

Queer Newark Oral History Project  
Interviewee: Tracey Africa Norman  
Interviewed by: Naomi Extra  
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Location: Rutgers-Newark

*Naomi Extra:* Today is October 31, 2016, and I am Naomi Extra interviewing Tracey Africa here at Rutgers-Newark. Alright, so the first question I'd like to ask you is when and where were you born?

*T. Africa Norman:* I was born here in Newark in December of '52.

*Naomi Extra:* Can you tell me a little bit about your early life?

*T. Africa Norman:* As a child, it wasn't very traumatic for me. I was just being what children do. I was learning. I always felt inside, since far back as I can remember that I was female. Maybe five or six years old. I grew up with that thought in my head, but I had no role models as far as someone gay, to be around for me to mimic. I grew up a shy child. Insecure. Because I was quiet I studied a lot. What I studied were women. How my mother talked and sat. How my grandmother talked and sat. My teachers were all predominantly female. I just studied women and how they maneuvered through the world. I also studied how they would converse with each other. How they would cross their leg or laugh. I was just getting my lessons in my brain on how I was supposed to act. That's how it all started from me being so small. I kept that with me through my teenage years. I was still quiet. I wasn't able to do my transformation until after high school when I graduated. I was the first one in my family to graduate high school.

*Naomi Extra:* Oh wow.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah.

*Naomi Extra:*

What are some of your earliest memories in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:*

Well, I survived and lived through the Newark riots. I was a teenager. I'm guessing I was around maybe 13 or 14, cuz I was in junior high. I remember that. Those were the years that my father came and asked my mother could we live with him. I didn't wanna go.

*[Laughter]*

My sister was adamant. While living with my father, the Newark riots developed. I experienced that. Being on our porch, we lived on Johnson Avenue, which is off of Clinton Avenue. We were almost in the heart of things because the army was all around up and down Clinton Avenue. Then the tanks came down Johnson Avenue. *[Laughter]* It was kinda funny because we were all on the porch, and our balcony. We lived on the third floor.

The tanks were coming down Johnson Avenue. When they got to our building as the tanks were coming down, the nozzle where the actual bomb would come out would deviate from left to right to different buildings. It was aimed upward. When it got near to our building *[laughter]* I remember my father we were all standing there, my father would yell, "Duck." *[Laughter]* We all just laid down on the patio until they all passed. I also noted, it's a vivid memory because there were also soldiers on both sides of the tank accompanying the tank. Walking up Johnson Avenue toward the high school which was Southside.

Yeah, I remember that. I can see it as I'm talking about it. It's so amazing. It was me, my sister, my father and the woman he was living with at the time who was named, Audrey. We were all on

the patio and—so when we finally got up *[laughter]* from laying down, even I had the forethought to say, well if it's a bomb *[laughter]* and they decided to *[laughter]* shoot the building we would still be *[laughter]*—we would still be gone. *[Laughter]*

*Naomi Extra:* Very sound logic.

*T. Africa Norman:* I just started laughing and my dad wanted to know *[laughter]* what was I laughing about? I was like, “Nothing.” I just kept it at that, I just said, “Nothing.” **[00:05:00]**

*Naomi Extra:* That's a really interesting memory.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah.

*Naomi Extra:* What do you remember—you said you lived on Johnson, what do you remember about Newark and the neighborhood?

*T. Africa Norman:* I remember when living with my mother we always lived in a mixed neighborhood. Predominantly I was raised in a Jewish neighborhood, which was the Weequahic section at the time, when we were smaller. Weequahic Park was right across the street and the race—horseraces, the trotters with the guy who was on the—I'm trying to think of the name, the I guess pulley on the back. Yeah, and he was racing the horse like that. Yeah, and then there was the rowboats in the park that I remember. Cuz Mommy would take us in the park and we would walk around. I remember that vividly and then Daddy came over whilst we got older, to ask us to live with him as I said prior. Then the other things that I remember in Newark would be just going back and forth to school. Because I was so quiet and so to myself I did make

friends. They were mostly female friends. I wasn't flamboyant. I was just what I consider normal, just passing through. Yeah, and got through junior high school. That was an experience. Living with my father was an experience. That's when I was sexually active with two of the male people that lived in our building.

*Naomi Extra:* Was that some of your first experiences?

*T. Africa Norman:* No, my first experience was—I don't know maybe I was like—I'm three years older than my sister and my sister was an infant. At the time, we were living with the babysitter while my mom had to work. I remember a guy down the street, a teenager invited me into his home where I was orally molested by him. The strangest thing I thought it was normal.

Every time he saw me on my tricycle he would call me and I would go in. The weirdest thing that happened with that is that, he had one of his friends hiding in the closet. When the friend popped out, for some *[laughter]* reason I got mad. I ran out of the bedroom, down the stairs and outside. I never went back. Because he did that to me.

*Naomi Extra:* This was in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* This was in Rahway.

*Naomi Extra:* In Rahway.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, this was in Rahway when we were very small. Yeah, and that's when I got my first experience of being called a fag. I was a child, I didn't know what that means.

*Naomi Extra:* Where was that, at school or was that in the neighborhood?

*T. Africa Norman:* That was in the neighborhood. Yeah, I wasn't in school then. We were at the babysitters, my mom would drop us off. She would head off to work cuz we were raised by a single-parent home. That was one of my memories, when my first sexual experience was at.

*Naomi Extra:* About how old were you?

*T. Africa Norman:* I'm guessing maybe three or four. Like I said I'm three years older than my sister. She was an infant at the time. I was on a three-wheel tricycle, riding outside in front of the house. I had certain parameters where I could and couldn't go. He lived diagonally across from where the babysitters were. I also remember now that I think about it I was out there by myself. I guess she was busy taking care of my sister being an infant inside. I don't know exactly what was going on. Yeah, I remember that very well.

*Naomi Extra:* As early as three or four, was it kids in the neighborhood were shouting at you in an unkind way about being gay?

*T. Africa Norman:* No, it was just the two boys that—the original guy who orally molested me and his friend. **[00:10:00]** If they were out on the porch and I would ride by, they would invite me to come in and I would say, "No." Keep riding, and then they would yell, faggot or sissy. That would be my first experience with that kind of negativity.

*Naomi Extra:* Where did you go to junior high school?

*T. Africa Norman:* I went to Clinton Place Junior High. *[Laughter]*

*Naomi Extra:* What do you remember about junior high school?

*T. Africa Norman:* I had a good time in junior high. Cuz like I said I had mostly female teachers and I made friends with the females in my home class. I levitated to my art schoolteacher. One, she reminded me so much of my mom. She was beautiful, light skin, had short hair. My mother always wore short hair ever since she saw this film Sophia Loren, an Italian film. She had cut her hair real short and they were calling it the Italian cut.

