

Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Noelle Lorraine Williams
Interviewer: Anna Alves
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Anna Alves: This is an oral history interview with Noelle Lorraine Williams by Anna Alves on Thursday, May 26, 2016. We are at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and in Manhattan, New York. The first question I'm going to ask you is a basic one. When and where were you born?

Noelle Lorraine Williams: I was born in, I should say, Jersey City, New Jersey in 1975, and I have an older brother, and an older sister when I was born, and then later on, four years later, my younger sister came.
[Laughter]

AA: How much older are your older brother and sister then, you...?

NLW: I think my older sister is eight years older than me.

[Laughter]

NLW: She might be nine. My older brother is ten.

AA: Okay, and then your younger sister?

NLW: She's like four and a half years younger or something.

AA: The two older were much farther in age ahead of you, but you were closer in age with your younger siblings? *[Laughter]*

NLW: Yes, and my older brother is much older than my younger sister, and that brings a lot of fife sometimes, 'cause he's almost 15 years older. *[Laughter]*

AA: Then who raised you? Did you grow up in one place or household or more than one?

NLW: Okay, so I was raised in one household. Originally when I was born, I lived with my mother and my father. We lived in downtown Jersey City near Liberty State Park. It's kind of—I forgot what they call it now, I think it's called Paula's Hook. We had a little house down there, on a little block.

[Laughter] The Del Montes were our neighbors. They were an Italian-Puerto Rican family with eight or nine kids. It was—I was a baby, but I remember having so much fun on the block, and I also

remember going up and down the stairs a lot. My father also bought my sister a air hockey table, *[laughter]* but—

AA: Your older sister or your younger?

NLW: My older sister. My father used to like to buy my older sister lots of toys, and balls, and air hockey, 'cause my sister's what people would call a tomboy, so. Everyone thought she was gonna be the gay one, but she's not.

[Laughter]

NLW: Anyway, yeah. I was raised there, and then we moved further up the hill in Jersey City.

AA: Did the neighborhood change when you did that?

NLW: It kinda changed a little bit. I mean, Jersey City is pretty diverse. What changed about moving to Summit Avenue? Well first, we lived in a little house, and then it was an apartment building, but it was still a very soft apartment building. Had like eight apartments, maybe eight or ten apartments.

There was a little bit of grass outside. I recently visited it, so I'm thinking of it in my mind. I went to collect some dirt from there, 'cause when I was a little girl, I used to meditate in the back. We moved up there when I was maybe four, almost five, 'cause I was in kindergarten when I was there, and then my mom got pregnant with Ashley.

Yeah, we lived there, and my father was there. We lived in a railroad apartment. My uncles actually always lived with us, too. I don't remember my uncles. *[Laughter]*

AA: Were they your father's brothers or your mother's brothers?

NLW: My mom's brothers, 'cause my grandmother died when she was in her 40s.

AA: Okay. How young.

NLW: Yeah, she died—I think she died the year I was born. A couple of months before I was born, yeah, 'cause my mom was pregnant. Yeah, so my uncles always lived with us. I don't remember my uncles living with us there, so I would have to reconfirm that with my mother.

They did live with us, but I don't remember them, but they did definitely live with us when we moved to Summit Avenue, 'cause they shared a room with my brother. I would share a room with my older sister. Then my father left. I guess eventually they got a divorce, so—

AA: How old were you when that happened?

NLW: I wanna say I was like four and a half, five. It was like we moved in there and I guess, a few months later, my father and my mother had a divorce.

According to my mother, and you know now I'm learning that they often separated before then, but—'cause they had known each other—my parents actually knew each other since they were 12 or 13. They went to the same church in Jersey City. I don't know if you're familiar with it, Grace Church. Yeah.

AA: Yes, I know where that is. That's over by Grove Street. Yes.

NLW: Yeah, and it's a very LGBT-friendly church, though then, they weren't saying they were an LGBT-friendly church. What their banner was more so is that they reached out to the community with community programs.

That's where my mother really got into what I would say is like community service, a little bit of community organizing. She learned that from the nuns, or here with the nuns, and also because she lived with my grandmother, my great grandmother, her grandmother.

Not with my grandmother her whole entire life. She would always do stuff after school, and she would always go to church, and you know the nuns and everybody, since my mom was really smart. She still is really smart. She's a helpful little girl. She'd like to run errands.

Doing that type of stuff with teachers and everything then turned into doing community work with the church. Since the church was so community-oriented at that time, and it still is, she did a lot of that. My father went to that church, but my father was a little entrepreneur.

His mother had actually started him off doing a little bit of acting on Broadway place. I have an uncle who used to work with Doris

Duke. She used to administer money to the Boy's Harbor Foundation. It's uptown, and they actually named a street after him.

My uncle helped my father to get into some plays. My father was doing his little acting thing, but he also sold newspapers, shined shoes.

My father was always entrepreneurial, and my mother was always into community service and doing things like sewing and stuff like that. Anyway. Yeah, they had been together for awhile by the time they had gone in their wars. He had gone to Korea. Yeah.

AA: In the war, or he just left?

NLW: Well, he wasn't a part of the war. He was in Korea—I'll have to clarify this with my mother, but he wasn't a part of the Korean War, but he was a chap—

AA: Oh, that's true. He'd be too young for that. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

NLW: He'd be too young for that. He was a chaplain's assistant, and—

AA: It's a missionary maybe?

NLW: No, because he was a part of the army.

AA: Ah, okay.

NLW: Yeah, so yeah, when we moved Summit Avenue in Jersey City, it was my whole family. My father left, and so we all lived together there.

AA: You and your mother, your siblings and your uncles?

NLW: Yes.

AA: *[Laughter]* Welcome to hell.

NLW: Yeah, that's true because then later on, we move again, and where was the next place we moved to? That was a couple of years later, we moved to Madison Avenue. When we moved to Madison Avenue, that's in Jersey City, that's a little bit deeper up the hill.

AA: Going north, or going west? *[Laughter]*

NLW: Going south. Do you know where Kentucky Fried Chicken is?

AA: Yes.

NLW: Yeah, so that block that swoops—

AA: *[inaudible 00:09:06]*?

NLW: Yeah. The black that swoops when you keep going, right?

AA: Yes. *[Laughter]*

NLW: I'm that, and even though I'm an avid reader—

[Laughter]

NLW: I don't know the titles of books. I think it's a part of my brain, when I was dropped, or character's names, but I'll remember big conceptual themes. I'm very much a conceptualist. We moved over there to Madison Avenue, and she got a two-story apartment, which was more spacious.

I started going to Lutheran school. Actually, I went to Lutheran school for kindergarten. For elementary school, I went to the Salvation Army nursery school, and that was near home. Then I went to Lutheran school, and then I—

AA: That was grade school?

NLW: Yeah, grade school. For kindergarten, and then we were there for first, yeah, first grade. Then I think that might be when we moved to Madison Avenue. Yeah, 'cause I remember Reggie and I, he was my little friend in the building.

He had a real single-mother situation, 'cause he didn't have any brothers or sisters. She used to give him Campbell Soup to eat, and I was like, "Oh, my God!" 'Cause you know my mother cooked, and—yeah. Anyway, to go on.

AA: What grade were you when you did the next move?

NLW: I think—I guess it would be first grade, maybe. Even though it might—so Reggie, I feel like I was in kindergarten when I was still friends with Reggie. You know what? It might've been first grade.

AA: It's hard to remember when you're an adult, because things happen when you're a child. *[Laughter]* It's sort of like trying to place them can be tough.

NLW: It's true, but I think it was first grade, 'cause in kindergarten, my reading wasn't so good, but in first grade, my reading was really good. I had to help Reggie with his reading, and he was in second grade.

I know in kindergarten, I wasn't busting it out like that. Yeah. I guess when we moved to Madison, I was in first grade. Then we lived on Madison in a two-story apartment there, or two-floor apartment. It was the same group of people, and my mom was working lots of hours.

AA: Where was she working?

NLW: I think at that time, she was probably working at banks. As we got older, then she started doing loan administration, loan work and things like that. 'Cause when we were younger, she would do community work.

I forgot the name of the community center she used to work, but she would sometimes bring me. Yeah. Then that's when I started walking home alone and sometimes I would walk with Tahara, 'cause it was only three blocks.

It was like Lutheran school and then there was that chicken place, and it was only a half a block. Yeah. Then we moved—

AA: Is Tahara your sister?

NLW: No, Tahara was a classmate. Then we moved around the corner, I think that might've been like a year and a half later. My mother—

AA: Wow. Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, we moved a lot. That was a longer L-shaped apartment, and in that apartment, my step-grandfather moved in. That was the father of my uncles, because my mom has a different father than my uncles and my aunt do.

They each have different fathers. 'Cause my grandmother had my mother when she was 15. Yeah, she was young.

AA: Well, she was young when she passed, so fam—

NLW: Yeah, and she was young when she passed too, so yeah. She lived a strong life.

AA: Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, so then when we moved into that apartment. My grandfather had his own room, and then my two uncles had their own room at the end, it was a really big room. My brother, of course, had his own *[laughter]* room.

Then, it was like my mother I think and Ashley. ‘Cause my sister—my older sister and I were having this conversation. I said, “Did we room together? ‘Cause I feel like sometimes I would sleep in mommy’s room, so I think—“

AA: She was so much older, too, right?

NLW: Yeah, but we always roomed together. When we were on Madison, we roomed together. I think Summit Avenue, we moved together. She was always my roommate, my older sister. We lived there.

Then my mother, being from Jersey City and knowing a lot of the people there, she had a really difficult divorce with my father. He ended up remarrying someone who had been a friend of my aunt’s. That my mother really didn’t care for, other people didn’t care for, so my mother decided she needed to do something new.

