Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Jasmine Mans
Interviewed by: Lorna Ebner
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Lorna Ebner: Today is June 16th, 2017. My name is Lorna Ebner, and I am interviewing Jasmine Mans at the courtyard of the Hahne's Building for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you so much for doing this.

Jasmine Mans: Anytime.

Lorna Ebner: When and where were you born?

Jasmine Mans: I was born on May 17th, 1991, at Saint Michael's Hospital in New Jersey.

Lorna Ebner: Who raised you? Did you grow up in one place or household or more than one?

Jasmine Mans: I've had the privilege of being raised in one household in the same home for my entire life in the South Ward of Newark, New Jersey. Yeah. I live with my mother and father. I was raised. I'm the middle child of two brothers. Yeah, and I live across the street from a baseball field in Newark. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: You were the only girl with two brothers?

Jasmine Mans: Two brothers.

Lorna Ebner: How was that?

Jasmine Mans: It was a very interesting childhood growing up. I do believe that we were raised with this competitive edge. Then also with this way of being unemotional and very—yeah, yeah. I have had a very interesting childhood with me and my brothers. Not the usual expectations, like being the girl and being protected by brothers. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: That's really interesting. Do you recall any events that were transitions or turning points in your early life?

Jasmine Mans: What kind of turning points?

Lorna Ebner: Just very distinct memories or something you can share about Newark when you were younger?

Jasmine Mans: Something I can share about Newark. The Star-Ledger, I remember distinctly my dad paying 35 cents every morning to get the paper. I would see the paper every morning. Then my grandmother is big on collecting the paper, the newspaper. She will cut out things that she thinks is interesting or things that she thinks I would know about. I never knew how intertwined I was and how I was conditioned to look at news often. One thing distinctly that I knew about Newark is when kids were killed in the city, that they would give these big headlines articles. I would save all of them. I remember being a freshman in high school and Kelvin Kelly passing away. That was the biggest moment when I realized one of my friends was a headline in the paper.

Newark, I guess, is used to these headlines of black boys. Then what was another turning point for me? I remember Assata Shakur making a headline. The headline was "Raising the Stakes to Bring Home a Cop Killer." It was this big black female revolutionary who made a headline, and my grandmother saved the article for me because she thought that it mattered to me. Yeah. I remember some of the first deaths in my life that made me realize what it meant to be alive. People can die young or that everyone doesn't live to be 80.

I remember when I first liked a girl, I guess that was a big turning point in my life, too. When I realized—or in high school when I couldn't understand why I couldn't get a boyfriend. Yeah. I do remember different turning points in different compartments in my life. Absolutely.

Lorna Ebner: How old were you when you first liked a girl?

Jasmine Mans: I remember being in high school. Maybe my junior or senior year. I remember this distinct moment of this girl telling me that she was gonna kiss me and my heart racing. Not understanding if I wanted her to, if I was just embarrassed. Not knowing what it was, **[00:05:00]** but knowing that I remember how my heart was pacing. Probably wanting her to kiss me. She didn't. It was in high school, and that was the first moment where I was just like—

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: Could I be—could I like girls? Then being devastated. It was so devastating. Like, "Darn. I don't even get a shot at liking guys as this idea of what this traditional fake idea of love and tradition and home and family is," because I come from that as well. My parents got married and had three kids and always lived together and are still together. I was like, "Grief. I want my shot at regular."

Lorna Ebner: Just flew out the window?

Jasmine Mans: It was just out the window.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: It was gone. I was so devastated. I was still not dating women. I just had that moment. I think I even got a boyfriend after that, but I remember just being like, "Really? Grief." Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What did you do with those newspaper clippings? Do you still have them? Did you put them in a scrapbook?

Jasmine Mans: I have them. What's so beautiful—it's so interesting how God works, because I would just make a collage every year. I would save things, and I would make a really—I would take poster board, make this big, big collage of everything I experienced that year, and then I would put it in a big frame. I would tell my dad to get me a frame. Find a frame. I would frame my collages. At first, I just thought that that was just some silly thing that I did. Then going back home as an adult, I still have these things. I'm like, "Wow, this is an art form. You've saved these memories. This is the art that I study in college." I'm just like, "This is crazy."

Lorna Ebner: When did you start doing this? How long did it continue?

Jasmine Mans: I started—maybe my first collage was my freshman year.

Lorna Ebner: Wow.

Jasmine Mans: My freshman year of high school. I have pictures with my mentors or albums that came out. Press passes that I had when I did poetry shows. All of these moments, or these boys that passed away. Their news clippings are there. It's so ironic to be an adult and to be a poet and to create art and to wanna be such a creative historian, and then to know that my mind was building in this way at such a young age. I didn't know what I was doing when I was pasting these articles together. It's art. It's art. I didn't know it would be that valid or valuable.

Lorna Ebner: How is it looking back on those now?

Jasmine Mans: It's incredibly emotional. I think it's breathtaking. It makes me realize the value of memories or the fact that MetroCards don't look exactly the same anymore, or you can't use them the same anymore. Then the memories of the people. Some of the people in the collages are not alive. Some are

incredibly successful beyond their wildest dreams. I have a picture with them the day I met them and we're the best of friends now. Just to see yourself growing up and to see how these memories have built upon themselves as well. They're not just pictures. They're stories that I eventually wrote about. Some of these people shaped and framed—some of these stories that I told framed my life. That's the impeccable part. These stories that I've seen, I've told, and because I told the story, it changed my life. It allowed me to speak louder to a bigger space. It gives you the sense of humility and the sense of how do you collect memories. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What was your neighborhood like growing up?

Jasmine Mans: Man, so—

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I grew up with strict, strict. My dad was really strict. We didn't get a chance to wander. It was like you couldn't go past the three houses on the left, and you couldn't go past the three houses on the right. You can play in the backyard, but you can't go past the backyard. **[00:10:00]** Then we were always in a lot of organized activities. It's like my brother became this—he was always in football activities no matter what, 24/7 all year round.

Lorna Ebner: Is that your older brother?