My mother chopped off all her hair and that's how she was wearing her hair. My high school teacher had the same cut. They had basically the same features. In my head and in my mind, they could pass for sisters. She was very welcoming to me, she was very considerate of me. I guess we levitated to each other. She would help me in art class. She was the first person ever to introduce me to a Broadway play. I was excited about that.

*Naomi Extra:* Do you remember what you saw?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, Ain't Misbehavin'.

*Naomi Extra:* Oh, you did?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, and I met Pearl Bailey outside. She was walking her two boxers. We were standing in line, to wait to go in. It was my art schoolteacher, me and I'm assuming it was either her boyfriend or her husband. I'm not really sure. We were standing in line and I loved the dogs, because I'm an animal lover.

I've always had dogs ever since I was really small, my mother gave me that responsibility. I was saying, "Oh they're beautiful." I

got down and I was petting them and playing with them. They were really friendly. My art schoolteacher introduced everyone too. Cuz she recognized who she was. I met Pearl Bailey that day.

*[Laughter]*

*Naomi Extra:* Oh, that's really cool.

*T. Africa Norman:* Then saw her on stage performing. It was really full circle for me, it was really overwhelming.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow, and little did you know that you would be on a stage at some point.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, I never knew. Or even follow in my mom's footsteps. Because my mother was a professional bowler. She was the very first African-American woman ever to be nationally televised in a tournament. A one-on-one tournament.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, she made history and I made history in my own way. Not even thinking about it. I'm just recently thinking about all of this. How my mom made history and going over what she did to do that. Yeah, and bowling is how she met my father. Yeah, he was in a bowling league and she was in a bowling league with a group of other women. Who I think was like five of them. Yeah, I'm thinking five, I wanna say five. Yeah, they met one day in a bowling alley. My mother told me the story. That's how they met.

*Naomi Extra:* Was this a bowling league in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah. Well, in my family since my father was a professional, my mom was a professional we were all bowlers. As children, when you're forced to do something *[laughter]* you don't wanna do it. After a while I got a kick out of it. They would be in their tournaments and me and my sister would be on a lane by ourselves. Periodically, they both would either take turns to come over and check on us, to see if we were okay. Yeah, so that's how it all started.

*Naomi Extra:* Your mother was a professional bowler, and your father.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, he was a professional bowler too. She was the one to be televised in a one-on-one tournament. Because at that one year she was the highest scoring African-American bowler. Also that year, there was a Caucasian woman **[00:15:00]** who was the highest score. They put those two women together and televised for the championship.

*Naomi Extra:* Do you know around what year that might have been, ballpark?

*T. Africa Norman:* Oh, god don't quote me on this.

*Naomi Extra:* That's okay. *[Laughter]*

*T. Africa Norman:* I'm assuming it was definitely in the '50s, cuz I'm a teenager.



*Naomi Extra:* Right, that's what I was thinking.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, I'm a teenager.

*Naomi Extra:* What did your parents do for a living?

*T. Africa Norman:* My dad started out working in the Ironbound section in the slaughterhouses down there. After that, he did odds and end jobs, but then he landed a job working as a bus driver for the City of Newark. He drove I think it was the 25—the number 25 up and down Springfield Avenue. Yeah, I think he drove that one. That was later on in life.

After I left my father when I graduated junior high, I went back to my mom. I had no more connection with my dad until later on in life. Yeah, that's what he did. My mom, she had various jobs too, to support two growing children. She did what she had to do. One job that she had was working in a coat factory also down in the Ironbound section. My mom and dad weren't together at that time. She did piece work, she made coats and she got paid by the coats that she produced. Then she wound up working in City Hall for Councilman Wheeler. She was his right hand. Then after that, her later year she worked for the County Food Stamp department. She worked the fraud division, she was the supervisor. She ran two floors for that, until she retired. She was there for maybe 20 years at that job.

*Naomi Extra:* That's really different things. Did you guys get the opportunity to get some nice coats from that?

*T. Africa Norman:* They were women coats, that's what she was making. She wore nice coats. *[Laughter]* My mom did but we—I wasn't dressing as a

female at the time. That didn't happen until I graduated high school. We were dressed very well. My mother saw to dressing us.

*Naomi Extra:* One more question about your family history. You were born in Newark, but what about your parents are they—were they from Newark or?

*T. Africa Norman:* My father was born in Oxford, North Carolina. As soon as he was born, my grandfather and grandmother moved up to Newark from there. He was an infant when he came to Newark. Raised in Newark from my understanding, from the little knowledge that I had. Raised in Newark. My mom was born and raised in Plainfield, New Jersey. That's where she was raised and educated et cetera. Yeah, that's how. Then eventually when she left home she moved to Newark.

*Naomi Extra:* Did you have cousins or relatives in Newark while you were growing up?

*T. Africa Norman:* Why did they text me again?

*Naomi Extra:* We have the same sound for our phones.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, and people wanna know where – it's confusing in the Morning because,

*Naomi Extra:* It's a bird right?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, cuz I live right at the park you know, at Branchbrook park and I'm at the tennis court and I have a family of birds that live underneath my air conditioner that's in the window and it's

confusing because is it the birds, is it my phone?

*Naomi Extra:*           *[Overlapping]* Is it your phone?

*[Laughter]*

*T. Africa Norman:*    Anyway, what was the question? I'm sorry.

*Naomi Extra:*           I was asking about family history in Newark and you were saying that your father pretty much lived in Newark for most of his life. Your mother moved to Newark.

*T. Africa Norman:*    To Newark yes. That I'm a little foggy on at their upbringing. I know that my mom from questioning her and asking her about her life she left my [00:20:00]—her family when she was 15. When she left when she was 15, she went to work for a family as their maid, housekeeper. She was cleaning their huge house. She worked for a wealthy family. Once she was educating herself and I believe they helped her educate—get educated. She left there and then went to Newark. What she did to support herself and do whatever. I don't know very much about that. I just know that she left her family when she was 15 and she worked for this wealthy family in Plainfield and then she moved to Newark. Then the story from there went to when they met—my father and mother *[laughter]* met. All that in between I really don't know very much about.

*Naomi Extra:*           Thank you. Just a few questions about—well, why don't we talk a little bit about—we talked about junior high, where did you go to high school?

*[Laughter]*

*T. Africa Norman:* Let me brace you for this—

*[Laughter]*

- by telling the story of my mind process at the time. As a small child, my grandfather would take us down south to North—Oxford, North Carolina every summer. My sister and me. Of course, my grandmother—and we would visit the families down there. Because my grandfather always drove like a bat out of hell, I was very excited about moving fast. It was an adrenalin rush for me.