It was just too much for her. I understand it more now that I’m older, but when I was younger, her explanation for it was like—but now, when you’re a part of the community and you were born there and you were raised there, my mother was born in the projects downtown and my father was born downtown.

What was that? 9th Street, like what they call Hamilton Park now. It’s like in some of the parts of our family, our friends, like my cousin Geneva was friends with my aunt Shirley. My cousin Geneva on my mother’s side was friends with my aunt Shirley on my father’s side.

AA: They were around each other.

NLW: Yeah, and I actually have a cousin who’s actually related to both, so yeah. It’s a lot of people from North Carolina. My maternal side is from North Carolina, and my paternal side, they came from Boston. Yeah, so that’s when we moved to Newark, so.

AA: You were how old at this time?

NLW: At that time, what—let's see, if I was four, 'cause I started before they changed our role for kindergarten. 'Cause I was born December 22. I started kindergarten at four, so four, five, six, seven. I was probably eight. Seven or eight.

At that time, I had actually started going to the Hudson School in Hoboken, 'cause the teachers at the Lutheran school said I was—they just felt a different environment would be better for me. Someone had suggested this school to my mother. You had to go take a test to get into the school, so I took it, and my cousin. Okay, I won't talk about that, but—*[laughter]*

AA: Was it weird to make that transition to Hoboken for schooling? Because you had to leave a lot of the folks you grew up with, yes? Or was it a strain?

NLW: Yeah, but I was such a big reader, I mean, I'm sure it must've been different, but it's a blur, 'cause my step-grandfather Ned, he would actually drive me in the morning.

He worked at a chemical factory that's on the borderline between downtown Jersey City and Hoboken. It's a old chemical factory there. He worked there, so he would drive us—before my friend Jessica's mom would drive us, he would drop me off—

[Laughter]

NLW: - in the morning, before he went to work. I would wake up when it was dark, yeah. He would leave me at the hospital, 'cause at that time, yeah, for four—

AA: At the hospital? Which hospital?

NLW: St. Mary's. My friend Wayne, he's Filipino, his mom—this is so crazy, how everybody put all this together.

[Laughter]

NLW: It's like working mothers.

AA: Right? Right?

NLW: Yeah, 'cause I was like, how did my mother know Wayne's mother—that's fascinating. Wayne's mother was a nurse at St. Mary's. Wayne and was Sigil there too in the morning? I don't know. It would be dark, and we would wait.

'Cause I guess St. Mary's must have a little pavilion sitting area in the front, and Wayne and I, and I think Sigil. I can't remember. Maybe Sigil sometimes. We would sit there till it's time for school, and then we would walk the block down to Stevens. What was that called? Stevens Co-Op.

AA: How many hours until school started were you waiting in the pavilion?

NLW: Who knows? Probably a hour and a half. 'Cause it was dark when we left. I would be in the car with my grandfather, 'cause we would go, we would pick up his brother Willie James, and then we would go down to the projects, downtown, and pick up two other people. I'd be in the back of the car.

Then he would go to Hoboken, drop me off, and then I guess go back to the chemical factory and they would start work. Right?

AA: Wow. *[Laughter]*

NLW: I was doing that, and then we moved to—

AA: Newark.

NLW: Yeah, and then there was also a thing where Jessica's mother—my friend Jessica Santiago, when I was still in Jersey City. She would drop me off in the afternoon.

[Laughter]

NLW: 'Cause Myrna, she used to do community work with my mother before she became a housewife, 'cause Eddie, I guess, wanted her to be a housewife. 'Cause he had a store downtown, so Myrna would drop me off in the afternoon, and so yeah. Then we moved to Newark. I moved to the borderline between Newark and I guess Irvington on 16th Avenue and 21st Street.

I had been to Newark before, 'cause my mom would come over here to go shopping at Macy's. Macy's used to have a bargain basement. My mother and my aunt used to be super shoppers.

[Laughter]

NLW: I guess, before my mother had a divorce, but even a little bit after the divorce, they would shop every weekend. Yeah, we would come to Newark to go shopping at Macy's, so we moved to my cousin's house. My cousin had a house over here at Irvington-Newark. We lived on the second floor. I don't know what happened to my uncles.

[Laughter]

AA: They didn't move with you?

NLW: They didn't move with us.

AA: Who was in your cousin's household? Was it just your cousin?

NLW: Oh, it was my cousin, so he owned the house. It was his wife, Selma and little Mark, and yeah. 'Cause that was before they had all the other kids. Little Mark was Ashley's age, so they would play together. Sometimes Selma would watch Mark and Ashley, that's my little sister. Yeah, we moved over there. That was different.

AA: You switched schools as well, yeah?

NLW: No, I stayed.

AA: Oh, you stayed?

NLW: At the school in Hoboken.

AA: You still would do—would you take the train home, or were you picked up?

NLW: I would take the number one.

AA: Oh, wow, the number one. That is a long local bus. *[Laughter]*

NLW: Yes, from over there, the borderline, Irvington and Newark, 16th Avenue and 21st Street, where it turned, and take it—how would I do this? Would I take it to Penn Station and then take the Path train? I don't know if in the beginning I was taking the bus all the way through, but that's how I really got to so much reading.

AA: Right, because you would bring a book with you. That makes sense. *[Laughter]*

NLW: That's when I became really, really obsessed with reading. There was a library near our house, in Newark, on 21st Street. I remember I would just go borrow all kinds of books.

[Laughter]

NLW: - and I mean, I used to read Donald Goines, I'd read Judy Blume. I'd read Roots. I'd read—

AA: That's a great book, too. *[Laughter]*

NLW: Yeah, I've read Roots a couple of times. I was always reading across the board. It was so crazy. I must have taken out so many books from the library that one day, the librarians had to come to the house.

AA: *[Laughter]* You had too many books, they wanted them back?

NLW: Yes, I had too many books. They waited. First, I think I brought down four, and they were like, "No, there's more." Then I brought down like, ten. They were just like, "There's more." Oh, my God. That was such a death feeling.

Having two librarians. It wasn't even one. I could imagine, 'cause they probably were around our age. They were probably like, "We just need to—what? She lives at 158 21st Street? That's three houses away." They're like, "Let's just walk over there."

AA: Get these books back.

[Laughter]

NLW: I know, 'cause probably nobody else was borrowing books in that state library. I think it's closed now, wow, I can't believe Newark had a library there.

AA: Do you remember what it was called? Was it a public library?

NLW: Yeah, it was a public library. Yeah, and they had it. They had a couple of librarians. I guess.

AA: What was the general neighborhood like? Did it feel—what did the transition feel like moving from Jersey City into that neighborhood?

NLW: Well, that section, 21st Street, 16th, it has a lot of houses over there, so it's a lot of houses. Buying opportunities. I can't even remember what it felt like. For me, I'd have to look at my journal.

I still have the journal, but for me, I wonder if a lot of things are almost like a daze, because I was getting up so early, doing so much stuff. Then at the Hudson School, we had electives after school, so I would get home late. What did it feel like?

I mean, I was just *[sighs]*—my cousin Zelma, during the summer, she would tell so many stories. We would sit out on the porch and listen to her stories. I have a neighbor, Jasmine, and she would always want to play with me, even though she's younger. I didn't have a lot of friends in that neighborhood.

Even when I lived in Jersey City, a lot of my friends were at school. Before I left, a lot of—I remember once I got to third grade, I was walking down the street, and someone called me a white girl, *[laughter]* because they were just like, “You sound like a white girl! You sound like a white girl!”

They're like, “Where do you go to school?” They just thought I was the weird—they were like, “Are you a midget? What are you?” They just thought I was so strange.

[Laughter]

NLW: I loved reading, yeah, and sometimes, I would go outside. In Jersey City, I was writing a piece about this a couple of months ago. It's like—a lot of people don't understand, especially with younger girls. It was once I looked out my window, *[laughter]* and Vicky, who was—well, I won't say anybody.

The guys' names. She was maybe 11. These two guys we knew, they were humping her on the street. She was enjoying it, but it was always this sexualization as young girls. I remember there was a park.

My friend and I, we were near a park, and it was like, we saw boys coming into the park. I was like, “We have to run.” It's like, ‘cause if you didn't run, you get caught by the boys. They could all—six

of them, they could just pin you down and hump you, and do whatever they want.

[Laughter]

NLW: Kiss you, hump you, do all the stuff.

AA: Wow.

NLW: It was like for me, a part of me didn't wanna go outside. Look at my mother. Yeah, no. *[Laughter]* How 'bout you go outside? I was kinda happy reading books.

[Laughter]

AA: You're like, "Let me stay inside, and read my books."

[Laughter]

NLW: Yes, and that's why I still love rainy days now, because I wouldn't feel all this pressure, like, "Go outside and play." Then sometimes I would go visit my cousin up the hill, when we still lived in Jersey City.

Sometimes I would play with her, and we would have fun, but our days then in Jersey City, it would be play, do cheers. Make up cheers. Do cheers.

AA: What are the cheers for?

NLW: They're like black girl cheers.

AA: Oh, oh. Got you. Got you. Okay.

NLW: Then you do claps and dances, and then of course there would be a fight. A planned fight, so it would be like, "Oh, today, on Wegman, they're having a fight at 3:00."

[Laughter]

NLW: We have to come in the house to eat lunch. Then we come back out, "Oh, so and so, they're fighting today." Oh, Lord. There might be sexual thing on the days when I would never wanna do anything. Oh, my God, but it would just—there would be things.