Jasmine Mans: My younger brother. It was like he didn't want my brothers—my dad worked a lot. He didn't want any of us to get caught up in the dangers of being in a neighborhood that could be violent. The blessing about me is that I live across the street from a park. Right? I can wake up and I can see trees. I don't wake up and see ten other houses. Then my block isn't

congested with that many houses. It's less people, less violence. A lot less of a lot of things. I also have a pool across the street from my house that I never got to swim in. People are like, "How long have you lived here?" I'm like, "26 years." They're like, "How many times did you play in the pool?" I was like, "Twice."

Lorna Ebner: Oh my gosh. *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I never got to play in this pool. I played baseball. I did karate. I did debate. They wanted me in stuff. I really, really thank my parents for that, because I just thought I was doing random things, but these random things led me. It was a really strict path that I did not know I was on. My neighborhood is—it's a gem. It's so funny, because people are often nervous to come to the hood. I remember being at UW, and I'm in a sociology class, and we're reading an article, and it's about my city. It's just about violence in my city. I think it was about a queer woman who was murdered in my city. Interesting.

Lorna Ebner: In Wisconsin?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. Right.

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: You thought you got away from it.

Jasmine Mans: Right. I've always wanted to prove that my home was beautiful and prove that my city was beautiful. That's what I've been—when my friends come home—when my friends come from Wisconsin, it's like, "I wanna come to the East Coast. I wanna hang out in the city. Can I stay with you?" It's just like, "Absolutely." Then they'll see the people on the corner. They'll see the bodegas and all of the everything that's happening. Then me and

my friend who's this white guy, it's just like, we're a community. We're a block. We all know each other. To have a white guy with me on my street is weird, because they're like, "Who's this guy?" He doesn't even look like he's—he doesn't look other. He looks white. *[Laughter]* We were standing on that corner. We got on the bus. No one—it was a fine, perfect day. He realized that those—well, not him, but we realized that those people that we're trained and conditioned to be scared of are people who are not trying to cause us any harm, are living their lives.

It's just like—and then I think my mother also—my parents really taught us pride and home. We've always had a beautiful, beautiful home. It was always some place that we wanted to come to. We always had toys that we earned that we wanted to play with. Home wasn't something we was tryin' to escape, but that we wanted to be at. It was a place we wanted to be. Then my friends wanted to be in my home.

It was just always this pride of, yeah. My being in this beautiful home made up for the fact that it looked a bit dangerous on the corners, but then also my neighborhood has a block association. Then I know that that block association changes houses every week. You have to put the sign outside your door if it's at your house. You leave your door open, so neighbors can come in. It is that community. I know that there's a block association meeting at my house on some months. We cook. I know when the neighbors' son passed away, that everybody in the neighborhood showed up. We gave them a gift from the block. Then there's a block party. They give you scholarships. It's a $50 scholarship, but every kid who's going to college will get $50 from the block. It's these things that you wouldn't think that you have, **[00:15:00]** because there's boys with their pants down on the corner, but the boy *[laughter]* with his pants down on the corner, his grandmother runs the block association.

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: It's this incredible, beautiful place. I curated my first poetry show across the street from my house.

Lorna Ebner: At the baseball field?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. It's a park.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: It's a parking lot, and so we put chairs all in the parking lot—

Lorna Ebner: Oh, okay.

Jasmine Mans: - and built a stage and all of these different things. Yeah. My neighborhood was a place that I took pride in because I was so proud of my home, because I always thought my home was beautiful. My parents, we have artwork in our house and nice couches. People feel safe and at home and feel like they're in a place that they can be prideful. My dad never allowed us to litter. There are times I do this thing where I'll see someone littering right next to a trashcan. I'll pick up their trash in front of them and throw it in the trash to just show them how stupid they are.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: Just how easy it is. One thing that I've always done was if I see trash in front of my home, I pick it up. This is my home. I'm growing this sense of pride. I didn't always have this sense of pride. My parents did, I think, a really good job at teaching us how to respect home. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Were there adults in your life that shaped your childhood or adolescence other than your parents?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, man.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: Absolutely. I was in elementary school, and I had an English teacher or just a teacher. She gave me the autobiography of Assata Shakur, whose name is tattooed on my hand.

Lorna Ebner: Oh, my gosh.

Jasmine Mans: - whose article I had. It was the first book that I finished. The first 270-page book. When I finished this book, I felt like an adult. I remember where I was. I remember. I was just like *[sigh]*.

Lorna Ebner: Where were you?

Jasmine Mans: I was in my room. Yeah. I think it was a Saturday.

Lorna Ebner: Can we go into that memory a little bit?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. I think it was a Saturday. It was taking me so long, because I remember being an eighth grader. I just thought this book was too big, and it was taking me months. Seriously. It was just so long. I finally finished, and I was just so proud. I wanted everyone to know. I wanted everyone to know what I learned. It was mixed with poetry and autobiography. I got—and there were things that I knew. I read this in the eighth grade. Then as an adult, I always remembered. That's what's so incredible about knowing that I was making collages or knowing that I was listening to Tupac or reading the autobiography of Assata Shakur. Not knowing what this meant. I was 13, 14, not knowing what any of this meant. Then it being stored in my body. Now I'm being an adult and it coming out.

Lorna Ebner: Then growing up and realizing what it meant.

Jasmine Mans: Right, right. I really forgot what your question was.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]* It's okay. Were there adults in your life that shaped your childhood?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, and so my elementary school teacher gives me this book that completely makes me think about who I am as a black woman. What is poetry? What is my story? What are the other stories? Now I have to find all of the stories. Then I go to high school. I have a substitute teacher. The whole class is wilding out, doing whatever they want to do. The sub is this brittle—when I say brittle, this brittle old man with a cane and these high-ass socks. He gets in front of the class with his brittle self, and he starts spitting. Spitting hardcore poetry.

Lorna Ebner: Oh my god. *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: Just game changing. The whole class is like, "Whoa." The whole class just started—the class just fell speechless. I walked up to this brittle old man. I'm just like, "I can do that. I can do that. Let me. I can do that." He's like, "Join my debate club." I eventually joined the debate club. We were the best debate team in North New Jersey. We competed at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, St. Joseph's University. We got in every Star-Ledger article *[laughter]* we could.