While we were down south, there was no turning and winding roads. It was just one straight road through the cities. At least in that area of where my grandfather was raised and my grandmother was raised. She was raised in an adjoining town. In fact, you can ride down the road and be in one town and not realizing *[laughter]* you're in another town.

Anyway, he would stand me up when we would go—he would take me on runs with him wherever he was going around town. He would stand me up on his lap and put my hands on the wheel and just tell me to ride straight. Keep the car straight. It took a while for me to do that of course. I got the hang of it by keeping going down there every summer. I was excited. Once I got really great at it he would go faster and faster. This big Kool-Aid smile would come— *[Laughter]*

- on my face. My process I always thought that I was gonna be the first female racecar driver. I always thought that throughout my entire life. Because of my grandfather he liked to go fast. When my mom got her car, she liked to go fast. Let her tell it, she doesn't.

*[Laughter]*

She likes to go fast. I was always around speed. It might have started when I was in my mom's stomach. Because the story went that my father and mother while she was pregnant with me and a group of their friends went to Coney Island. Because she was pregnant everybody was going to go on the Cyclone. They dared her to go. You can't dare my mother to do anything. She went on, so I'm guessing I was in my mother's belly. Going, "Yay!"

*[laughter]* and doing flip-flops.

Yes, I grew up with that. Back to my high school I went to Newark Tech. Now, I did have a scholarship to go to an art school in New York. My art teacher got the application, sent me home to my mom to have it filled out to see if I can get accepted into the art school in New York. Because I was a good sketch artist at the time. When it came to making my decision, this overwhelming dream of mine was overpowering me. I went to North Tech let me be clear.

*[Laughter]*

Not to become an auto mechanic. I needed to learn how a car works. I needed to learn the inside and out of motors. How to put them together, [00:25:00] how to tune them up. How to make them faster. I needed to learn about transmissions. The difference between an automatic and a stick shift and rebuild that. In order for me to graduate, my grandfather bought me a car. I had to strip the motor, take the motor and transmission out. Strip the motor of all its parts, label the parts and keep them organized.

Clean everything and whatever new parts was needed we would then tell the teacher and he would order these parts. I graduated as one of the top in my class. We were also not realizing, but later on in life I'm realizing we were separated. There was four black students in the class with me. There was four white students in the class.

They were in one end of the auto mechanic room and we were in

another. Also, they would get first choice of any teacher's car that needed to be fixed. They would get it. If two teachers' cars needed to be fixed, obviously, we would get one, they would get one. Any one teacher needed a car to be fixed, they would get it first. There was a lot that I felt I had to prove to my teacher.

*Naomi Extra:* You worked hard.

*T. Africa Norman:* I worked very hard. Yes. I worked very hard.

*Naomi Extra:* When did you realize that you weren't going that direction?

*T. Africa Norman:* My graduation day. *[Laughter]*  
Literally during the ceremony and receiving my diploma. My mom and I after the ceremony went outside in front of the building, sat down on the steps of my high school, and that's when I handed her my diploma. I proceeded to tell my mother my truth and that how I wish to—who I wish to be and how I wish to navigate my world through this life. How I wish to live as a woman.  
She opened her arms and hugged me. That's when I discovered that day what unconditional love was truly about. You hear it as a child, but you don't really understand it. It hit me like a ton of bricks that my mother loved me and accepted me and supported me throughout my entire life. She was my biggest cheerleader.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow. That's just such a special moment.

*T. Africa Norman:* I'm sorry, excuse me, I need some water.

*Naomi Extra:* You want me to pause it for a second?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, I need some water.

*Naomi Extra:* You graduated from high school, what year was that?

*T. Africa Norman:* That was 1972.

*Naomi Extra:* You decided not to become a racecar driver.

*T. Africa Norman:* Exactly.

*Naomi Extra:* Then, what was next for you?

*T. Africa Norman:* I had no clue. *[Laughter]*

That was the whole thing because this thing that I was embarking on, this life that was calling me to be this person that I know that I always was. That's the only thing that I concentrated on was to become this woman that I suppressed all of those years. I started by trying to find someone or run into someone that can guide me in the direction of hormone treatment. I started buying female clothing. My first dress was about a size 16. *[Laughter]* According to my mother it was the ugliest thing— *[Laughter]*- she ever saw.

**[00:30:00]**

She had given me some money and I had went down to S. Kleins on Broad Street when S. Kleins were there. I went to the women's department. I saw this dress on the rack. Of course, I wasn't able to try it on. I held it up in front of me. What I was picking was entirely too small, cuz I was so—I don't like the word fat.

*[Laughter]* I was healthy. I finally found one that my shoulders met and then pressing it against my body it seemed like it would fit nicely. I was so excited to show my *[laughter]* mother when she came home from work.

I was standing there when she came in and I said, “What do you think?” She looked [*laughter*] at me and she thought that was the ugliest dress she ever saw. I thought it was pretty. Being blinded and no sense of style at the time. It was just a very effeminate dress. I think it was green, but then it had a floral print to it. Needless to say, I never wore that dress again. [*Laughter*] Because my mother hated it.

I lived in jeans and t-shirts for a very long time, and it just became my signature look. In order for me to dress it up I dressed it up with high heel boots, or high heels or mules. I loved a mule. Oh my god, in the summertime I loved a mule. It was the most sexiest shoe that I’ve ever saw. Besides the closed in high heel pam. A mule was just it for me. I lived in them through an entire summer. Jeans, t-shirt and a mule.

I had a red pair, I had a white pair. Then I had a black pair. I was just buying out the store. It was really incredible. Then I started developing a sense of style that I thought was nice. I had gotten this jumpsuit, it was a beige cotton jumpsuit. I was downtown Newark one day. I was on Broad and Market and I decided to do some window-shopping on Market Street. While I was walking on one side of the street and then I turned around and came back on the other side of the street.

Friends of mine that I’ve known during my high school years and a little bit of my—because we lived in the same neighborhood of my high school years. Before my transformation I disappeared during that time. They hadn’t seen me for maybe a couple of years. They ran out the store and I guess they heard through the grapevine that my name was Tracey. They called me and I turned around and there they were. They were like, “Oh my god.” Then they called me into the store and I went into the store. It was, Tommy Garrett and his sister, Yvonne Garrett.