It was interesting, 'cause it was like sexual exploration that people wanted, and the sexual exploration that girls didn't want. It was this whole melena of just learning how to interact.

Yeah, it was really—so living in Newark, it was definitely—it was different, 'cause I didn't know as many people. I really didn't have so much time. It's like even today I was thinking about when we moved to Newark, and I remember one of the first times having—consciously thinking about being—not being gay, but thinking about gayness was one day, we were like outside the house, and we heard this guy.

He was screaming. He was just screaming, and he was running down 21st Street in Newark, and his father was literally chasing him with an axe. I swear to God, this shit must have emotionally shocked me forever.

I should explore this in one of my shamanism courses. I really should. I never even thought that might be something that—but yeah, and literally, everybody just moved back. Imagine—

[Laughter]

NLW: - 'cause you know how it is when it's hot. Everybody's out, they're on their porch. I think that horrified me the most, and there was something that had happened in Jersey City where I saw someone get stabbed in the neck, but I think I was so horrified at the fact that everybody—the people on this side of the block were moving back. The people on that side moved back.

Nobody went to stop it. I think it was all really horrible for me, because it was just like I couldn't believe that *[voice breaking]* this person was about to get hit with an axe from his father, and it's like everybody just—it was just really scary.

[Sighs] Oh, and it's really affecting me after talking to my boss. Yeah, so I remember that. It was like, so I'm reading these Donald Garnes novels, which are crazy, and then listening to my sister remembers some, too. My cousin stories from Jersey City.

AA: What kinda stories did she tell?

NLW: Oh, my gosh.

AA: Or that you could share, so that we could get a sense—

NLW: Oh, God. She would tell us stories about someone, like a teenage girl who lived in the building.

‘Cause she actually lived in the building up from us on Summit Avenue, and she—there was this girl who was gay in her building. She had gotten caught on another girl, Zelma would tell us this story. That how she got a beating about it. Just all these—I remember that story. She told us dozens of stories.

[Laughter]

NLW: I’ll have to ask Ashley the next time I see her, like we used to sit out there and lose it. Oh, my God. It’s so funny, and now she’s a nurse, and so. ‘Cause I saw a picture of her and my cousin. What is it, their 25th or 30th anniversary. I don’t know.

AA: Wow.

NLW: Yeah, but yeah, so we lived there in Newark for a couple of years, and then we moved to East Orange. I’m trying to think of when we moved to East Orange. We moved to East Orange after I graduated from eighth grade.

AA: Okay, so then you went to high school in East Orange?

NLW: No, I went to boarding school.

AA: Oh, that’s right. You’ve mentioned that.

NLW: Yeah, in Wesley, Massachusetts. I really—I loved moving to East Orange. I don’t know if it’s ‘cause I got new glasses, so all of a sudden, *[laughter]* I was attractive. Or ‘cause I was a teenager. I went from being a nerd girl, glasses. I got new glasses, and yeah, so we lived in East Orange, and I went to boarding school. I think I came out when I was 15 there.

AA: At boarding school?

NLW: At boarding school.

AA: What boarding school did you go to?

NLW: Dana Hall. It’s in Wellesey, Massachusetts. We basically lived there. Then we had a fire. *[Laughter]* When I was—when I came home.

AA: In East Orange?

NLW: Yes.

AA: Okay.

NLW: When I came to home to go to accepted students day in *[laughter]* at the new school that weekend. That was such a crazy couple months, 'cause my uncle Larry had passed away, and we—

AA: Was that one of the uncles that lived with you, or a different uncle?

NLW: No, no. This is my aunt's husband.

AA: Okay.

NLW: He had passed away. I'm trying to remember if he passed away before the fire. I think it was before the fire. Then we had the fire, and I had to leave my family, 'cause they were staying in the hotel. Then—

AA: This is when you had graduated and were going to *[inaudible 00:33:24]*.

NLW: No, this was my senior year.

AA: This was your senior year at boarding school, okay.

NLW: I came home for accepted students day, so that must've been April or something. April in the spring before you go. Yeah. Then they ended up moving into an apartment a little bit further down.

AA: Did the fire destroy the house?

NLW: No, it didn't. It just waterlogged it. They—everyone believes that they wanted to just get rid of that apartment building anyway, and it's interesting, 'cause in East Orange, that space, even though they're doing all that gentrification.

That area, they still haven't developed there. They've developed, but a lot of people felt like they had just wanted to get rid of that building. Then after that, yeah, so yeah. Then by then, we still lived in East Orange, and then I came back for the summer.

I did—I had been doing summer jobs, I guess, since I was 13 or 14. Then I started going to school in New York, and I lived in the dorm there.

AA: Okay, and then before we jump into that part of your life, just going back a little bit.

NLW: Yeah, I was like, “Let me stop here.”

[Laughter]

AA: Just to dig in a little bit more into the childhood part is that there seems to be a lot of moving, so there’s a lot of transitions there.

NLW: Yeah. I didn’t even know you weren’t supposed to move like that till my mother told me my aunt said that to her.

AA: You don’t know, right? *[Laughter]*

NLW: “You move so much, how…” Da da da. I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to do that with your kids. Hey, Bifa, yeah. That’s cool. Thank you.

AA: Do you recall any other turning points in your early life? You shared some pretty intense stories, too.

NLW: Yeah, well, we had a cousin, who—I’ll fix the chairs and everything. Yeah, I’ll bring ‘em. Yeah. You know me. I wouldn’t be—I don’t roll like that. I’m like, “Oh, let me leave my stuff in the commons room.” Turning points in my early life. I would say always the biggest turning points are always discovering the library, discovering books, writing a little. *[Sighs]* Music.

AA: Hmm. What kind of music?

NLW: House music, rap, hip hop. That was a big thing for me. I guess I went to my elementary school, my mother is progressive. Even though sometimes we’ll have contrasting—

[Laughter]

NLW: - views about certain things, but she is progressive. I generally think of her as being a feminist. She raised me to be independent and to do what I wanted to do. She’s like, “I don’t know.” She doesn’t know if that was the best decision for all of us. She feels

like, “Maybe I should’ve told you guys what to do.” Yeah, she let us do what we wanted to do, so—

AA: Were there other adults besides your mother that were impactful for you in your adolescence or your childhood and adolescence role models, or even just influential in any way?

NLW: Yeah, well definitely my uncle Charles. As bad as that as. That’s so funny. ‘Cause I was posting something on Facebook the other day, ‘cause last night.

Not last night, the night before. I had to get a picture of this new beaded mask I did. I was gonna go to the park and go—and I was trying to take selfies, right? *[Laughter]* ‘Cause I happen to live near Branchwood Park now. I live about four blocks.

AA: Oh, nice. Yeah.

NLW: My uncle lives right across from the park, on Lake Street.

[Laughter]

NLW: I was like, “I don’t wanna fuck with my uncle’s night, ‘cause he tells so many—“ He’s long-winded like me. That’s where I got it from. Also the Williams family, they love telling stories and they love news, and my mother, she’s a talker, too, but she talks about other things.

This is my uncle, and I used to hang out with my uncle and my father when I was really, really young. Before I was four, it was like my father would take me to school with him, ‘cause my father went back to school to get—I don’t know if it’s his master’s, but he got his secondary degree in math.

Some veterans or something. Yeah, so he taught math and general—I don’t know what you call it. General, what is it in elementary school?

AA: Education. Yeah.

NLW: General education, for seventh graders. Yeah, I guess that’s called—

[Laughter]

NLW: I don't know. I never went to public school, so it was like, I don't know.

AA: Your uncle Charles was one of the uncles that lived with you?

NLW: Yes.

AA: Okay. *[Laughter]*

NLW: He used to take me around a lot, and when my uncle Charles was in school, he used to take lots of photos of me, and I got into a really bad accident with my sister, which I won't, we can't in details, 'cause I've been told not to recount it for the millionth time.

Basically it scraped, in Jersey City, coming from nursery school. It scraped the skin *[laughter]* off of half my forehead. I had stitches in my feet. *[Laughter]* My uncle still took pictures of me, and my father got really upset and tore up all the pictures, like, "You won't—" Anyway.

My uncle was really influential to me because he's amazing. I always—when I was younger, I felt he was amazing. Now he's problematic and I won't say why for the oral history. When I was younger, 'cause he was raunchy, but then he was really smart, but then he was funny. He could tell a joke.

To me, that's always a model of how people should be. You should be able to have lively conversation. My aunt Loretta, before my parents divorced, and we really didn't go to my aunt on my father's side. She used to have parties every week.

[Laughter]

NLW: Invite all these people to her house, so it would be like—that's why I've always had this notion, and I spent lots of time at my niece's and my cousin's when I can, is because we would party with the adults. We'd be running around while they were drinking beer, smoking. Every Saturday.

It's always this notion of always being able to communicate and talk about news. Also make jokes, but also be funny and engaging. Yeah, so my uncle is influential. My aunt Jerry, she is influential, 'cause my aunt Jerry would take us out. Sometimes, I would just go visit her. Yeah, I guess she was my friend in Jersey City.

[Laughter]

NLW: She lived across the street from me, and sometimes, my aunt Jerry, who's considered to be the bohemian of my aunts, she would make peach cobbler, blueberry cobbler. She'd make little pies and I'd go sit over there and talk with her.

She would also make collages of—she would get pictures from Essence and Ebony magazines. I would always see that. yeah, and I mean my cousins. My cousin Gela. She used to have a For Colored Girls poster that I'll always remember when I was a little girl. It was the whole span of the door. It was like, Ntozake Shange.

AA: Oh, I was gonna say, the play? Oh, okay. Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, the play, and with her head rag on. I used to think it was my cousin Gela.