We were crafted as the best debate team. When we debated, we made sure that our issues remained political and black. We talked about black things. It's crazy being in this whole debate room. All of these kids are white. Suit, ties, suits. We can't afford the nice suits, **[00:20:00]** so we're wearing sweaters that have little lint balls on them and shit. Our shoes aren't the best shoes. We're the poor black kids from the movie. We're getting there. We're the most talented. We're crushing every single time.

People began to—and these conversations were every Saturday. This debate coach dedicated his time every Saturday. That goes back to organized activity where my parents didn't want me in the hood. I'm debating every Saturday. Then they give you $100 to eat. As kids in high school, we're like, "We're getting $100."

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: We're saving up our $100 and not really eating the food. In the debate budget, you have to give the kids money to eat. We always had money, which was so awesome. *[Laughter]* Yeah. He was giving us black issues to talk about. When we did speeches, I remember as a freshman doing a speech about football teams who had these nicknames that demean Native American culture. He was teaching us these things. Then when I get to college, I'm going and working on reservations in South Dakota.
It's crazy how things—how you're growing towards something. The path is so carved out already. He was teaching me black art. Then one day, I'm on the bus. We're going to Saint Joseph's University in Pennsylvania. He's like, "Jasmine Mans, come up here." He's like, "Is William Mans your uncle?" I'm just like, "Yeah. William Mans is my uncle." He was like, "Me, William Mans, and Amiri Baraka, we were all in a black arts movement together. We were all getting arrested together." It was like the man who was coaching me as a debate coach was in the movement, and was in the movement with my uncle. My uncle was another old brittle guy, black guy who was a lawyer, went to Cornell University. He practiced law right downtown. He was Amiri Baraka's lawyer. He passed away, but before he passed away, every time I would see him, he would say, "Do a poem. Do a poem. Do a poem." To know that his peer, his friend was now coaching me, and then later that year, he passes away. Then years later, I remember the—years later. This is when I'm in high school. My uncle died when I was in high school. My speech and debate coach died when I was—the summer of my sophomore year. Then Amiri

Baraka, he dies, I think it was January 13th of—if it's 2017, maybe a couple of years. Was it 2015? 2014 maybe? He graduated when I was—he died when I was in college. He died when I was onstage. It was so interesting that my uncle was like, "Jasmine, do a poem. Spit a poem for me." Then my debate coach was actually for a year sitting in a room everyday crafting my poetry. Do it over. Do it again. Run it five times. Do it again. Then Saturdays making me perform and compete against people and humbly lose if I lost. Then Amiri Baraka, I didn't get to study under him, but when he passed away, I was onstage. I was a poet by then. It was like to know that these Newark men instilled so much creatively in me and trained me and kept me on my toes and was making a poet out of me, an artist out of me. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Wow. That's an amazing, amazing story.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: It's like they almost crafted your art through you.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What schools did you attend here?

Jasmine Mans: Man.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I went to Saint Rose of Lima Elementary School, which was a Catholic school. I guess I contextualize a lot of religious things at a young age. Then I went to Arts High School, which is the first performing arts high school in the country, which is down here. I didn't get in at first. I didn't get in. It was the only school I applied to. My mother said, "I can't

afford"—my mother said—she was like, "I can't afford Catholic school." my parents couldn't afford Catholic school anymore. **[00:25:00]** They were like, "You guys have to try to get into good public schools." There were three really, really good public schools. I knew I wasn't academically brilliant. But I knew I was creative, and I knew I wanted to be creative. I applied to Arts High School for drama. They did not accept me. I was broken about that. I was like, "Wow." I always felt really guilty about making my parents struggle or them having to pay a lot of bills or whatever. My uncle was like, "I'm gonna get you in." My uncle was like, "You need her in here," and he convinced the people to accept me. Then I was accepted. They were like, "You can't be drama. You have to be TV production."

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I really wanted to be drama. That's why I'm on a speech and debate team. I need someone to see me. I'm going to Arts High School. Literally hands down, I was in everything. I was doing everything. People didn't know what I majored in. They just thought I did everything. I was everywhere. Then won the drama—I won a $20,000 drama scholarship *[laughter]* to go to University of Wisconsin.

Lorna Ebner: That's so funny.

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Yeah. "I do TV production here, but I'm getting a drama scholarship."

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, and so those are—yeah. I went to Arts High School. Then I graduated Arts. When I was in Arts High School, I was doing a lot of debate. Then I was competing in poetry. New Jersey had the weakest poetry infrastructure for young people. New York City was right there. They would let me come to their workshops. I would literally shake every jean jacket in the house for change so I could get money for a MetroCard to go to New York to take my poetry classes. Then to feel cool with the New York City kids. They got to go on the train. They got to go to Burger King after school. I couldn't do any of that shit. *[Laughter]* I couldn't do anything. Then they were so expressive. You were learning self-expression and what it meant to use your voice. What were you doing with your voice?

I was taking these poetry classes in New York City. Then wanting to compete for the New York City poetry team. One of my mentors said they had a collaborative partnership with the University of Wisconsin. My poetry organization. My mentor said, "Apply. Just see what happens." At the time, I think the GPA for UW was 3.6. I was just like, "Whoa. I don't have a 3.6 GPA. I'm not gonna get into this school. It's a white school." It was just like, "Why would I get into this school? Why? Then why would I go? What girl from Newark with a"—I think I was the only girl from Newark. *[Laughter]* Who would go to University of Wisconsin? Who from the East Coast would leave the East Coast and go to Wisconsin? Then I was so sure I was going to Penn State or Syracuse. I wanted to go to a big school with a lot of spirit that had a bunch of majors that I could choose from that was close to home but far enough away. I was very simplistic about what I wanted. I got into Penn State. I got into Syracuse, and then I got into the University of Wisconsin. The University of Wisconsin said that, "We'll pay for absolutely everything." Then I had the $20,000 scholarship. It was all about money at one point. It was like, "I know that my mom and my dad don't have to worry about anything if I took this school." I think my dad one day only had to pay a $211 light bill because I was just negligent. I was like, "If I take this school, my parents

don’t have to struggle, and . They would let me be an artist.” I just had this—the wish was completely false. You’re not going to college and being some happy-go-lucky artist. I was like, “I can do art! My parents don’t have to struggle. When? I’m going.” I went to the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I absolutely became an artist. I absolutely took incredible classes. Yeah, it was incredible.