Then there was, Albert Murphy who was manager of this shoe store at the time. We were all just catching up and I had not consciously, but lost a lot of weight over those periods of two years. My body started taking shape. The fullness of my face was thinning out. My cheekbones were showing. Tommy suggested out of the blue, he thought that I was beautiful and that I should become a model. I said, “Okay.” that’s where it all started. They started training me. They started doing my hair and makeup and putting me in front of a camera. I started doing the local shows. That’s where I met Al Grundy and [Spelling: Darrell? 00:34:28] Grundy. Al Grundy was a great makeup artist, and [Spelling: Darrell? 00:34:32] Grundy was his brother who was a fantastic designer. They took me under their wings. Then that’s where my training really began with them. We would go over to their house. Maybe a couple of us girls would go over to their house. Models rather. Would go over to their house and he would paint us up. [Spelling: Darrell? 00:34:57] would put us into dresses and we’d go in the hallway [00:35:00] of their home and practice walking up and down for the next show.

*Naomi Extra:* We’re in the mid-70s now?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah. This was around I would say around `74, `75. Because my professional career didn’t start until the late `70s. Being a local model went on for maybe a couple of years. Al Grundy got a job in New York working for Audrey Smaltz. Now, Audrey Smaltz started out as a commentator for the Ebony Fashion Fair shows that would travel coast to coast. She developed a company that dressed—had a group of people that dressed the models for the top designers in New York City.

They would hire her and her company to dress the models.

Because before then there were only interns doing it, and it was a mess. She would train people that came in how to dress the model and what accessory goes with what, et cetera, et cetera. He would know when all the shows were and time and place. He would call me because I was still in training and I would get the opportunity to go to these professional shows like Halston, Oscar de la Renta. I went to all of them. Donna Karan, you name it, I was there as a student.

Because he told me in order to get in the show just tell them you were a student at FIT. They let those students in, but we weren't able to sit down we would have to stand up with your backs against the wall. At that time, they weren't done in those big huge venues, they were done at the designer's studio and it was very tight. I would get to see a professional girl walk. The first thing that I picked up on was their footwork. Every girl walked no matter how fast or how slow. Or whatever they were doing it was one foot in front of the other. I picked that up immediately from my viewpoint when I was doing it.

The swaying of the hips came later for me. I just wanted to get—I started with the bottom with my footwork, then my legs because I'm bowlegged and I had to practice where I didn't look like I was Annie Oakley coming down the runway. *[Laughter]* Like I just jumped off a horse. I would go home and I would practice, I would put on my heels. I would put on a tall mirror in front of the door. I would walk up and down my hallway. Then putting one foot in front of the other, I realized that I didn't appear to look bowlegged as I was doing before. Because I wasn't getting it in my brain that they were telling me, Al and **Spelling: Darrell? 00:38:20** were telling me. "You have to stop walking natural."

They weren't telling me to put one foot in front of the other they were just trying to get me to put my legs together. Make my knees

knock, so I don't look so bowlegged. I wasn't really getting it. Once I saw a professional then I got it. Then when that happened, my sway came naturally in my hips. Because the way you put your foot, your body moves and then you put your other foot your body moves that way. You just have to control it. Then I learned the posture of how they present themselves. You always have an arched back and your shoulders are pulled back. Your head is up, that keeps your neck looking long. It makes you look even taller. Once I got all of that down, I was good to go. *[Laughter]*

*Naomi Extra:* Yeah, that's a lot. Your training started in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes.

*Naomi Extra:* Then all the shows that you're talking about were in New York City?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, all the professional shows were in New York City. That's where my real training started by going and attending these shows as a student from FIT. *[Laughter]*

Yes, and that's where it all started for me. In the meantime, I was still taking pictures for the Grundy's and still doing a local show. Then one day he sent me to New York. Maybe I heard him wrong **[00:40:00]** or he misunderstood but I thought I was going to get another lesson by going to this fashion show. This show I had thought was at the Pierre Hotel on Fifth Avenue in New York. When I came up the subway and crossed the street walking alongside Central Park. I noticed on the corner of 60th where the hotel was, Fifth Avenue, that there were a group of black models and they were all talking to each other.

I laid back for some reason, my mind told me to just wait. That's

what I did for some reason. Why I'm following my first mind out of all of these years I don't know, but I did that day. They separated and a group walked away from the hotel and another group went into the hotel. I crossed the street, caught up with them and then went into the hotel with them. Thinking that these were the models in the show. They all got on the elevator. My mind is telling me just go with the flow. I got on the elevator and they pressed the button. We got off on the floor.

I went to the left, they went to the right. I just turned around and went—and followed them and I was the last one on line. I realized that we were—they were being interviewed because there were so many girls that we weren't all able to fit in the suite. They were calling us in one at a time. There was somebody out in the hallway calling one girl in. She would get interviewed. Leave. Another girl go in, et cetera. Then it was my turn and I was the last model.

When I went in, I immediately just started apologizing to people. I said, "I'm sorry, I'm in the wrong place. Please forgive me."

The guy who approached me I didn't know at the time was a famous photographer. Mr. Irving Penn, world famous photographer. He stopped me from going out the door and said, "Well, do you have any pictures with you? Do you model?" I said, "I have pictures with me and I've done a little modelling." He took a picture from me and looked at me and thought that I was pretty. There were other people in the room that I learned later were the people from Italian Vogue.

The design people were there and it was an Italian designer by the company named Basile. Two days later I got a phone call at home, gave them my information, of course. I got a phone call at home. It was the assistant saying that I'm hired to do a two-day booking photoshoot for Italian Vogue. I was getting paid \$1,500.00 each

day. I hung up the phone and did flipflops— *[Laughter]*  
- and screamed.

*Naomi Extra:* I bet.

*T. Africa Norman:* Because not even knowing the status of Italian Vogue, but the money was *[laughter]* like, oh my god. When my mom came home I said, “Mommy, I got a job modelling.” She was excited for me. She was like, “Well, what is it?” I said, I’m going into New York, and it’s two days. They said I’m gonna be working for Italian Vogue, and that I’m gonna be making \$1,500.00 each day.” She was very excited. That’s how it all started. I started out as an International model really.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow. All the while you’re still living in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* Mm-hmm.

*[Text Notification Sound]*

*[Laughter]*

*Naomi Extra:* That’s you? Ok- I just wanna ask a few questions about—

*T. Africa Norman:* *[Text Notification Sound]* Oh God.

*Naomi Extra:* It’s Ok.

*T. Africa Norman:* It comes double

*Naomi Extra:* I don't know if you were out in Newark, or if you had any presence in terms of nightlife in Newark. I'm wondering if you remember during the same time period. Were there places in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* Oh yes.

*Naomi Extra:* Where were those places?

*T. Africa Norman:* Well, the first place that opened up was, Albert Murphy who was the manager of the shoe store, I spoke about. He was also an entrepreneur. He saw that there was something missing in Newark. There was fashion [00:45:00] missing in Newark and he knew these designers. He was friends with these makeup people. He was friends with the models like, Tommy and everybody that was doing this. He saw a niche. He's the one that started doing the fashion shows in Newark. That put Newark on the map for fashion.