[Laughter]

NLW: I always thought my family were the stars. When I would see Hills, I would be like, "Oh, that's Hollywood!" Over there in the Oranges. That was a big thing for me when I saw For Colored Girls, they had this production of it on television channel 13. I still remember that.

It was always awesome with my family in that you see some things on TV and then you'll see it like a real light. They were always engaging us. Whether it was my father's side. It was really my mother's driving.

I would say those are influential people. There were so many influential people. Mrs. Newman, helping my mother out. 'Cause at first, I didn't have a full scholarship, and then I had a partial scholarship.

AA: Is this to the boarding school, or is this to?

NLW: Well, to both, but to the elementary school.

AA: To the elementary school.

NLW: At first, my father, my mother were paying, even though they were divorced. I think she gave some money the first year, but then later on, I got more of a scholarship. Yeah. I mean I would say yeah. In

my early, early life, it would be my uncle, my aunt Jerry. My other uncle Nelly, as mean as he was to me, he was important.

Then my mother. My mother was my main influence. I wanted to grow up to look like her. I really believed her. I really believed her about the no sex, no drugs, do what you wanna do thing. Yeah.

AA: What did you say?

NLW: She was like, “No sex. Don’t have sex unless you wanna bring up a baby.” She’ll say, “Don’t take drugs.” Then I’m like, I find out 15 years ago she smoked pot once. Even though I was in my late 20s, I was still devastated. I had really believed her. I won't say anything about my older sister, but I believed her. Yeah.

AA: What were some challenges that you remember from childhood and how you managed them?

NLW: Yeah, oh, and I’d also like to add, my neighbor Sylvia in Jersey City. I would go sit with her and listen to her stories, too.

AA: *[Laughter]* You listened to a lot of stories.

NLW: Yeah, that’s why I’m like, “Oh, you have the best job.” You said what was the—

AA: Do you recall some of the challenges you might have faced in childhood and how you navigated them?

NLW: I think now as a 40-year-old, obviously the challenges must’ve been feeling strange towards that third, fourth grade period. People thinking I was a midget, and I’m using that with an asterisk. That’s what they would call me, not a short person or the proper name. People calling me a white girl, ‘cause of the way I spoke. The way I acted.

AA: How did you feel you navigated that?

NLW: How did I navigate that?

AA: Yeah, or, of course, when you're a child, you're not thinking that way, but I guess how did you respond to that? As an adult, you can go back and think, “I navigated this.” As a child, *[laughter]* how do you, or what do you remember doing in response to some of those challenges of feeling like an outlier in a sense?

NLW: Yeah, I mean I think the way I navigated it is ‘cause my family was very loving and supportive. I mean, I wouldn’t have said that in my 20s, but now in comparison to what I’ve learned in my 30s, I see my family as very loving and supportive.

Also, I had to be very aware. The thing I told you about at the park. It was always this thing about not letting boys catch you. Because my mother, even though she did try to check me on too much reading, she allowed me to read, and allowed me to explore my imagination.

Then I had my friends at school, I had Wayne and Segal and Jessica. We were all best friends. My mother sent me to a school that embraced my ideas and her ideas. It was an affirmation process. If my mother had said no, she needs to stay here, I really don’t know.

I don’t know who—what I would’ve been. I don’t know if I would’ve acted out in different ways, but my mother was like, “Oh, okay.” My brother also went to boarding school, but it was in Massachusetts. Yeah, that’s what helped me. Books helped me navigate it, and just my mother’s leadership as a parent.

AA: Yeah, it sounds like you also had a core network of friends as well that allowed you to feel like you were included somewhere. Yeah. That’s probably something as well. Yeah.

NLW: Oh, yeah, and I have my family. I wasn’t an only child. If you have your family.

AA: What role, if any, did religion play in your growing up life? You went to—there was a Lutheran school at one point, and then there was Grace Church that your mother volunteered at?

NLW: Yeah, my mother. Yeah, so she was baptized, but we weren’t—

AA: Ah. I guess in terms of all of that, I guess what role did religion play, if any, again? You mentioned a few things, but—

NLW: My mother, she decided not to baptize any of us. I don’t even think my brother and my sister. Even though my brother is named after one of the priests. ‘Cause my brother’s name is Ledlie, and I think it—

AA: One of the priests at Grace Church?

NLW: Yeah, so I think there was a Father Ledlie or something. I can't remember. She's told me a couple of times. I'm sure if I had my phone, I could text my brother. Yeah, I know this woman got so angry at this barbecue.

When she found out my name was Noelle. *[Laughter]* She was like, "Your brother should have been—" "My father's name was Noel. She got really angry. I told my sister, it's so fascinating how people are so stuck to these gender things. "Your brother's name should have been Noelle!"

AA: That's so edgy. Yeah.

NLW: I was like, "No, they named me, 'cause I'm named after my father and my mother." I was like—and she was like, "No, your brother." I said, "No, my mother named him after a priest who she really loved." I mean, that's—

AA: That is strange how that goes. Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, but I had never thought of the concept of someone being angry, as if I had stolen the birthright of my brother. He should've been named after my father. No, my mom didn't raise us with any religious beliefs. We were Christian in the sense that black people who—

[Laughter]

NLW: - don't make a concerted effort not to be Christian, 'cause I just made that joke, if you're African American, you're Christian by default. We would still celebrate Easter. Get dressed up for Easter. We would sometimes go to church, a couple of times a year.

AA: If so, it was Grace Church? Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, when we—yeah. That's the only church I've gone to with my family. Yeah, you're right. Unless we've gone to a funeral. Yeah, but my mother—no.

AA: They're an open denomination, too, if I remember.

NLW: Yeah, my mom is Anglican Episcopal. That's what she and my father identify as. Well, my father, once he got with his new wife, he became Catholic. His new wife.

AA: Which is close.

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, it's still similar. Yeah, so but we had his funeral at Grace Church. As far as spirituality, she didn't really teach us how to pray or anything like that. those are all things I've taken off in my—

[Laughter]

NLW: - early 30s. Yeah, that was it. We would go to church for Easter, but that's a—I don't know. People always make fun of black people and Easter.

AA: Holidays.

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, I think. She would sew all of our clothes for it. She said, "I think that's why you're always running close to deadline with your artwork is because you got that from me." She said, "When I was pregnant with you, that was that year." She said, "That's probably your problem, where I sewed those five dresses I made, those two suits, I was pregnant, and I was trying to do it."

[Laughter]

NLW: She said, "That's probably why you are the way you are with the beadwork." I was like, "It's okay." Oh, God, she does that. Yeah. That was our spirituality practice.

Then I guess when I got to high school, I started exploring Christianity and I started to go with our RA. One of our black RAs, Cheryl. She went to a church in Roxbury. She would bring the black girls who wanted to go, the four of us. It was like Oya, Ebony. They were these two sons.

That Ebony and Oya thought were so fine. That's why they would keep going. Then I started listening to Bob Marley, and I became a vegetarian. 'Cause I started exploring these universalist *[sighs]*—spirituality as a way of accessing the universe. Then I moved away from being Christian. I started doing meditation, so yeah.

AA: Hmm. That's where you're at up to this point?

NLW: Well, yeah. I mean now, though, I'm developing more of a interest in herbs. I've been taking some courses on shamanism. I've been learning more about root work.

African American root work. Slave spirituality. What I'm curious about is how people access their intuition, and so I've been trying to learn the different ways people do that and how they create change in their lives.

That's why I've developed an interest in magic, shamanism, root work. Root work is so detailed though. We all made that joke in the class. We were like, "Can someone else dress these candles?" I said, "Leave it up to some black women to create it."

[Laughter]

NLW: It's like I don't know if you've ever done root works.

AA: Mm-nnn.

NLW: Oh, my God. It's slave work. First, you get ten ingredients, then you gotta write on a particular paper. I said, "Leave it up to black women to make it so complex." Yeah, so my spiritual practice now is a combination of I guess stillness practice. Walking in the park. Prayers. Not necessarily Christian prayers. Just intention prayers.

AA: Not to a higher being, per se, but more of a energy? Yeah.

NLW: No, 'cause I believe we're all a part of one energy. The only time I might integrate any kind of Christianity, per se, is I really got *[laughter]*—I read this spell once about Psalm 23 and reversing negative energy.

I was like, "Whoever wrote that shit really put their foot in it, because is the damning—" Well not per se. My favorite part of that, and I only learnt that after the magic work, right? The root work. Is you set a table for me in front of my enemies.

I went there, I posted it on Facebook, and I told my best friend on the phone. I said, "That's crazy to think that there's this God who went and bought you all this food."

[Laughter]

NLW: "Everything, gold and goblets. All your enemies are sitting there, and you just went and laid it all out." They were like, "Oh, my

God! God bought you all this food!” When I read it, that’s why I can’t resist reading it, because the writing is so fabulous.

It helps me—it helped me during a really difficult breakup I had recently, so yeah. Now I’m feeling really good, but yeah. I burn sage and incense. Just really integrating a lot of earth-based things. I just recently started a garlic plant. My prayers are for best outcomes. I pray more for my family. The healing of my family. The healing of myself. Yeah. That’s—

[Laughter]

AA: That’s true, you are with that.

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, I’ll start there.

AA: Well, of course you can keep talking about it, because I know that it’s a significant part. It seems like it’s a significant part of also your artistic practice? No? Yeah.

NLW: Yeah, well and you know, just in general, even I’ve done some volunteer work with Liberation in Truth in downtown Newark, and one of the first things I collaborated with them on was an HIV AIDS show. What was that? Was that 2006? I would always see the church, and wanna do something with them.