It was interesting being this black girl from Newark going to this white school in Wisconsin for five years. The entitlement that I came home with. I remember being in Newark just recently. **[00:30:00]** Maybe a month ago. I got on a bus at 9:00 a.m. This guy gets on the bus with this loud-ass speaker. I tell him—I ask him if he can turn it down. Now the thing is, if someone’s selfish enough to come onto a public space playing music that loud, they’re not gonna be selfless enough to turn the music down. However, me, I guess feeling a sense of entitlement to just peace in a city, I say, “Hey, can you turn that down?” He was just like, “You’re not from here, are you? You don’t know that I’ll kill you, do you? You don’t”—was saying it in a way and aggressively enough that completely frightened me. I ran off the bus crying. I just had this panic attack.

I remember this old black woman on the bus, too, lifted up her head and was just like, “Sweetheart, you’re not from here. Just turn around.” I thought when she looked at me, that she was gonna give me this sense of peace, this sense of mother-daughter, “It’s okay. You’re safe.” This sense of safety. She just laughed at me, too. It was like—and I realized that entitlement that I came back to my city with of—you want things to be peaceful and perfect, and you want to be able to negotiate your way. You’ve come from a space where you think that you can negotiate your way and that you can talk your way, and that if you’re right, the right things will prevail. That’s not the truth. There are things that I got used to. In Wisconsin, I could walk home at 4:00 a.m. in the morning and not think about my safety. I’ve never thought about, “Will I get hurt?” There are other things. There are things that I struggle with coming back from this

place, Wisconsin. Madison, Wisconsin. Coming back home from Newark and being like, “Whoa. You can’t act like that.” Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What role, if any, has religion played in your life?

Jasmine Mans: Man.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I’ve always seen the art of religion. I think that that was the first thing that attracted me to religion. Was the way words were sculpted. Then I used religion as a way of rebellion. I remember Father Bob—when you reached eighth grade, the nuns no longer taught you. The priest taught you. I took that as the opportunity to ask Father Bob the most outlandish questions.

Lorna Ebner: Do you remember any of them?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. I asked, “What color was Jesus?”

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: He was a white man. He said, “He’s darker than me and lighter than you.”

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: That’s what he told me!

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: I remember asking that, and I remember his answer. This is not—I don’t know if it’s funny actually, but the crazy thing is a year ago he fell off a cliff and died. That’s crazy.

Lorna Ebner: It's ironic. Yeah.

Jasmine Mans: It's so ironic. It's like news articles about it. Yeah. I'm sorry. Where were we?

Lorna Ebner: About religion.

Jasmine Mans: Oh, religion. I remember it was a space of rebellion. I remember going to church every Sunday because I thought that that was the good thing to do, even as a little girl. My parents didn't go to church, so I went with my neighbors, because my best friend went to church. I just felt that being in church was a good thing. I always wanted to pray. I always said my prayer. I always wanted—I always had this relationship where you can talk to God. You can talk to God. I never felt like I couldn't talk to God. I've never been afraid to pray. I guess because in elementary school, we were saying the Hail Mary and saying the Lord's Prayer and *[laughter]* five different other prayers. Then song prayers. *[Laughter]* There was always prayer.

Then I realized in my work that as you develop catalogues of work, you realize that, oh, you reference God here. You reference Jesus here. You reference wings here. You realize—I've realized how much I've referenced God or heaven or hell in my work. I went to a Methodist Church, a Catholic school my family's Baptist. I have a lot of strict Hebrew Israelites in my family as well. I've always found religion as something intriguing. **[00:35:00]** Then when a lot of people ask me, "As an artist, how do you navigate being queer and religion and your faith? Because you seem like you still have a strong faith? You're still queer." I never thought that they went against each other. In my relationship with God, I never thought that God was telling me that these things were like water and oil. It was just everyone else who did it. When I met people who I fell in love with, I felt like God brought me to those people. It's just I

feel like it's so weird looking at these people. It's not weird. I do feel sad for people who struggle with, "Oh, I don't think that God accepts me as who I am," because I always feel like God loves me. I've always felt like God loved me. I'm lucky for that. I know that that's a lot of grace and mercy. I've always felt like God loved me, even when I was coming out, even when my parents said things to me. I always knew. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What's your earliest memory of Newark?

Jasmine Mans: Oh, man. My earliest memory of Newark.

Lorna Ebner: Yeah, 'cause you were born here. Right? *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: Right.

[Pause 00:36:24 - 00:36:32]

Jasmine Mans: I want to mention technology. I remember when the first time I saw Google Maps and you could see your house. Then I remember how I saw Newark develop by how the baseball field across the street from our house developed. It was this shitty baseball field with wooden bleachers that splintered your butt. Then it became steel bleachers. Then just recently they put this huge sign that says, "We are Newark." I see how we have this recreation center, so I see as the time changes, things are developed differently and better. I don't know my earliest memory. That's such an interesting question. My parents and my uncle and my aunt, they work for shelters. Some of my Newark memories are being in the shelter because my parents couldn't afford a babysitter. Whitney Houston would give toys to our shelter. My memories are seeing Whitney Houston give PlayStations and shit to poor kids.

Lorna Ebner: Such an interesting early memory to have of Newark.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, and so that's some of my earliest memories of Newark.

Lorna Ebner: How has Newark changed since then? You already talked about the baseball field. Are there other aspects of the city or your neighborhood that have just drastically changed as you've grown up?

Jasmine Mans: I've seen a lot of people sell their houses. I've seen—I went from knowing my neighbors to not knowing my neighbors to knowing my neighbors to not speaking to my neighbors. It's weird, and I feel a little bit bad about it. I'll wake up, go outside, leave the house, and don't speak to the people outside. That's weird for me. That's something. I wish more people, and I wish we encouraged more people to own their homes. I feel like when the city rendered itself more dangerous or when we created this frame of danger, because it's how you promote and advertise and frame things. When we framed the city as a dangerous place, people started selling their homes. I've seen people who stay in a house for six months and then leave after six months. I've seen people who don't know the value. If you own your home, you're gonna pick up the trash in front of it, 'cause it's yours. If it's not necessarily yours, if you think it's temporary, you're not gonna treat it the same. Then I don't know if Newark has changed, or if I just grew up. It's like when you're a kid, there are things you just don't see. I'm like, "Ah, this was always here. I just never saw it."