*Naomi Extra:* Where were those fashion shows during—

*T. Africa Norman:* At Symphony Hall. The ballroom next to Symphony Hall. Right now, my mind is blank and I can't remember it. It was the ballroom next to Symphony Hall that's adjoined to Symphony Hall. Then he opened up a club on Halsey Street called Le Joc. It was a big open space that he moved into and made it his home. The upstairs part was where he lived. The downstairs part was so open he hired some—a DJ that he was friends with and he started opening this club. First, it was just for his immediate friends. It caught on and it started—

*[Extraneous conversation 00:46:15-00:46:16 "Excuse me for burping."]*

- it started getting popular.

*[Extraneous conversation 00:46:19-00:46:20 "I hope you cut that burp out" "If you want us to, we can."]*

It started getting popular and word of mouth started growing. Because the gay community really had no place to go to in Newark. He was the first one to start that.

*Naomi Extra:* In the `70s?

*T. Africa Norman:* In the `70s. Then he started charging because it became so popular and it became so crowded it became like a fire hazard. He had to do a bigger place. I don't remember the second place but it was on Market Street in the building on the corner of Market and Halsey. I don't remember the name of it. Then he went and had the club over at the hotel on Broad Street. Oh my god, I'm having a senior moment today.

*Naomi Extra:* *[Laughter]* A senior moment.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah, cuz the club was so popular and—what was it?

*Naomi Extra:* Where did you say it was?

*T. Africa Norman:* There was a hotel that used to be on Broad Street, on the far end of Broad Street where the 280 overpass is. There was a hotel there, and then there was a nightclub there.

*Naomi Extra:* Did he have a club called Murphy's at one point?

*T. Africa Norman:* No, that was a bar.

*Naomi Extra:* That was a bar. Okay. That wasn't his.

*T. Africa Norman:* I didn't drink or smoke, but the gay males went there. I believe maybe some gay females went there, I'm not really sure. Cuz I was never a bar person. I did go to Murphy's one or two times but I didn't have a good time. Because like I said I didn't drink and I didn't smoke. That's all that was going on in there. Then it was full of the gay males. A lot of the gay males didn't appreciate—well, for identity purposes because I don't like being identified as transgender, cuz in my mind I'm female. The transgender community, they always put us down. Because they always kept us in the same melting pot. We were all prostitutes and drug users. It would seem like—

*Naomi Extra:* It wasn't such a great space necessarily?

*T. Africa Norman:* Not for me. It was popular. It was popular but not for me.

*Naomi Extra:* What was the scene like at Le Joc?

*T. Africa Norman:* It was a very fashionable scene. Because, like I said word of mouth got out and since we were models we would all just get dressed up. New York people would start to come over as the word spread. Top models like Pat Cleveland, Billie Blair, Peggy Dillard. She was the third black model ever to grace the cover of Vogue. She was just starting out as a model. Eventually Iman came over.

*Naomi Extra:* To Le Joc in Newark?



*T. Africa Norman:* Yes.

*Naomi Extra:* Alright. Wow, okay. *[Laughter]*

Before I asked you about nightlife, you were talking about that moment when you got your first big job. Can you tell me a little bit about what happens after that?

*T. Africa Norman:* What happened after that the day—the second day shoot at the end of the shoot [00:50:00] Mr. Penn made a phone call and had his assistant search for a modelling agency for me. When the assistant found the right one for me he told them to try to find something unique and a small boutique modelling agency. It was Zoli Model Management. They promoted me as the young Beverly Johnson at that time. Mr. Penn got on the phone, spoke to Zoli himself I'm assuming. He said that, "We have a beautiful dark skin model here and you need to make an appointment to see her. I just shot with her for Italian Vogue. She has the same features as Beverly Johnson."

That's how they were promoting me. We made the appointment, and I went in to see Zoli himself. Then he liked me, and I got signed to the agency. He introduced me to my booker. She started getting me jobs the following week. I never went on a go-see. They were just word of mouth. "We have this young Beverly Johnson that just shot with, Irving Penn." This was the whole build up for me. I started flying all over the place. I started doing catalogue work down in Miami. Then I went out to Vegas and did a catalogue and hair shows out there.

Then I started doing some catalogue work up in Chicago, and in New York. My world was spinning and it was exciting. I was making money. When I got my first apartment was on 70th Street

in Weston Avenue because I was making money. I left home got this apartment and I was working in New York, I was a working model. It just started. Then, two years in I got the contract with Clairol to be on their hair color box. Because at the time they were promoting to reach the African-American community they want that dollar. They developed hair color specifically for African-American women.

My color was Dark Auburn, Box 512. The campaign was called Born Beautiful. During that time for a good two years my box was the most popular color. I had a two-year contract with Clairol and an option to continue another year if they chose to sign me for another year. Then pay me royalties for that. My box was on the shelf for a good maybe three, maybe four years. Because my color was very popular, one of the most popular ones.

*Naomi Extra:*

While all these amazing things are happening and you've moved to New York, did you maintain friendships with people in Newark? Did people in Newark know about this success that you were having?

*T. Africa Norman:*

Some of them did. Because I was living in New York, and because I was on this high and this ride. I was flying all over the place I didn't see them for a long time. Because this new life, this great opportunity was placed in front of me and I was just riding the wave. Not even thinking that my truth would be revealed. Because, I was young and it was exciting and I was making money. I was living this dream life that a lot of young female women want to live. Yeah, that's what was happening to me.

As I was getting more and more work, and more and more popular. I was in the back of my mind getting a little nervous. Because my name was circulating through the community of fashion.

Photographers knew who I was before I even went to them. If I would go to them they would say, “Oh yes, we heard about you and you shot with Irving Penn,” and this whole big thing. I started getting a little worried because jobs was coming at me left and right.

Now, like I said I was making money. [00:55:00] Then one day Essence Magazine called. I didn’t wanna go to Essence—up to Essence at the time, I just wanted to continue working with the Caucasian people. Because I just felt different about going up there. In my mind, I was thinking that I needed to build my book more. Maybe they would give me an—that would give me an opportunity for them to give me a cover. That would have been my first cover, that was my thought.

*Naomi Extra:* Right, were you still with Zoli at this time?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes, I was always with Zoli. My booker told me that they requested me. I had to go cuz I had time and they had booked me to go. I went up and did my first shoot with them. I was approached by the hairdresser. He did my face and then he took me to the side and he said that—his words to me he said that, “I know what’s going on, but don’t worry I’m not gonna say anything to anyone.” That’s where it all started. Then it was my turn to get my hair done. Andre Douglas was a popular hairdresser for all the black publications in New York City. He had just signed a contract with a wig making company under his name. His first prototype he wore there nobody knew it was a wig. It was called the Rasta. It was this crinkly thing that was going on. Everyone including me thought it was his hair.