I was friends with Shonda. Someone was like, “Oh, well, can you curate a show on HIV AIDS?” I said, “Sure, if I’m allowed to do whatever I wanna do.” I had some music from Sylvester, ‘cause he passed away from HIV AIDS. Fela

Really bringing in this African American sensibility, and then have different folks give different things. That was my first time working with them. Then I ended up doing another show there in the community center.

AA: Aw.

NLW: What was that called?

AA: On Halsey Street?

NLW: Yeah, to not be seen. I think I did that a couple of months later. Then maybe three years ago, and sometimes I go to church, but since it's not really universalist, it's very Christian, I can't go.

[Laughter]

NLW: 'Cause with Christianity, there's a buy-in part of it after awhile. It's true, people say it's open, and maybe if I go to universalist church, I'm not clear, it might be open. I feel like you should become a member. Even when I used to do meditation. I used to do meditation with Angel Williams.

She wrote "Being Black and Buddhist." She used to do meditations in Brooklyn. I would travel from Newark. 'Cause I moved back to Newark after I broke up with my girlfriend in my late 20s. We lived in downtown Jersey City, and she went back to Detroit, and I didn't wanna have a roommate.

My mother jokingly said, "Oh, why don't you look up those towers?" I ended up at the Colonnade. Not the Colonnade, the Pavilion. The ones by the train station, behind Birch Train.

AA: Which train station?

NLW: Broad Street Train Station.

AA: Okay, the—

NLW: There's two tall buildings.

AA: Okay, I know what those are. Yeah.

NLW: Yeah. Yeah. When I got back here, and I learned about the church, I would go visit, but I wasn't Christian, but yeah. Then I ended up working with—then we were supposed to do a quilt project that I conceptualized together, but like a lot of projects, [laughter] I'll let this go on the record.

A lot of projects, 'cause I've been—I didn't mention that part, but I've been doing student volunteer work and student organizing since I was 13. Being a student volunteer with the counsel, helping them out. Helping the organ—

AA: Right, like the counsel.

NLW: In elementary school. Student counsel.

AA: Okay, gotcha. Student counsel.

NLW: Volunteering with them, working on dance committee to put together dances. To getting to high school, and help cofound a GSA there. I was a member of Women of Color, then my senior year, I was president of Women of Color.

AA: You're very active. *[Laughter]*

NLW: Yeah, so I know how it goes, and then eventually volunteering with Andre Lord Project in Brooklyn. Yeah, I know that it's usually one or a couple of people who are driving. With the quilt pieces. I was—everybody.

Basically the concept was for each person to do a quilt square. Then I even made *[laughter]* it so that folks could just contribute a piece of clothing. People would promise it to me. I'm talking about the wider north community.

The folks at the church were great, but everybody else, or our homies, were like, "Oh, yeah, Noelle. I'll get it." I mean, "Just give me a piece of your shirt that you love."

AA: *[Laughter]* Gimme some cloth.

NLW: Yes, and it was so hard. That was one of the hardest decisions of my life, 'cause I believe in sticking with it. I got that from my mother. Sticking it with it, even at your own peril, and finishing.

Yeah. I have a deep respect for—I love learning about other peoples. One of the programs I went to at Rutgers was the one on Abrahamic stories, and Judaism. I just—eventually, I think I'll go back to school and get my PhD in some combination between spirituality and community and how people use culture.

AA: Yeah, that would be really cool.

NLW: Yeah, my sister's like, "You're the only person who wants to go back to school as you get older!" I said, "Because I don't know. I know you don't get rich from—" To me, it's like, maybe for my sister, 'cause she associates it with people going back to school to make more money. I said, "No, you go back to school for your PhD in spirituality to—"

[Laughter]

AA: Yeah, that's great. Oh.

[Laughter]

NLW: I don't wanna put that in the universe, but it was a different framework than what she was thinking. *[Pause 01:01:42 – 01:01:48]* Oh, look at this.

AA: In terms of Newark, what is your earliest memory of Newark? You talked a little bit about when you moved, but do you have a specific concrete earliest memory of being in Newark?

NLW: Oh, yes.

AA: *[Laughter]*

NLW: It would be being on the bus. I actually did a photo project about this, and I'll send it to you. It was being on the bus, and going up Springfield Avenue, and I was just like, "What is up with all these empty lots?" At that time, with downtown, there were a lot of burnt out buildings.

I was like, "Why doesn't someone fix that?" That's always been my idea. I have this photo project where—it's called Mala, and it's a woman. She wakes up 40 years after the Newark riots, and she's like, "What's happened to everybody? Where are all these empty spaces?"

It reminds me of when I was younger in Jersey City, and then in Newark, even though they didn't, at that time, have as many community gardens in Newark. Or maybe because Newark is so gigantic that obviously the impact of us seeing two gardens, right?

Downtown Jersey City, two gardens up the hill. They could have had 50 gardens in Newark. It always used to drive me crazy, 'cause I used to be like, "Why did they just use tires?"

'Cause it's ugly, and I had this discussion with my friend Jerry Gant, I said, "It's interesting 'cause it's beautiful, like recycle goods and gardens. Then it's also like, is that sensibility consistent with what a community thinks is beautiful?" Is it that a recycled tire can still seem like refuse, like garbage to someone, and as a young girl, I didn't like it.

What I did like was that they actually did something with the space. When I first came to Newark, and my mom and I would come over here to go shopping, I would be like, “What happened? Why don’t they fix it?”

AA: How do you think Newark’s changed since then? Since you were a kid?

NLW: How do I think—well, I think Newark is still fresh like it was.

[Laughter]

AA: What do you mean when you say fresh?

NLW: Fresh as in people who are very awake. Have something to say about something. The way I was raised in Jersey City, Newark, and East Orange is around lots of black folks who have something to say about something.

Kids have something to say about something. Everybody has something to say about something. That’s the same about Newark is you’ll have a conversation about something. How has it changed? It’s like, oh, well, Macy’s isn’t here. You can’t go shopping in the basement. To me, it’s the same, except you have more people, particularly white people, and other races, too. A couple of other black people as well, who feel like they’re trying to save Newark.

It’s always this that Newark is just this—I have this essay I’m uploading to my website. [Where people feel] It’s like this bombed-out place. That people are like—the wild west. There’s more of that idea.

Which is also—but then there’s also black folks and folks who have lived here a long time who feel like dismissive about what we have already, and there are some people who feel like we have something already.

You have all of these dialogues existing. I think that’s the most different thing about Newark. Then my experience in Newark is different. When I was a kid, I lived up the hill, almost near Irvington. That was a lot of houses. Dilapidated houses, but then when I came back, I moved to downtown, and then I became an artist. My experience is so different. I don’t know.

AA: What has it been like, I guess, becoming an artist in Newark?

NLW: Yeah, I think becoming an artist in Newark has been a really good experience. I mean, when I first left my job, I guess in my late 20s, I was working at a women's foundation. I was just exploring my creativity.

I didn't know I would necessarily become a fine artist, and now I'm a conceptual artist. I just started full-time work again the past two years, still feels like yesterday. I just thought maybe I want to do projects. Using black womens' images to sell.

I was really interested in ad busters, and all of that. One of the first things I did was a pin where I made Rosie the Riveter and Aunt Jemima, and I was like, what did I write? One allegiance. Life. I hate how people use Rosie the River like she's an empowerment symbol for women. No, she's not! It's about war making. Please, feminists, stop using it!

[Laughter]

NLW: I have Aunt Jemima stabbing the mom. As you can tell, I'm very didactic, that's okay. Then transitioning to fine art was unexpected but it went along with the idea that what's most important to me is thinking of ideas and sharing ideas. As much as I wanna push to make more money and—

[Laughter]

AA: Which is nice, but yeah.

NLW: The most important thing to me, if I die, knock on wood, anytime soon, is to fully express and understand any ideas that I may not have unearthed.

Interact with people about them, too. I like that. I mean, I'm both a very private person, but then I'm a very, "Yeah!" Yeah, so becoming an artist here. It was so funny, 'cause then I met an artist who I had admired his work for a long time, 'cause he used to do work on the streets.

AA: In Newark?

NLW: Yeah. For a long time without knowing him. Then we kept meeting each other over and over again. Actually, I told this story for another oral history, but you don't need to know the full story for this.

We eventually became friends, and then I started becoming acquainted with the different folks who are still in the art community here. As I developed as an artist, I had that community here. I would still go to New York to volunteer at Audrey Lorde Project and stuff like that. Yeah. That's what it was developing as a artist here. It was—yeah.

AA: How do you feel about, I guess, the development of that arts community while you were growing up, in a sense, and then also as you were developing as an artist? Does that question make sense, or?

NLW: Mm-hmm. How did I feel about the development of the arts community now?

AA: Yeah, because I mean—I guess part of it is how did you become aware of the arts community that is in Newark, and then as you as an artist, how did you evolve to becoming part of it, or helping to contribute the creation of it, or development of it? Does that make sense? Yeah.

NLW: Yeah. Well, I met my friend, and he introduced me. He was like, “You need to come to Open Doors.” Then I met other folks who were artists, too. That's how—that's generally how things go for me. I meet people in an expanse.

The thing, I think, though, being black. Being African American, is there is a very significant tradition that ties thinking, intellect, with the arts. Music, fine art, textiles, commercial art, street art. When I was younger, my cousin, in Jersey City and in Newark.

[Laughter]

NLW: They would do community fashion shows, they would do community plays. My mother, she'll even talk about it. She'll be like, “Yeah, your cousin Gela had me sewing all these outfits.” Because my cousin, he was working.