I'm sure my speech and debate coach who passed away when I was a sophomore in college wrote in his album—he had a poetry album about how we're bringing the devils to Newark. It was a poem about how the devil is coming to Newark. It was a metaphor about the Devil's stadium. This first form of gentrification that we saw when they were building this building that no one knew what it was gonna look like. It became this Prudential Center that Justin Bieber comes to, that all of these artists come to. It's facing the city. It doesn't face us. **[00:40:00]** It doesn't face Newarkers. It faces—and so it's easy to bring people in from the City,

have them go to the Prudential. In from the City, go to Prudential Center, back to the City without ever navigating the people. Then do Newark kids play hockey? Are there hockey camps for Newark kids? Are there hockey teams in any of the Newark public schools? Absolutely not. It was just like you believe that it has something to do with space.

Then so it's just like that's how—that's the first time I saw Newark or heard of change in Newark or thought of gentrification is when he said, "We're bringing the devils to Newark." That play on words as the devil is coming to Newark and this being a wave of gentrification. Then just the renovations here of what happens when this space that we're sitting in that I'm proud to be a part of and to see, "Oh my gosh. I can say let's have an interview here and be proud of a place." Then but what happens when all of this is white mothers and children. They want a sense of protection and security. They lock all the doors. They say, "You can't come in this space anymore." What happens when none of this downtown area is a place that we can navigate as people of color?

What I've seen, I guess how I've seen the city change is these hints of gentrification. Not gentrification but infrastructure that we may not be able to afford. I was hanging out with a friend from Long Beach. He was like, "Jas, just get a storefront and open your own shop," 'cause he has his own shop in Long Beach. His rent is $800. To pay $800 to run the store, you look how many chances you can take as a young person, where it's just like, "I wanna try something." You may end up in a little debt, but you tried something. I guess a lot of us want to know can we test our dreams here? Are we gonna be able to—can we test out families here? The families that we always wanted to have and the places that we always wanted to have them. Can we get that chance to test it out here? We all have that question. I've seen Newark change by seeing—but then I'm sure when my dad was coming up or when my mother was coming up, they saw something that made them say, "Oh, wow. Do I belong here?" Yeah. Then I'm always—always wanting to feel confident. "No. This is yours. Treat it like it's yours."

Lorna Ebner: What do you like about living in Newark?

Jasmine Mans: Man, I feel like it is a place that can be my oyster that I can test out my dreams here. I'm testing them now. To be continued.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I still feel like this place is mine in a bigger way, where it's just like, I can leave an imprint on my city. I can change something, and I can leave and that thing will still be here. For the first time, I remember the goal was to get out of Newark, go to a good school, get a good enough education to get a great job so that you can buy a house not in Newark. *[Laughter]* Now, I'm like, "I want to have a loft, an art loft, in my hood and be this thriving young black woman in my city and gain wealth and save money and buy property and say, 'I own a piece of this.'" Then I get intimidated and nervous. "Would I be able to afford this? Can that dream that I have of wanting and owning." That's one thing that black people don't have. We don't own. We don't have ownership. That dream is mine. It's like, "Will I be afforded that here?" Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby places or cities?

Jasmine Mans: I travel a lot. That's my job. Every time I go to the airport, I think about how it's angled to New York City. All of the promotion in the Newark airport is, "Welcome to New York City. I love New York City." As a Newarker, that makes me sad. Then also I'll get in an Uber, and because it's an international airport, a lot of the people are going to a suburb an hour away or they're going into Manhattan. I'll get an Uber to go home, which is ten minutes away, and they'll call and they'll be like, "Where you going?" **[00:45:00]** I'll say I'm going somewhere in Newark, and they'll

cancel the ride, because it's too close. They want to be able to go into New York City.

Lorna Ebner: It's too close?

Jasmine Mans: Then even this place here is—they're like, 20 minutes away from New York. You start to feel uneasy, 'cause is this for Newark people? Is it just for people who—

Lorna Ebner: Commuters.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. Commuters. People who want a cheaper New York City. Who want a more subtle New York City. That's what's frustrating. Now the question is will New Yorkers—will white families actually live here? It's one thing to work here and to get your latte here. Will they live here? To be continued. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: What places in Newark do you associate with the LGBTQ community?

Jasmine Mans: Man.

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: No, it's so interesting. I have a story to tell. I could tell you a story, but none. I think that the art spaces are the safest of—there's an art show. There's a poetry show. There's so many galleries here. Oh, there's a gallery exhibition. Those are the most welcoming spaces I've been in. There aren't many liquor licenses downtown. When you want to go to the bar, you end up going to one of two bars. There are no queer bars, and as a queer woman, you know the uneasy—I know the uneasiness of being around—amongst men and being with my girlfriend and not feeling comfortable. I don't think that there are too many queer spaces in Newark.

Recently I was on a date on Valentine's Day. We went to a diner. Me and my girlfriend kissed at the diner, and the manager said, "This is a family restaurant." I go up to him, and I say, "Sir, what do you mean by that?" That by this point, I've already spent $150 in alcohol and brunch food. "What do you mean by that, sir?" "You've had too many drinks. It's time for you to go." Then a second later, a police officer is behind me. It was just like, "Wow."