He snatched it off of his head and put it on mine. Then the people for accessories came and put this big giant silver necklace on me.

It was like a choker. It was huge and it was thick. They told me it was for—this was like a symbol of marriage from a certain tribe in Africa. They put me in front of the camera, I shot the pictures and then I left. Nothing happened then and then months passed and Essence requested me again.

I met with Susan Taylor who was the fashion editor at Essence Magazine at the time. She had this idea that she wanted me for to shoot the holiday issue for December. This was done toward the end of summer. We were shooting this campaign for that. They had hired this hairdresser to box braid my hair individually. Then she was to bead my hair in these gold beads. Her instructions she thought was to bead my entire head. It was only supposed to be the ends. She beaded my entire head, that took three days. For her to braid my hair, bead my entire hair. Mind you could not sleep. Because every time you make—you turn, clunk, clunk, click, click with the beads. *[Laughter]*

My head felt so heavy because I had these beads. I showed up at the set and got all painted up and got in front of the camera. Susan brought a Egyptian shawl when she was in Egypt, she had gotten. She wrapped it around my breast. Then we had these two stays, like Cleopatra would hold. They were gold and they were heavy. The instructions from her were—and from the photographer, “We want you to pretend that you’re Cleopatra and that you’re sailing down the Nile in your huge gold ship.”

I was slowly getting into character that they wanted. During my time as being a model, I always got direction. Just stand *[laughter]* me in front of the camera, I get lost and don’t know what to do. Being new, I would always ask for direction and then I would just do it. **[01:00:00]** Once I was able to project that character that the client or photographer wanted, I’d get tunnel vision. It’s always cloudy and all I see is what’s in front of me. I finally was able to

be Cleopatra sailing down the Nile.

I had this tunnel vision. They were excited. The photographer was just clicking away and Susan was saying, “Oh my god, Tracey, your stare is incredible,” because I wouldn’t blink. I would just do subtle movements like just move my head like that or move my head like that and just stay forward. I wouldn’t do, because it was like more of a beauty shot so I didn’t have to do very much just project. The hairdresser, everybody was so excited about what I was doing. Then they added these—one of the assistants got a ladder that was next to me but out of frame. She climbed the ladder. They had these gold dust sprinkling in front of me. Still in tunnel vision, he was working on the second roll of film at this time.

Then suddenly, to the left of me, this guy come into the door and he calls Susan over to him and, for some reason, the left side of the room felt negative to me. It was just a whole negative vibe. I lost my concentration and the photographer noticed it. The girl stopped sprinkling—stopped dropping this gold dust, and the photographer had me to rest. When I was able to relax my shoulders and relax, I happened to glance over to who Susan was talking to and it was one of the hairdressers on a photo shoot that I had done prior to working with Essence.

It was the assistant to Andre Douglas, the wig designer. It was his cousin who was his assistant. He proceeded to telling them my truth—to tell Susan my truth. He left. She turns around and she shuts down the set and said, “We think we have it. We think we got all what we need.” Mind you, the photographer wasn’t finished the second film because he said, “I haven’t finished.” She said, “No, I think I got what we need.”

I go to the dressing room. I’m washing all of this makeup off my face and then, finally, she comes in there and she stands behind

me. The way she looks at me is different than my normal encounters with her in her office. Now, I know what's going on because she's looking for the truth. Then she actually takes her hands and slowly just rubs my shoulders and down my arms, and then she compliments me on how soft my skin is and how even my skin tone is.

In my head, I'm going, "Uh duh." *[Laughter]* I'm looking at her and I asked her, "Is everything alright?" She said, "No, everything is fine. The pictures are beautiful. Dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, and we're just wrapping up." I went home. I called my agent the next day. No work for me. My work stopped literally the next day. Literally. I was a working model. I was testing. There was always something for me to do, building my book. Work stopped. No go sees, no testing, no jobs. Nothing. That went on for two weeks. I finally made an appointment to come in and see Zoli. We get in there. Now mind you, I am the perfect size, at that time, was a size six.

Those were the samples that were made by every designer and when you're doing photo shoots for catalogs, if you don't fit the clothes, you don't get the job. I was a perfect size six. He complained that my hips were too big and I was like, "I just did a phot—I just did a campaign for Seagull's a couple of weeks ago, and I fit the clothes. They were all six." "We're getting complaints **[01:05:00]** that your hips are still too big." He was making an excuse. We feel as though that you're no longer right for our company, our manager, so we're not going to further our relationship with you." That was that. Mind you, Zoli was a gay man too.

*Naomi Extra:*

Wow. Wow.

*T. Africa Norman:* My work stopped. I never got paid from Essence for that photo shoot, never saw the pictures till this day. My work literally stopped so I had this great opportunity that was placed in front of me, and then one day evil stepped in and it changed my whole life. That ended my career as far as New York was concerned.

*Naomi Extra:* Tracey, I want to be respectful of your time, and it's 3:08. Do you want to do a part two at another time?

*T. Africa Norman:* No, we can continue for another half an hour.

*Naomi Extra:* Okay. Did you go back to Newark? Were you already back in Newark at this time?

*T. Africa Norman:* No, I tried to hang out but I had some savings and I was trying to hold onto it, but I had to pay my rent. I had to pay utilities and I was running out of money. Eventually, I did move back to my mother's house in Newark. Then I started going back to doing the local shows in Newark for maybe about six months or so. Then one day one of the models by the name of Sherry Gordon—beautiful exotic woman, she has these cat eyes and they're green and this reddish-blond hair, naturally reddish-blond hair. She's 5'11", and she said that she was going to Paris. Why don't I come with her?

I got some money together and we bought a stand-by ticket on TWA, \$175.00 for the ticket. I believe between the two of us we may have had \$150.00 in our pockets between the two of us, but we were still young. When you're young you don't have this fear of tomorrow. We finally got on a flight.

We got into Paris and we got a hotel room. Tommy was already there, Tommy Garrett. He was a model with Ford. He was doing

very well. He was travelling the world. He was in every major magazine. He worked for every designer in New York—a male model, and Italy and Paris. He had a lot of contacts. When we got there, Sherry and I didn't realize it was off-season. We weren't able to get any work. She had Tommy's number. We had this two-bedroom suite at this hotel not knowing how we were going to pay for it.