Well, and my cousin Gela, she was dating Lloyd, and Lloyd was working with Amiri Baraka. Spirit House. Gela would be like, “Well, we need these outfits for a play.” My mother would end up sewing them. Always—that's what's different. Is that the poetry—yeah, especially. The poetry.

Poetry, the arts. Even if you look at Essence magazine, when I was a kid. I don't know if they still publish a poem in the back, and they would show artists. Like Lorna Simpson. Not Lorna Simpson. Carrie May—correction. Carrie May Weems. It's so funny to me when somebody asks me Carrie May Weems.

I'll be like, "You've never seen that photo of her sitting at the kitchen table waiting? 'Cause I remember being a kid, and seeing that photo in Essence." For me getting involved in, I guess, the fine arts community here, and watching it develop, it's been interesting.

Sometimes, when I used to volunteer in Newark Arts Council and Open Doors, figuring out different ways how to still have integrity as a art tour, but also make it open to people. How to market it and how to do things, so that people think, "Okay, there's a weekend of art. Let's come out."

Obviously my friend Jerry would always be like, "Oh, we need more sites than downtown." 'Cause it was this, "Oh, maybe going up to the Jewish temple, the synagogue, right, over there on Broadway. Maybe that was the furthest." Then swooping over to Lincoln Park. Then maybe Bisa Studio, which is parallel to Sar Ledger. I think that's the highest. Jerry would be like, "No, you need to go deeper."

I've always been very invested in the concept of downtown areas, so for me, it wasn't that important. I was like, "We don't need to create—" 'Cause I feel like there's not that much energy, but with him, he's different.

He's like, "Well, let's do it up there." Where I lived, on 21st Street, there's some places we won't even—a lot of the newcomers don't even know about. Like, "What's 21st, Newark half of 21st Street? Newark extends that—"

I don't mean to make fun, but—yeah, and the thing that's just been the hardest for me is just always—emotionally, what's always the hardest for me is just always people creating Newark as this empty space. That the black people *[laughter]* only think about violence.

[Laughter]

NLW:

They don't know what art is. I'm just like everything is art, and there are different kinds of art, so you need to specify exactly what you're talking about. Even if you talk about fine art. The blacks are involved in fine art. Commercial art. Hairstyles. Dance on the

street, and creativity. Just general. What we have too much of are fashion shows, so yeah. That's the hardest thing.

AA: What do you find?

NLW: Huh? Oh, but now I don't know what time it is. What time it is? Okay. Cool.

AA: What do you find most appealing about living in Newark and what are some of the more difficult or frustrating things that you think are significant about living in Newark?

[Laughter]

NLW: Well, I think what's appealing is living near my family. I literally love the northeast, so I love cobblestone streets. I love the streets of Newark. I walk sometimes in the middle of the night in the streets. I like old buildings. I physically—

AA: Right city, yeah.

NLW: I physically love—I love Branch Brook Park. I physically love Newark, right? There are some aspects that I don't like with certain post-industrial cities. That has to deal with the upkeep, and it has to deal with a whole lot of other issues.

When I was dating someone last year, and she was not really interested in moving to Newark, and I was like, "Well, what is my investment in staying here in Newark?" That's what I like. I physically love Newark, and then I love the people. My family and my friends.

Even though I don't see the folks in the art community as much as I used to, since *[laughter]* I'm working a full-time job now, I miss being at home and going downtown for lunch, and going to the Newark Public Library.

AA: Oh, it's so beautiful. Yeah.

NLW: Yeah. I miss doing that stuff during the daytime a lot. That's what appeals to me most about Newark. I love post-industrial spaces, and I love the fact that it's a part of my youth. I love Jersey City and I love Newark. What are some of the things that I find to be challenging? I think sometimes even though with the queer community in Newark, what's so awesome about Newark is there's lots of gay people.

[Laughter]

NLW: You know with the youth now, you'll be downtown. They'll be like lots of girls. I don't know if they're lesbian or bisexual or whatever. They'll be teenagers. They're always so fascinating, 'cause one day, I saw two girls. They weren't really fem, and they weren't really butch. They weren't really anything.

[Laughter]

NLW: They were 12 or something. They looked like me when I was 12 before I got new glasses, which is basically your perm, your straight perm. My hair is natural now, but a lot of black women relax their hair straight. Basically it's your roots are growing in, so it's nappy here at the root, so what you're doing every morning 'cause your mom's not doing your hair anymore is you're combing it out, and it's this ponytail that goes like this.

[Laughter]

NLW: Both of them looked like that, and I was like, "Oh, my God!" I was like, "They're two girls with no tellin' 'em shit." Even though we have that, and even though there are lots of queer people in the arts community here, being queer per se isn't discussed a lot in the arts community. Then you have a strong enough mostly black queer community, queer organizing community. Even though there are people of other races who are LGBT in Newark obviously. Yeah.

AA: Well what places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ?

NLW: Well obviously Murphy's, 'cause Murphy's was one of the first clubs that I went to. What was the first time I went to Murphy's? God, that must've been in like—it must've been when I went back. When my girlfriend, my ex-girlfriend moved back to Detroit. Yeah, 'cause I was going there—yeah, my late 20s.

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, 'cause with Murphy's, it used to just be a regular bar during the day that people would just go eat sandwiches. They had a good cheesesteak. When I left the foundation I was working at and I was temping, I would—and I sometimes got a job in Newark, I would go there and get a cheesesteak.

Murphy's I would consider. Any party. Lots of house music. Because it's like lots of queer folks at the house music party. Probably it was lots of queer folks at the hip hop parties, too, but at the house music parties, especially people my age up to 55. Yeah. 50, 55. Especially that. I would be the bottom part of that.

[Laughter]

NLW: At 40, I would be the bottom part of that whole 80s house music crew. I think, I've been thinking a lot about that. You look at the development of house music in Newark, and in Newark, you listen to house music at baby showers. Family parties. It was so funny, 'cause I was talking to my cousin one day.

She called house music—I was doing the playlist, and she goes, “Oh, are you guys gonna play cookout music?” I was cracking up, I told my friend, who's a music journalist. I said, “Damn, she calls it cookout music.” I said, “'Cause she's 17, right?”

I said, “That's so funny, 'cause we play it so much, but the radio, too, 'cause for black radio when I was younger like WBLS, they would play what you called blue-eyed soul.” We didn't call it blue-eyed soul, or maybe adults did. Blue-eyed soul, right? Like Simply Red. They'd play it on black radio.

Then they'd play R&B. They'd play pop, and then once hip hop started to come. Now with the kids, they're listening to straight hip hop stations, so then they associated [laughter] house music. It's 'cause they don't go to the clubs, 'cause they're cookout music, 'cause everybody listens to it.

AA: That's interesting.

NLW: I always think of that period and what came out of that, even though folks were hit so hard, I think LGBT people, straight people, that generation. This 40 to 55 were hit so hard by drugs. The good thing about that period is it was a period of creativity.

That went all the way up to when I was 15, and the boys I used to hang out with and the first guy I dated when I was 15 was a dancer. Everybody's aspiring to be video dancers. They had dreadlocks, and this, and that. They were Afrocentric. They're gonna be hip hop dancers. Yeah. House music has always been that scene. There's gonna be queer people there. Then obviously the community center.

AA: Mm-hmm. On Halsey Street. *[Laughter]*

NLW: Yeah, and just generally, yeah. *[Sighs]*

AA: Yeah. What do you think about Newark in relationship, or the perspective of Newark in relationship, I guess, to its surrounding cities? Like Jersey City, since you've lived in both places, and say, New York City?

NLW: Well, I think the perception is that there aren't that many gay people in Newark.

[Laughter]

NLW: I think what they're thinking of are gay white people.

AA: Hmm, that's interesting. Yeah.

NLW: Gay working middle-class and upper-class white people. Mainly men. When they think there aren't any gay people in Newark. *[Laughter]* They're not thinking of 26-year-old women with two kids who are gay, right? Or someone like me. They're not—that doesn't even come up in the imagination. Sometimes that doesn't come up in the imagination for the people who are that.

[Laughter]

NLW: That's what I always—as an artist and as a thinker, I always find that to be the most fascinating. Or when things are right in front of you, people don't see it. I think that's the perception. It's frustrating. It's really frustrating. Yeah.

[Laughter]

AA: Now we're moving into the section around identity. How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

NLW: Hmm. I guess my—I identify as a woman. Other people identify me as fem. Sometimes jokingly, making jokes, I identify as fem, but it's not something that comes from my heart. It's more a part of my joke records.

I identify as a woman. I identify as a woman. I think for now, I identify as a lesbian. Before, I used to identify as a bisexual woman, even though really I have always been a lesbian identified

bisexual. Because it made it harder to call yourself a lesbian if you slept with a guy five years ago.

[Laughter]

NLW: ‘Cause then people think you wanna sleep with a guy now. Now I identify as a lesbian, even though I don’t find myself saying that as often. Sometimes I identify as queer. I’ll use that. I think it depends on the space, yeah.

AA: Yeah.

NLW: If I’m with radical feminists, I identify as a dyke. If I’m at the bar, I identify as a lesbian.

AA: Right. Okay. How did you first—or when did you first become aware of that aspect of yourself, and how did you first learn about the existence of LGBTQ people?

[Laughter]

AA: That’s a lot of thinking. They’re almost kinda too into questions there.

NLW: I know. Well, when I was younger, I have a family member. I have a couple of family members who are lesbians. I had a family member who was very emotional, I won’t say her name. She was a lesbian. I always connected.