You see easily the criminalization of the black body. Then the intersection of being a black woman and being queer, where just like, "You're queer. I don't want you here. Then you're black, so I can easily frame you as a troublemaker. I can frame you as aggressive." I look at my bill. I look at my bill the next day, and I'm just like, I spent $150 at a place I got kicked out of. Absolutely— I just go crazy. I call back, and I want to speak to the manager. I wanted to talk to him, like some reconciliation. His attitude was, "One, I don't give a fuck. If you wanna take me to court, it's fine." He's like—this is where it gets interesting. He was like, "And the reason you got kicked out is because you were in the bathroom having sex, and you hit our waiter, and you were making a scene." These are the things that you can implicate about—if you're talking about queer people, you can implicate this hypersexuality when you're talking about—

Lorna Ebner: Mm-hmm. That's really common.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. When you're talking about black women, you can implicate this aggression. Then because I had alcohol on my tab, absolutely I was doing all of these things. All of the above. Now I'm realizing, "Oh, wow. How do you defend yourself? How do you defend yourself?" The place has cameras, so I was like, "I'm gonna sue you, and I want you to save your camera footage," which they probably didn't. It was just so interesting seeing this intersection. Then thinking to myself, "How do I protect the woman I'm with? How— If we're both 150 pounds, 5 foot 4, feminine women, how do you protect?" Because you would never walk up to a man

and a woman and say, “You kissed. Leave.” You would never do that. It’s so interesting. I’ve realized just things that don’t ever happen to me if I’m just with a guy. Nothing ever happens, but you get the most attention when you’re with a woman. I just remembered getting in the Uber leaving that restaurant and just crying. Like, “Why are we treated like this?” **[00:50:00]** There are not a lot of—there are no queer places here. There are events that are awesome and that I feel incredibly safe at. I’ve been hanging out at this bar a lot. It’s just like I have a bar that I feel comfortable in.

Lorna Ebner: Which bar is it?

Jasmine Mans: The Kilkenny’s, up the street, which is just a random bar that’s a—yeah, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: *[Cross Talk 00:50:25]*.

Jasmine Mans: It’s like we’ve become regulars there. We’re comfortable. It makes me feel good to know that no one’s going to treat me like crap. Yeah. Just the intersection of being a black woman, being in the hood, and then being with another woman. Then questioning how do I protect myself, and how do I keep her protected when I’m at a party and people are drunk. I carry mace on me everywhere I go now. I never did that before. It wasn’t until this year that I started doing that. I always think, and it sounds bad, but I always think to myself, “What on me can I make a weapon if I needed to make a weapon?” Whether it’s a pen, whether it’s a safety pin, whether it’s my keys.

Lorna Ebner: Your keys.

Jasmine Mans: Well, yeah. What can I make a weapon out of immediately if I needed to protect myself? It’s scary. Yeah, because there is a sense of you never

think of the sense of— For my birthday actually *[laughter],* we were out in New York. It was me and my girlfriend, and it was another friend. We were a group of three women. We wanted to be with each other. *[Laughter]* We were out with each other. We did not want to other—we didn't want outside attention. A guy walks up to us. He's like, and we're like, "Oh, we actually just wanted to hang out with each other." In this moment, I was like, "You can't offend him, because you don't want him to attack you. He might be drunk. Don't offend this man. You don't want him near you, so you have to get him away."

It's like, I had to—there's this level of, "Don't make him feel insecure. Don't offend him, but get him away from you, but make—just let him not call you a name." He's like, "Don't you want a man? Don't you want?" He thought that we needed him. That we were supposed to—and it was so mind-blowing. Like, "Oh my gosh. You thought we wanted you here." It's that thing where it's just like, when you come—when you make a guy feel insecure or unwanted in a public space or when he's drunk, you're susceptible to getting attacked. That's always scary. Then you're thinking, "I just wanted to get drunk." You can't get drunk and have a good time and just have the most fun, because you have to be on alert. Yeah. It's—

Lorna Ebner: It's horrible that you have to maintain their masculinity when you're the one that's in danger. You're the one that feels scared.

Jasmine Mans: Right! It's mind-boggling. I remember thinking that, "Oh my gosh. You can't." Then being scared. I'm like, "Did we"— 'cause I didn't want anything bad to happen to us. It's like, at the end of the day, I can't fight a guy. I can mace one, but I can't fight one. *[Laughter]* It's always incredibly scary to the point where I thought, well, every time we go out, maybe it should be a double date with a straight couple. Maybe we should get security. I started looking up security officers. Bodyguards who are $20 an hour. It's just like, these are the precautions that you have to take, because you don't want someone to grab your girlfriend. You can't do

anything about it. That would never happen if a straight couple was walking down the street. It's like I look at my little brother and his girlfriend. My brother's a six foot two football player. There is no man who would ever grab his girlfriend. It's like, you can go have a dinner and just not think of all of these things, but not as a lesbian couple. Absolutely not.

Lorna Ebner: How would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Jasmine Mans: I often say queer, but I can say that I'm a lesbian woman of color.

Lorna Ebner: How did you first learn about the existence of LGBTQ people?

Jasmine Mans: I guess we have to say TV. **[00:55:00]** I guess when I was growing up, TV became gayer and gayer. You were able to identify. Then I went to a performing arts high school, so everybody in school is gay. Then you saw like, "Holy crap. There are different kids of lesbians. There are girls who dress"—or there are different kids of women. There are girls who dress like boy, or there are girls who never wear cleavage, or there are girls who never wear tight pants. This girl is straight, but she's gonna wear basketball shorts all four years of high school. I saw these different layers of women, 'cause I went to Catholic school, so we only wore a uniform. It was just like—and it's so interesting how religion frames femininity and masculinity. It was just like no matter what, girls wore dresses and skirts. No matter what, boys wore pants and ties.

Then I went to a school where you can wear anything. Now it's like, I saw queerness on television, but then I saw it in school, where it was just like, "Wow. All of these different people"—I saw gay boys. I saw boys who were dancers. I saw gay boys who were dancers. I saw boys who were boyfriends. In high school, I got to see a lot of it. Then in college, it's just like, I was in Wisconsin, and I was in a dorm. There was no—I could do

whatever I wanted to do. Then I remember when I first started talking to a girl in college. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: How do the people in your life become aware of that aspect of your identity?

Jasmine Mans: Honestly, it happened just like this.

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: I remember going away to college and before I left for school, I had a party and invited all of my friends to my house. We had pizza. One of my poetry friends was coming over, who I thought I liked, but I didn't know what being gay was. I didn't know what being gay was inside of me.

Lorna Ebner: How old were you at this point?