Tommy came over one day and said, "Oh you guys got an extra bedroom. I'll move in." We said, "Okay." *[Laughter]*. I always said that it was better that we were poor in Paris with no money than to be poor with no money and living in Newark because you were surrounded by these beautiful architecture buildings and people speaking French. Everyone is dressed well and you're just mingling within these people, and you're doing your daily routine trying to find work. Eventually, Tommy would get a job, pay for the hotel and then feed us all.

We lived off of, which is called pomfrit sandwiches, which is a gyro bread filled with french fries and Arabic mustard that broke me out. We had enough to buy two bottles of Coke. Pepsi didn't exist. We would go to these Arab stands and get this bread because it only cost us six francs. We would split it, cut it up in threes and it would fill us up between the starch of the bread and the starch of the french fries. **[01:10:00]** That's what we would eat.

Sherry would get a job and she would pay the bills and then feed us the same thing. Then I finally had money sent to me from Newark, and I'd pay the hotel and feed us. We were running out of money, running out of time. One day Sherry got this big job to go to Africa to work for—I think it was four days, maybe about a week. Yeah, four days. We knew that we had one week for her to get back here and pay this hotel bill, but we had been there for so long that they really didn't pressure us.



They just knew that we were models and we would leave every day and that we would carry our portfolios and that we would come back and eventually the bills would be paid. They never bothered us about paying the bill every week. Whenever we got the money, they knew that we would pay it. She stayed to do the work, but then she stayed an extra week as a vacation. We panicked, Tommy and I. We packed a few things and left the hotel. We dodged paying the bill late one night. He left with the bags late one night and he didn't come back.

I was getting worried so I finally—he landed in another hotel somewhere where we had just enough money for one night. When he called me, I said, “Look I don't feel comfortable being here by myself. For some reason, I'm just real nervous and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.” I was nervous because of several things. There was some weird stuff going on in the hotel. One, we lived at 6 Rue de Nue. Two, we lived on the sixth floor. Three, we lived in apartment six.

*Naomi Extra:* Oh my gosh. Lots of sixes.

*T. Africa Norman:* Hello.

*Naomi Extra:* Six, six, six.

*T. Africa Norman:* Everyday that we leave and come back, the light at our door was out. It blew out. They would have to change it every day or everyday that we complained. One day the light was broke. It was busted and there was glass all in front of the door. It was dark so we didn't know and we stepped on it and heard all this crunching. We told—

*Naomi Extra:* The manager.

*T. Africa Norman:* - the concierge that the light was broke and they came up. They cleaned it, changed the bulb. It was just a bunch of uncomfortableness as far as I was concerned.

*Naomi Extra:* What year did you arrive in Paris. Were you in the early 80s?

*T. Africa Norman:* That was the early '80s. I was in Paris from '80—I started modeling in the job for Irving Penn when I got discovered by the photographer, was '78—no '77. The pictures came out in '78 in the Italian magazine. Then that lasted until, I would say, '82 that I was doing all of this work and then stopped 82. then went back to Jersey. Then in '85, went to Paris with Sherry. We stayed there for maybe about two or three years. Then I started working—but prior to me getting a job working as a house model for Balenciaga, we did a spoof for the owner of The Palace in Paris. Palace was the same equivalent to Studio 54 in New York City. It was a very popular, very huge place.

All the models, all the photographers, all the actors, all the singers, everybody who was somebody always came to The Palace. We were going there and we were friends of the manager who ran The Privilege, which was a private bar restaurant situation downstairs of the Palace. Same owners, but this guy [Spelling: Michel? 01:14:48] Michel, we were friends with him and he would invite us everyday to come just hang out down there. Then we would go the back way up [01:15:00] to get on the dance floor and dance and stuff—through Tommy. Tommy knew him.

*Naomi Extra:* Got it.

*T. Africa Norman:* Where was I?

*Naomi Extra:* You were talking about working in The Palace.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes. It was the owner's birthday. We came up with this idea of doing the Supremes' act on stage. We rehearsed it and we got two other girls to be my background singers because I was Diana Ross, of course [*laughter*]. Tommy came in later because he was—when the Supremes did a duet with the Temptations, we did that song also, but that was later. We got costumes designed by—a designer designed our costumes. Then we got on stage.

They gave us the whole nine yards. The curtains were closed. They gave us fog. They gave us lights and all of that. It was incredible and then when the music came on, we just started with the singing and we were, "Stop in the name of love." We did the routine and it was a hit and he loved it, so he hired us. We did it every single night including the tea dance which was gay afternoon tea party. We really became popular for the tea dance because during that time on stage, there were other acts. There would be a nude woman riding a horse. The horse would be on a conveyor belt. They would have a background of her with the sky and clouds and she would be on this white horse. They would have the wind blowing her hair. She would have this long blonde hair. She was nude riding a horse. You would see the side profile of it from the dance floor. Then her act would be finished and another act would come up whether it was whatever, clowns or whatever.

Then a singer would come on to sing, and then the curtains would close. Then it was us. That's how it went. We were hired and we were making \$100.00 a night. That lasted for about, at least two, three months. We were making good money. Tommy came in on the second month so we wanted to build the act. He did his solo of

a song by Eddie Kendricks and then the duet of me and him doing Diana Ross and Eddie doing that ballad that they had made together, or one of the singers from the Temptations. We stayed on for three months. We were making money.

*Naomi Extra:* Wow. I wanted to squeeze in two more topics. One is you coming back to Newark and the ballroom scene. When does that happen?

*T. Africa Norman:* That happened when I got back from Paris. I got from Paris in, I would say in '87. I didn't start doing the ballroom scene until '89. What happened is that I was living with mom and some friends of mine had told me that Paris Dupree was giving this ball. At the time, I was broke as a doornail. I was going for the grand prize, which was \$1,000.00. Prior to all of that, I used to go to it in the 70s before the modeling thing took off. During my transformation and being young and a teenager, I would just—heard about it, just go up to Harlem with a group of other girls and not participate, but to look and be amazed.

One day they pushed me out on the floor and asked me my name. I said that I was Tracey and I'm from New Jersey. I wasn't popular. I was not well received by the ball community in the 70s. They didn't, I don't know. Your question is why. I don't know. I can't tell you till today, but I was not popular. It might have been a Jersey thing. I don't know.

*Naomi Extra:* In New York, in particular?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes. In Harlem in New York I was not welcomed every time that I hit the floor. That only last for a minute because I got bored with it and so I left the community. When I left that community, that's

when my modeling thing and training started, [01:20:00] so my life was different.

*Naomi Extra:* Okay. Got it.

*T. Africa Norman:* Then going back to going to Avis Pendavis. I'm sorry. That was her ball. Grand prize was \$1,000.00. Me working with the local designers, I was able to get a dress and go that evening and enter that category to try to win the money. I didn't win because I didn't have a purse. I didn't know all the rules. I just knew that I had on this beautiful white gown and this white cape to go over it. I'm doing my modeling walk that they knew nothing about because I stood out because I only did what I was trained to do. The girls back then were doing this shoulder thing and it was like shaking the breasts and pushing the cheeks. It was just crazy. Any walk that they did, that's what they did. It was just so gay I couldn't stand it.