I always had connected this deep emotional sum by being a lesbian *[laughter]* when I was younger. ‘Cause she was very, very emotional, and she still is. I think for me, when would I—I guess it was my freshman year in high school. One weekend, my—

[Laughter]

NLW: I was about to say my coworker. A fellow student who was a friend, we had this call it like a experience. It was a intimate sexual experience. I don’t remember it being a big deal, but apparently, my best friend at that period said I wrote this long letter about it and I was like, “Oh. I write this, I write that.”

All this stuff. I don’t remember all that. That’s what my best friend remembers. I just remember it as being really hot, and we were a little loud because our dorm mother, Gretchen. You know.

I won't say the person's name, 'cause now she's a Christian with two kids. Yeah, so I think at that point then, I felt like I was bisexual. I felt like sleeping with women, I was like, "I need to get in better shape." Because I was like—

[Laughter]

NLW: 'Cause I hadn't really started having sex with boys. 'Cause I was committed to not having any penis going into my vagina and getting pregnant, 'cause my mother had invested so much in me.

I wasn't going to have anyone talking about my mother, like, "Oh, she did all that for her, and look, she ended up pregnant like everybody else!" 'Cause that was the general narrative. You're a black girl, you're from Newark and Jersey City.

You got pregnant, you're a failure, so I was really attached to this whole concept of not letting a penis go into my vagina. I realized now why it was easier for me than my best friend.

[Laughter]

NLW: 'Cause she would be like, "Don't you want to date?" I'd be like, "No, I'm chill." Then my first boyfriend left me. He was 19. He was like, "Sorry, I like you, but—"

[Laughter]

NLW: Anyway, so I guess maybe when I was 15, Kevin Jennings came to our school from GLSEN, and he was talking—I don't know what happened. I raised my hand, and I said, "Because I'm bisexual." Then we ended up starting a GSA at our school.

AA: Mm-hmm. A Gay Student Alliance?

NLW: Yeah, a Gay Student Alliance. Then it was funny, 'cause I ended up working at GLSEN and leaving as their first national student organizer. In my 20s.

It was so funny, 'cause whenever I would tell people I started GSA in high school ten years ago 'cause Kevin came. 'Cause he was the GSA father. 'Cause he came and I came out when he came. It was like a made up now I'm their first national student. I'm like *[sighs]*.

[Laughter]

AA: That's like, a perfect story.

NLW: I know. Yeah, that's when I came out, and then I ended up having another intimate with another friend, I won't say. Yeah. I was—but yeah, I was like, “I need to be in shape.” ‘Cause I said they really see your body. Women really see your body. Then as opposed to when you can sleep with some guys now, it depends.

I mean, I've slept with a couple of guys. It depends. Some guys you can get away with like. Then some guys need to explore every single section in your body. I knew when I got with my boyfriend in college, which was such an interesting psychological experience, because it was like—he was like, dark skin. By the time I got to college, I learned how to style my hair better. It was just like if someone who had been made fun of—

[Laughter]

NLW: Before eighth grade, who really only started to become cool after ninth grade. I wasn't with people 'cause they were nerd nerd. No, in my neighborhood in Jersey City, but not in my school I wasn't considered. It was affirmation just everywhere. I mean, it's like we'd be walking down the street, it was like beacons of black love. Like, “Oh, you guys are so beautiful together! Oh, yes!”

Which is interesting, I didn't experience that again until last year, when I dated a woman who's butch, and but to me, she was like a woman. I don't know if sometimes people knew she was a woman or not. That was like, everywhere we would go. *[Laughter]* Like, “Wow you guys are so in love!”

With my first boyfriend in college though, it was like—I told him. I was like, *[laughter]* “You're gonna be the last guy I ever date.” I said, “So if this doesn't work out, you have to let—“ I said, “I might sleep with a guy after this.” I said, “But I'm not dating this whole marriage dating thing, I'm not doing it if it doesn't work out with us.” In his head, he was like, “And I'm not dating any more black women.”

[Laughter]

NLW: “I'm only gonna date Asian women and white women!” Because now he's married to an Asian woman and I'm a lesbian.

[Laughter]

NLW: Look in his head, he was like, “Yes, anything that will work for me.”

[Laughter]

AA: What school—where did you go to college again?

NLW: The New School.

AA: At the New School, that’s right.

NLW: Eugene Lang College at the New School, which is very specific, ‘cause we all—it’s basically back in the date. Not now. ‘Cause a couple years ago, they decided that they wanted to compete with NYU undergraduate. When I went, it was 260 people. *[Laughter]* We all thought we were going to school to become Fidel Castro.

[Laughter]

NLW: That’s what Lang used to be! We all thought we were little—and the couple of people who had gotten there, yeah.

AA: Little revolutionaries?

NLW: Yeah, ‘cause they were write. They had wanted to be writers, and they came for our writing program. They were just like, “What the? Why are these people always talking about race, gender, politics?” Because they didn’t know about that whole tradition that a lot of us went for. Yeah. Yeah. That was—

AA: They never go. *[Laughter]* How did other people in your life become aware of—well, you said you came out at 15 with your family. Can you describe a little bit about what that was like?

NLW: I can't even remember. I just remember telling my mother I was bisexual, and she was like, “Okay.” My family was fine with it. The only people who had a problem but didn’t express it as a problem. They expressed it in other problematic ways, like a family friend. A family member who was a—“You're too pretty!”

[Laughter]

NLW: As if you only “you’re ugly”, you’re gay, or whatever. “Oh, you're too pretty.” My family, like my mom, my sisters, and my brother, they’ve all been “accepting.”

[Laughter]

NLW: Oh, 'cause people say that to me. "Oh, your family's so accepting." No, I'm not gonna be thankful my family's accepting.

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, but I also think coming out is something you keep doing all the time. You're always—and especially when you look like me, where people think [laughter] I'm—they get the sense that I'm a little bit into politics. It's like politics like—I'm proud to be black, but it's proud to be black like a cereal box. They always think I'm straight. They always think I cook, which I don't.

[Laughter]

AA: That's so interesting! [Laughter]

NLW: It's like—so when people meet me, and because I'm smiley by nature, unless I'm really thinking about money or something, then you'll see me like. People always describe me in the same sister-girl, black is beautiful light when I'm really like, black is beautiful hardcore black is beautiful. Our culture is beautiful. Our bodies are beautiful, but our culture's beautiful.

The way we think about things. Our innovation is beautiful. Our communities are beautiful. That's how I'm in black is beautiful, not just that I'm wearing coconut oil on my hair. Yes. I'm always coming out to people.

Then sometimes, since a lot of people don't always see me with a girlfriend in my family, it's still like you're always coming out. Once, my aunt said [laughter] to me, "Okay, this is—" I was kinda like temping and doing my art. She and my cousin, my older cousin. 'Cause I have a cousin who's close to 70 and then I have a cousin who's like 12, so I have a whole—

AA: [Laughter] Nice spectrum.

NLW: They were like, "Okay, so when are you gonna stop this, and get a husband to support—"

[Laughter]

NLW: I was just like, “Have I ever asked you for money?” I said, “I’ve been self-supporting since I was 17.” I said, “You know, you can really take that language for someone who’s asking you for money. That’s who you need to give advice to.

Don’t give advice to me, ‘cause I’ve never asked you for a dime. I’ve been supporting myself since I was 17.” That’s been very important for me, but it’s also made certain things harder for me. Because I’ve always had to provide for myself. That’s a much different life when you’re providing for yourself than when you have a safety net, so.

AA: Yeah. How have your racial and or religious identity, all of spiritual, we can also use spiritual, impacted your LGBTQ identity, if any?

NLW: I think it impacts it because I see it as something, my sexuality is something very organic. I think ‘cause I was in high school, I’d read people like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, so I was really, really lucky in that sense of having this framework.

Then also my mother always presented sexuality, not necessarily queer or straight, but masturbation or touching your body as very natural. For me, I always contextualized my queerness as something that comes organically. Something that you feel. It’s always really interesting to me when—I heard some—

[Laughter]

NLW: I judged this LGBT youth ball on Saturday for Hudson Pride Connections, and the guy was like saying something, *[laughter]* and he was like, “Well, I’m not that gay.”

[Laughter]

NLW: I wanted to stop and have a conversation about himself. I was gonna stop him and be like, “Guys.” That was the second time I’ve heard somebody in their 20s say that. I said, “When we were younger, in our 20s, we would say that as a joke. I could hear people, but not seriously.”

I hear some of these teenagers, and people in their 20s. Even using blackness like that, like, “I’m not that black, or I’m whiter.” It’s interesting how it’s almost like folks just are dropping the ball on—‘cause a large part of identity and cultural work, I mean,

especially with blacks, African Americans, and Jewish people in the United States, is this—it's a retelling of a story in this.

It's a retelling of a story. With—one day I was out with my little cousins and nieces. They were like, "Well, you're whiter."
[Laughter] Going, I was lighter. "You're whiter than she is." I said, "No, you all are black."

[Laughter]

NLW: You had to read these guys briefs. "No, each of y'all are black. You're all black. No, she's not whiter and if you're saying that she's lighter, but she's not whiter." Because I feel that with using that "whiter" is it becomes associated with so much other stuff. Yeah. When I heard 'em say, "Well, I'm not that gay." Like seriously, as if it was a scientific quantifiable—

[Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, and—

AA: What does that mean? [Laughter]

NLW: Yeah, and we all know how that plays out, too. Where you could be on the bus and you could be seeing somebody who's getting harassed and not necessarily not say something 'cause you're fearing your own safety, but just not say something because you're not affiliated with that in any way. I had to let it go, though. I can't do it like I used to, 'cause I was like, "Oh, I'm here to judge the contest and continue." It's not to stop, and—so yeah.