Jasmine Mans: I was graduating from high school, so maybe 18. Just turned 18. She came to my house. All of my friends—at this point everyone left, but all of the girls spent the night. Maybe I had five of my girlfriends there. They were all sleeping on the floor. This girl comes, and we're all watching movies. She comes, and she lays on my bed while we're watching a movie. She is like, running her finger down my spine. I was like, "Oh my gosh." At this point, I had a boyfriend. That feeling was a feeling I'd never had before. I kissed boys. I touched a penis. That feeling *[laughter]* was unlike anything else. Then my friends look up, and was like, Mhmm-mhmm-mhmm. After she leaves, they're all rise up and was like, mhmm-mhmm-mhmmm. You can't—and it was something that I was proud I did, and it was something that they just all teased me about.

Then when I liked my—the girl that became my first girlfriend, when I realized that I liked her, I called home, and I said, "Mom, I like someone. It's a girl." She said, "If you're gonna date girls, that's on you." I'm like—

[laughter]. My father was like, “Jasmine, you need to be focusing on your studies and not thinking”— Just like a typical dumb unnurturing father perspective. “Focus on your studies and not”—it would be a couple months before I went home for winter break.

The girl lived in Jersey, and so I remember saying—I was serious, and they thought it was a joke. It was like, “Well, I’m going to go out with this girl.” Then my mother was like, “No, I wanna see her. Dah dah dah.” The girl was just like, “Okay. I’ll come meet your mom.” She comes to meet my mom. Then my mother is like, “I don’t like her.” My mother just became this detriment. To this day, if you let her talk, she’ll be like, “It wasn’t the fact that you were gay. It was just something about her.” I remember just my mom being just as harmful. My dad being very silent. He never was threatening, but he always just—“You’re not with that girl, are you?”

Yeah. Neither one of them were helpful. Neither one of them had the right words. They still don’t. They’re just incredibly accepting. My dad wakes up, and he’s like, “Jasmine,” ‘cause I live on the third floor of my house and was like, “Jasmine, tell your girlfriend to leave her keys downstairs, and I’ll move her car, because she doesn’t park on the right side of the street during street cleaning day.” **[01:00:00]**

It’s just like, I think they’ve accepted the fact that, no, I am gay. I do come from a house of not-good communicators. It’s just like they would never kick me out. I’ve seen horror stories of some of my friends who came out. I never said I came out, ‘cause the first time I liked a girl, I called and told everybody. This is like, I didn’t hide it for a year and then decide—the moment I called my parents, I think I called them before I even started really dating her, before I even actually knew I was gay. That was when I was like, “You know what? I should’ve kept it a secret. I should’ve waited, because it was just like, I wasn’t even—but it was true. I do like girls. I was gay. *[Laughter]* She would’ve became my girlfriend. Yeah. Then everybody else, like my best, best friend in the whole world was already gay and kind of dressed like a boy. It was just like, I had gay

people in my life. I didn't feel comfortable in my house. I remember just always locking myself in my room, locking us in my room. Wanting to be with her, but being terrified of my parents. I just remember my parents keeping a close eye on me. My mom would come up to my room and knock on my door for no reason. Yeah.

Then I remember my grandmother saying, "I don't care what you are, because you are mine." She said that in a car. I remember the exact place. It's crazy, because when people say things that change your life, you remember exactly where you were, how you felt, what everything smelled like. Yeah. I think it was because my grandmother's best friend was queer. She died, and she wasn't married. My grandmother, I think more than anything, wants me to find love. I'm sure my grandmother having a queer best friend and growing up in the time that she grew up in wasn't the easiest, where you absolutely have to hide. I think my grandmother doesn't want me to hide, wants me to have love, wants me to have children, wants me to do all of those things that I dream of. Yeah.

I remember the harshness of being—the harshness of my house and how everything felt cold and the depression, and then people thinking that you can't be depressed because you're young and you don't pay no bills. *[Laughter]* You're in college. What are you depressed about? I remember that summer, the summer that I came out, I got an internship for the New York Knicks. I worked in the community relations department for the Knicks and the Liberty. I'm going to Madison Square Garden every day. I got an Access Pass. I can run concerts if I wanted to. I got all of this access and this cool-ass job.

I cried every single day. I remember saving my money, 'cause working for the Knicks, and you're only getting paid maybe $1,000 for the summer or $1,500 or whatever. I remember only buying a slice of pizza and a drink every day and not being able to get through that pizza. I remember every day challenging myself to get through the pizza and not be able to get through the pizza. Knowing that that was depression. Cutting my hair off 'cause you want to change, and then freaking the fuck out because you cut

all your hair off. I did that. It was just like, but I remember what it was and what it felt like. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Where were your brothers in all of this? How did they react?

Jasmine Mans: The interesting thing is, I blame my parents at this stage in my life for this. *[Laughter]* We weren't good communicators. Me and my brothers got to a point where we didn't talk to each other. All my life I grew up with my brothers not speaking to them. Living with them, but we didn't talk. It wasn't until college that me and my little brother started talking. It's the story of your little brother just moves in with you, and you start building a relationship with him, but you never lived with him. It's like I lived with him, and we never had a relationship. When it came to me and my identity, they weren't a part of that. They didn't have an opinion. They didn't say anything. They didn't come to my counsel. They were silent. It's so funny, 'cause I watched my little brother, who's had a girlfriend all of childhood. **[01:05:00]** She would come over a lot.

I remember maybe sophomore year I was—it was high school, and she was always there. I've watched him not be able to have a relationship or figure out sexuality, and then them consistently—so juxtaposing me being a gay woman to my brother being a straight man, and him having this girlfriend and knowing after a certain amount of years, he'll marry her. Them both getting through college together, and all of these things that it's easy for straight people to decide and do. Then me not knowing and navigating that. Being gay means different things.

At a certain age if you're gay, it's gonna be like having a secret. Or being someone secret. Then after a certain amount of years, it's gonna be, "Well, now, let me figure out what it feels like to actually be free." It's like, "You're 25. I'm fucking 25 years old. Now I can be normal, where people are being normal since they were 18." *[Laughter]* Now I'm thinking about the idea of, okay. Well, I wanna live my life, and I wanna have a partner. All of these, and it's so different. Looking at my brother and his girlfriend

and just this fine path that they were able to create. Not saying that all straight people can do it. They were able to create this path, and then my path is like—it's just this mess.

