna do this work on Brooklyn, and maybe it will happen still one day, but, like, I think -- There was a sh-- Kamau Bell has this show called, I think, *United Shades of America*, and I was watching it with my husband. And there was the episode on Portland and on Black Portland. And the -- one of the women, young women there was saying. She had this statement that just, like -- it's, like, it gives you goosebumps, but it's so true. She's like, "It's, like, we're artifacts," and so I feel like in Brooklyn now, like there'll be AfroPunk and there's the East still, and these -- these things will pop up here and there that, like, may retain some of that, but they're are ephemeral, right? They're ephemeral. They come, and they go. People still want them around to give some -- some authenticity to the Brooklyn they're in, but you're not grounded in the same way.

And, of course, there are people -- like I -- I attended last year, last September. The Brooklyn Anti-- Anti-Gentrification Network had a march, and I marched with them from -- like the whole march. So, we started at Barclays, and it ended at -- in Williams--

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no, yeah, yeah, Williamsburg over by the J train over there. And it gave me a little bit of hope because, like, when I got there, it had to be all of a hundred people at first, maybe as full as 200 the most. There had to be like 50 police officers, and I was like, "Well, that means there's actually something you can do," 'cause you could -- they won't be here. You know what I mean? like, all these police for a hundred people? It's like -- 'cause, obviously, this -- this -- there's something here, right, and there's something there, and so you try to support those things.

You know like, Masjid Khalifah, like, they're doing a fundraiser, and I'm like, "I'm gonna try to raise some money for them" because they're also being targeted, right? Some people -- so the -- there are ways that we try to intervene, but even with those interventions, something has been lost that I think just the reality is will never be recovered and displacement is kind of like -- [phone rings].

ALI: Okay.

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah. What do you call it?

ALI: You were saying it's important to do these kinds of interventions to --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yeah, yeah. Sorry. I got distracted. Okay, yes. So, I think it's important to do these kinds of things, but there's something that's lost. I think it's just -- it is -- it's gone. But yes, I guess, we just continue. Like we shall continue, right? We continue to -- we continue to struggle and to try to do something and we try to hold on. We try not to give up.

You know, I'm in Ann Arbor. [laughter] I'm like, okay. And you try to figure -- okay, well, what can I do here or how ca--? You know, like, what --? Like, you know, I'm Muslim, right, so Allah has put me in this place for some reason. My friends say I'm having my Khidr moment, and so I guess, it will reveal itself at some point [laughter] why this is happening.

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But all that said, I wanna recognize too, like, I'm in a really privileged position considering, like, where I came from and the academy. Like, I have a tenure at a research-1 institution, and I had multiple offers, you know, and I was, like, sought after. Of course, that also -- it's also the result of, like, being exceptional when you're not really, but because there are so few things, you know what I mean? So, it's like, you know -- you know it's, like -- you know, like, you know, there are lots of smart Black people, you know what I mean? Like -- so like -- but, like -- you know? And this is something that I think has been true my whole entire life. Although, some woman -- this one woman was, like -- she was like, "Whatever, you worked." And I did work. I'm not saying I didn't work. But because there is a motif, right, around kind of, like, you know, exceptional people of color, Black people, and I f-- and I check off so many boxes that, you know, if there is a space, you can fit into it right? But there should be more spaces, right?

It's, like, I wanted this one job at this one school in New York, and I didn't get it. I didn't even get an interview, although they were interested in me, but at that point, I had already this other stuff, so their timeline was much longer or whatever. But someone else got the job who's totally qualified and that kind of thing, but it was, like, messed up because it's, like -- but there can only be one of us. So, like, it's not a -- you know what I mean? So, she got the job, and she got the job, right, because -- and she was replacing the person who was there before her, right? Right? Because there can only be one of you. You can't have more than one. So, I think that is just, kind of, like, what it is, you know? And so, it's kind of crazy. It's -- it just -- it is -- and hopefully -- well I think -- I don't know. I'm hoping that will change. I think, at least, in terms of the academy, I feel like there's a -- myself included, there are some of us who are now tenured and that, like, I just did a tenure letter for somebody, which was great. I mean it was a lot of work, but it was great to be able to do. But I think there are some of us who are now tenured, and I think -- I mean these -- I -- I don't wanna overstate it because you're fighting against the institution as individuals. Nevertheless, you know, what is it they call it?

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Like Fred Moten calls it fugitivity, right? So, you try to be a fugitive in these spaces. I won't tell all our secrets, though, because -- you know, [laughter] that we -- we can't let that -- we can't give the full plan. But, you know what I mean? But I feel like, you know, we try to, kind of, sort of, do that stuff too but -- But yeah. But I think -- yeah, I don't know.

So, sometimes with Brooklyn, like I go home, and I'm furious, and I just wanna, like, raze everything to the ground because it was just like WTF, you know, like, "What is happening here?" You know? And then it's like, I meet people that go, "You know, my cousin lives in Brooklyn," or some girl from -- some White girl from Iowa. Or my sister lives in -- And I'll be like, "You know what, it's taken everything I have to just sit here and -- and nod and smile," [laughter], you know? Yeah. So, sometimes, it's just like -- and it's just sad, you're just sad, and it's depressing.

And like my husband is from Oakland, West Oakland and he used to not really get it 'cause he doesn't go home as much as I do, and then he went home, and he was like, "Oh, I, now I understand." I'm like, "Yes, right?" But how do you not be sad? And not not be sad, but how do you, I think, recognize the loss but also, I think, still have a vision and projection for a possible future that includes you and your story and your people? And I think that's what I'm still trying to figure out how to do that even from my outpost here in Ann Arbor, Michigan, or wherever I'll end up being next if not here. But, yeah, I guess that's' -- that's what I -- that's what's there. And I think -- you know I think, you know, liberation is a journey not a destination. I think God is God, and so -- And this world isn't meant to be perfect. So, I think, you know, you try to hold on to those things and until it's your time to transition over, you just, you know, keep on keeping on, so --

ALI: Well, thank you very much.

ABDUL KHABEER: You're welcome.

ALI: Hopefully, your contribution to this project will help --

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ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: -- help that in --

ABDUL KHABEER: Yes.

ALI: -- in solidifying the memories of -- of that Brooklyn. So, again, thank you for sharing --

ABDUL KHABEER: Thank you.

ALI: -- your story.

ABDUL KHABEER: Thanks.

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