*Naomi Extra:* Did you ever join a house?

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes. That was the same night that I met the people from the House of Africa. They saw me on stage. They liked me and they wanted me to come to one of their meetings. I did, and it was in Brooklyn. They asked me to join their house, so I was a member. Then I became Tracey Africa, a member. I would walk. My categories was face, body, and runway grand prize.

Then I became very popular as Tracey Africa because I was winning because one, I was dark skinned so I stood out from my lighter skinned sisters who were Hispanic, and two I had so much grace on the runway they couldn't understand it. The guys picked up on my walk before the females started trying to walk like me.

When I came on the scene, I changed the whole community of how to present yourself to the judges.

*Naomi Extra:* That's amazing. The House of Africa, members of the House of Africa were in New York City and in Newark?

*T. Africa Norman:* No. Just New York.

*Naomi Extra:* Just New York.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yes. I was the only member in Newark.

*Naomi Extra:* Oh okay.

*T. Africa Norman:* Then another member moved from New York into Newark. There was maybe two or three of us eventually, but I was the first original member who lived in Newark. The chapter was, everybody that was a part of the House was in New York. These people from the House of Africa, they were all good friends. They heard about a ball and they would just go to see and not participate. They were very excited. This was the second ball that I met them. They decided that they were going to do this house and participate in the balls.

*Naomi Extra:* Did you start teaching some of your other—some of the other members of the house how to walk?

*T. Africa Norman:* I just taught the females what I was doing. They already had some experience. We were a mixed group. We were black, Hispanic, white and Jamaican. The members were all mixed. The two white females that participated in the female categories, they had some

experience with modeling. I just polished it a little with posture and poise.

*Naomi Extra:* In the 80s, members of the House of Africa had a walk?

*T. Africa Norman:* Mm-hmm.

*Naomi Extra:* Okay, that's so interesting.

*T. Africa Norman:* That was in '89 and that's when I met them. When '90 came around, that's when my career as Tracey Africa started. Eventually the two original members, Stella and the original father, decided that they didn't want to be mother and father anymore so they voted me as mother and then Eddie Smith was going to be the father of the house. That's how I became the mother of the House of Africa.

*Naomi Extra:* How long were you mother for?

*T. Africa Norman:* I was mother for maybe about two, three years at the most because Eddie had gotten ill [01:25:00] and he didn't survive his illness eventually. Eddie was the glue that held the house together. Once Eddie's passing, the majority of the members just started going their separate ways. I just continued not really participating, but just going to the balls. If they saw me in the audience, they would call me out. Some balls I participated wholeheartedly in because the prize money was big.

Mother didn't raise no fool. The one that I went after the most and researched everything that I was going to wear, etc., was LaBeija. I never won a trophy. I never won a category and I never won grand prize. She is the only house that I never won anything from. I don't

know what she had it in for me about, but I never won a LaBeija trophy. I've won trophies in New York, New Jersey, Baltimore, Washington and Atlanta. Never from the house of LaBeija.

*Naomi Extra:* That's interesting. I don't know what's in store for you because so many exciting things are happening. Just two questions, one you talked a little bit earlier about not liking the word transgender and we talked about the word queer. Can you talk about your feeling about the word transgender and what it means or doesn't mean to you?

*T. Africa Norman:* Transgender means society putting you in a category. My DNA and my brain wave always said that I was a woman. That's how I carried myself. That's how I talked. That's how I walked. That's how I lived my life, as a woman. It's not until recently that transgender have been attached to my name from being rehired by Clairol. Society has a tendency to keep you in these specific niches, like we're black African American. We're not American. We are black African American. Whites do not seem to have that stigma on them.

If you are Pakistani or Chinese or Japanese, you are Japanese American. You are Indian American. It's society that puts you in these niches for identification. This is where the transgender comes from. I'm still trying to get used to it. I know that since I've been rehired by Clairol and I've done the commercial and I've been in the magazines and I've done tons of these interviews, that this is how I'm being perceived. I'm accepting it. I don't like it, but I'm accepting it. That's as far as trans—

*Naomi Extra:* In the '70s transgender—



*T. Africa Norman:* It didn't exist. There were ugly words being used. That's a man. That's a faggot. That's a freak. Transgender was never used. At least I never heard it.

*Naomi Extra:* Your preference is you're a woman.

*T. Africa Norman:* Yeah I'm a woman, and that's how I live my life. That's how I was able to work as a model. I was a woman going in getting the job as a woman. Once they found out, of course, my work stopped because the timing of it was so unheard of and so frightening for them that it was like "Wow. Now what do we do?" I'm being [01:30:00] the first woman of color to do this, so that's what made it even more, within the black modeling community, really scandalous.

Because I was going for the same jobs that a natural born woman was going to get and I got it. I got the makeup contract from Ultra Sheen's cosmetic. I got the Clairol contracts to be on their hair color box. I got the contract to be the advertisement for Avon skin care. These same females were going up for the same thing. Needless to say, they didn't like me [laughter] once they found out.

*Naomi Extra:* Right. Right. Just to wrap up can you—you are doing such amazing things right now. Could you just say very briefly where you are right now because I think it would be so great in light of the trajectory that you just—

*T. Africa Norman:* Sure. I have to start with me being comfortable and telling my story to a magazine, which was New York Mag. They picked up the story then they put it on the Internet and it went crazy.

*Naomi Extra:* That was last year, right?

*T. Africa Norman:* That was in December of 2015. Since then, I also did an interview for the London Times. I also did another interview for Marie Claire of South Africa. They published it and since it's been all over the Internet, Clairol called and hired me back. I'm under contract with Clairol. Through that, a person by the name of Christopher Sollinger reached out to me and he has been the catalyst and my angel to put me on the cover of Harper's Bazaar International magazine.

I got three fashion pages inside the International Harper's Bazaar magazine, and I'm also doing a movie. I'm acting in a movie with a girlfriend of mine who is producing it. The production company is called Lady Seven Sings. What else? Now I'm about to embark to leave very soon to go to California to do a commercial for Lexus, a media commercial for Lexus.

*Naomi Extra:* So wonderful. Tracey, thank you so much.

*T. Africa Norman:* Thank you. Thank you for having me.

*Naomi Extra:* I really appreciate this. Today is October 31, 2016. I'm Naomi Extra here with Tracey Africa at Rutgers-Newark. Thank you so much.

*[End of Audio, 01:33:12]*