AA: It wasn't a moment for a learning moment at that moment?

NLW: No.

[Laughter]

AA: How has being gay made your life different from the way it would be if you didn't have this identity?

NLW: How is my life being gay different? [Sighs] I think probably in my 20s, I would've pushed harder for marriage. Marriage with a guy. Only because in my early 20s, even though my mother never pushed marriage for us. I think I would've—when my ex-boyfriend and I, we always used to talk about marriage.

“I’ll be a lawyer, you’ll be a doctor.” *[Laughter]* If I had continued along that trajectory of goal-setting, maybe I would have been different in that sense. I don’t know how my life—I mean my life is so rich, ‘cause I really love—I love black women, and I love all women, but I really love black women. I love the way black women look, and I love black history and culture. To me, it’s like I can’t really imagine. I can’t. I can’t.

AA: *[Laughter]* Has your perception of your identity changed over time at all, do you think?

NLW: Well I think now in my late 30s, really becoming clear about being a lesbian. ‘Cause I think at one point, I was like, “Oh. Maybe I’m bisexual.” Because to me, I didn’t feel—I felt—I think I was coming from this whole theory of that.

You know you could have sex with anyone, which I still believe. You could have sex with anyone. Obviously, that’s what supports sex work, and that’s what supports marriages that people aren’t fully committed to each other, but they still have sex.

Technically your body can be with anyone, right? I think a big breakthrough for me was—‘cause someone was asking me something. Some guy was pressuring me, and it was just like *[laughter]*, “Well who do you imagine when you imagine having this? Who do you imagine when your eyes are closed?” You’re imagining happy endings. Who do you imagine? I imagine a woman.

[Laughter]

NLW: I said, “That’s the difference.” What do you want to see when your eyes are open? I wanna see a woman. Even though now I don’t really think I could necessarily sleep with a guy, but before when I would sleep with guys occasionally, usually when I broke up with women, and I’m not trying to get into another relationship.

[Laughter]

NLW: It would always be after six weeks or something, it would just kinda be like, “Okay, we’re done.” I never had those super-romantic feelings. With my first boyfriend, that was more like, “Okay, you’re gonna be a poet. You’re gonna be this.” Then, but I’ve evolved even—the evolution I’ve had over the past year with my sexuality and having understanding the need for more emotional connections.

I was always very attracted to people over their ideas. Then this year, I've learnt a lot about feeling, 'cause I fell in love with someone who I just felt. It was a feeling on a different level. That's evolved over what I demand, what quality of life I demand now. That's evolved. Yeah.

[Laughter]

AA: Do you have any significant goals or future plans that are—that you're starting to settle, or starting to—I don't, create a foundation sounds weird, but I guess any goals or any future plans that are in the mix right now? That you wanna discuss with us?

[Laughter]

NLW: I guess I'm just continuing to evolve, my artwork and my writing. Right now, I'm moving towards—I used to do more sculpture, even though I integrated photography and other work into it. What is now my focus is installation work.

Right now, *[laughter]* I'm working on what would you—it would be considered like a beaded labyrinth. I'm really invested in creating spaces for people to experience things, and walk through, and feel.

One part of that is this project I'm doing is called Genocidal Music Remix, and I have these little short videos that I've done so far that are like YouTube mashups. It's about this song that Irving Berlin took that was a black spiritual, and he put it into a pop song.

AA: Which song was it? Do you know?

NLW: The song is called, "I Got Shoes" or it could be called "Heaven." It has so many different names, but it was a really popular song.

My work has always been about spirituality through the lens of an American black woman's identity, particularly African American multi-generational, probably migrated from the south to be more specific.

Now, with this Genocidal Music Remix, what I'm doing is looking at the ways people have used spiritual music or have to demean a certain group. With the Irving Berlin song, it's a deliberate use of a spiritual to make fun.

Then on the other side of the project which I'm working on is looking at women rappers from Newark, particularly Queen Latifah, and how she comes to symbolize the various spiritual movements through art that exist. You have these very folks who are integrating these ideas of Egyptology. Right? Then these ideas—

[Laughter]

NLW: I don't know what to call it, universalism. Where people integrate ideas about space, and consciousness. Right? You have a lot of that coming, oh, Lord. I know, just bring up for the LGBT project.

[Laughter]

NLW: With Africa Bambaataa.

AA: Oh.

[Laughter]

NLW: Afrika Bambaataa was a big proponent of integrating West African with—but also ideas about consciousness, and the expanded consciousness. Someone like Queen Latifah, that was her friend. The story I'm actually—one of the short stories I'm working on now is the story of when she was eight years old.

AA: Mm-hmm. Queen Latifah?

NLW: Yes, and [laughter] she was eight years old and she decided to come up with a new name. Her original name was Dana. How she was sitting with her cousin, and looking through the Muslim book of names, Arabic.

How she found the name Latifah. She looked up what it meant, and it was like delicate and sensitive. In the project, right now, I'm building the collage for it. I have some images of black, young Muslim girls, and then I have this heading I'm integrating called—the headline is another Newark is threatened here.

It was from Durham, North Carolina. What I just find to be [laughter] so fascinating about this article is this whole concept that Newark—it's almost like Newark is a brand or a model. Another Newark is threatened here.

[Laughter]

NLW: Even in her interviews, like her most recent interviews, how she becomes an embodiment of these different movements.

Some of them sexist, but how she takes all these different parts of it, and then how a lot of people take the different parts of it, and they create new understandings of blackness for themselves. Yeah. That's some projects I'm working on, it's yeah, Genocidal Music Remix. That's exciting.

AA: Do you know where the installation might be mounted? You have plans with that already?

NLW: Yeah. Well, first *[laughter]* it was going to be mounted in June.

[Laughter]

NLW: Now, I'm probably going to use it in September for an installation for the Queen of Angels show my friend Matt is doing.

AA: Where is it?

NLW: That's going to be downtown Newark on Market Street, and I haven't told Matt yet.

[Laughter]

NLW: It's debuting there, but it should be fine. 'Cause the piece is about spiritual music, and what is sacred music and what is pop culture. Then the Queen Latifah piece, I'm not sure when I'm going to be showing that. Probably sometime late this year or next year, so. I actually have a question for you about it.

Yeah, those are my plans, and for four years, I volunteered with Newark Pride, and last year was my last year working with them. It's like—so this is the first year I'm not working with them in a couple of years.

It's like with my artwork, and moving to installation, and moving to having the videos, and the installations, and these different ways to people to access it. One of the things when I was working with Newark Pride was I was like, "We have to let people know there is a Newark Pride."

Not only that there's a Newark Pride once a year, in July, but that we actually have a gay church. Even though they don't call

themselves a gay church, right? It's a church for everyone, but it's a gay-affirming church.

Don't you know the church was founded, like one of the bishops is Carl B., and the song you danced to in the club. I always find that to be the most fascinating thing. Have you ever heard that song? "I Was Born This Way"?

AA: Yes. It's popular. It's really popular. *[Laughter]*

NLW: With Carl B.? The house music song. I said, "When people are getting down to it, and they're testifying, and they're crying on the house *[laughter]* music floor, do you understand this is about—" Even though I'm sure Bishop would say it's about everything being coming out as a person, but do you know this song is from a gay man who's a bishop of a LGBT welcoming church?

[Laughter]

NLW: That's essentially the song of coming out? Like, "I was born this way. From a little, bitty boy." I guess that comes back to what we've been discussing. I think that's the role of the artist, and as also the activist. Is to make things—help people to see what's there. 'Cause when people are feeling their song, it doesn't matter.

It could be like a family party, it'll be a outdoor—people feel this. Like, "I was born this way." I wonder what do y'all—when you're feeling I was born this—I think what it speaks to is this—June Jordan has this poem called—it's not called "I am not wrong" but that's my favorite part of it.

Where she goes, "I am not wrong. Wrong is not my name. My name is my own, my own, my own." I think when people who have no idea this song is from a gay man, what they're responding to is this whole concept that being black, or being poor, or being whatever.

Or just being someone who's an outsider. You're not wrong. I was born this way. Even working with Newark Pride last year, I was like—when I wasn't having to do *[laughter]* web stuff, I was like, Perris. I just need to be out on the streets, telling people, "We have gay businesses down here. The church has this archive." All these things. Wanting to tell people about it. I think that would be my work, so yeah.

AA: Anything else you'd like to add?

NLW: What would I like to add?

AA: As we finish off? *[Laughter]*

NLW: I think the only thing I would like to add is I feel especially privileged to be here in 2016. To see the work that I contributed to, in small ways, as a student activist, or as a cultural activist.

In Brooklyn, and in Newark, or even money given to places like Astraea or something. To see queerness, LGBT becoming—and discrimination against LGBT folks a part of the popular conversation, even though it's a four, five *[laughter]* decades is amazing.

To see women's radicalism, even though—'cause sometimes we are off into the pop feminism, but still, all these different themes to become things that people speak about as common sense is really amazing.

I wish for a world where everybody feels comfortable, as someone who's experienced bullying, and who's felt like an outsider, and as someone who's been very much on the inside, and who's experienced privilege to some degree. I just feel like this—our societies have to be places.

It's a non-negotiable half to be places where all people are free to feel comfortable to walk the streets. That that's the basic *[laughter]*. That there are other people advocating for other people to be able to walk the streets freely.

To me, that's my base, and to feel comfortable in their bodies, in the fact that they can be free. I guess that would be—that's what encompasses all my work as an artist. As an activist, a cultural worker is just—is that. Yeah.

AA: Thank you.

NLW: Sure.

[Laughter]

[End of Audio]