Lorna Ebner: Yeah. All this pressure of social norms are right there in front of you for you to see.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Have you found community or support from other people in Newark?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. I think—well, the thing is honestly, I haven't been here for too long, 'cause I graduated in 2015—'14. I'm sorry. Right. *[Laughter]* I graduated in 2014. It's 2017. Then as an artist, I just—I tour. I travel out of the state maybe once or twice a week. I don't get to be a part like I wanna be a part. I don't get to be a local community member, even though I know when I fly home, I can't get an Uber to my house. *[Laughter]* I know I live here, but it's hard to be local. It's hard to be consistent. I feel guilty sometimes because people are like, "I want you to be a part of this." I'm just like, "I actually can't, 'cause I'm committed to this world vision of being a poet. This national, international idea."

I know that there are places on this street where I can hold my girlfriend's hand. We were joking about it, 'cause I spent every day of this week on this street doing different things, meeting at different locations. Being on the street, because I felt comfortable. I felt like I could be an artist. I feel like I can be gay. I feel like there's community. I do feel like there is a sense of home in the creative community. I didn't go to school here, so I don't know what it's like. I don't know what the Rutgers or the college community is like.

I do see communities that I know that I can—but then it gets old, right? Everybody gets tired of something. In New York City, I can explore a different gay club probably every week, whereas there are no gay clubs

here. I can explore a different bar, a different probably friendly bar. That's not here. You're always waiting for an event, or you're always waiting for someone to say, "Let's do this before you do anything." You realize you're going to the same seven or five locations. It gets annoying. You wanna—but then it's like, is the city my oyster? Can I create here? Can I build the location? Can I build the space? Yeah. It's not many spaces. You end up going to the same spaces. You end up waiting and yearning for those spaces, like I want to create them. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: That's fantastic. Can we talk about your poetry a little bit?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. *[Laughter]*

Lorna Ebner: It's amazing. Absolutely life-changing.

Jasmine Mans: I try.

Lorna Ebner: What inspires you?

Jasmine Mans: Man, everything and nothing at the same time. My friend tells me that to be a craftsman is to be able to draw inspiration from things. I'm sitting on a bench. What does this bench represent? Then being able to think about what's—and then I think to paraphrase. Right? Langston Hughes just, "The artist must do what he wants, but then he must do what he must." Then it becomes this responsibility of you can't just be out here talking about fucking butterflies when there are black boys dying or when there are queer women who are discriminated against. **[01:10:00]** It's this level of what inspires me is I want to be inspired by my day-to-day. But then I also want to be responsible. Yeah. It goes both ways. There are things that I'm in love with. I'm in love with my people. I'm in love with things. Art. I'm in love with women. Yeah. Then being able to not just be inspired, because what inspires me isn't what people fall in love with. It's actually

the execution. It's just like, yeah. Being inspired. I'm always inspired. I'm inspired all the time. I execute about 20 percent of that. I'm at a point where I'm just like, "Yeah. You're inspired, but what can that create?" Just the artist, everybody's inspired, but the artist is the creator. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: In a couple of different articles I read, they always say that your poetry has teeth to it, which is so true watching it—

Jasmine Mans: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: - which is amazing. Such amazing performances. Speaking to you right now just one-on-one as an interview, you have such a soothing, calm voice.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. It's so funny!

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: I get this every time, where just like, "You look mean, or you have this intimidating—this intense thing. Then you're soft, and you're nice."

Lorna Ebner: *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: I'm funny at times. Yeah. I get that a lot. I get that a lot. I guess it's like I've always had this aggressive presence because just even I think black art comes out of this state of chaos, riot, and aggression. There's always this grrrrr to me. Then in debate, you learn how to manipulate the voice. Then me trying to be a fake drama major in high school, you learn these different levels of there are things that the voice can do. There are ways that you can make people feel. Applying that to poetry. I think that that's my gift that I see that other poets don't have. I'm just like, people ask me all the time, "What makes you different or what makes you better? Why

are you more successful than that poet?" It's not that I'm a better writer than them. It's that I think I speak better than them. That I know the levels. That it's not the—the writing isn't just the poem, but the execution. That it's all a poem. I was working on coffee quote mugs where I put my quotes on coffee mugs. I wrote today. I said, "It's not about putting poetry on things, but about making everything a poem."

Lorna Ebner: That's beautiful.

Jasmine Mans: Thank you.

[Laughter]

Jasmine Mans: It's so poetic, right? It's like I'm at this point where I'm just like—how do you make everything a poem? I think with me, and I've seen my peers where they're just like, "I wrote a poem, and my poem is good." You didn't execute. You're not the poem. I think that that's the difference—is that when I walk into a space, I want my presence to project the poem. I want my demeanor to project the poem. That's what I'm always working on. That's what the poets I like do.

Lorna Ebner: You've had so many amazing experiences being an artist. You were Glamour's Top Ten Most Influential College Students in 2012. I think I saw that you were able to do a tour in London. You've worked with all these different artists. Your YouTube videos have hundreds of thousands of hits. What do you think has been the most rewarding?

[Pause 01:13:41 – 01:13:51]

Jasmine Mans: Last summer I was called to Virginia to coach some young poets. It was this thing that tugged on my heart, because I was coached. That's why I am who I am, because of that speech and debate coach, because of that woman who gave me the autobiography of the Assata. Because of that

mentor in New York who said apply to the university. It was these people, these little people. To be asked to be someone's coach. I don't know if you ever played a sport—

Lorna Ebner: Yeah.

Jasmine Mans: It's like the coach is the person who can change your life or you'll hate them. When I was asked to be a coach, not only was I asked to be a coach, but I was asked to go to Virginia and to stay there and to coach them. I'm nervous. I'm just, one—and then it's for the International Poetry Festival. Not only am I coaching them, but it's just like now your reputation is on the line, because people are gonna ask, "Is she a good poet? Can she teach people to be good poets?" **[01:15:00]** It's now, "Can I make them good?" Then I'm only given a month. I was on teams, right? Then it's like some of the best poets from around the country coach some of which will be the best young poets from around the country. You're not just going to the—. It's like you're going to the national basketball conference, where it's like you're having the best teams of the best coaches.

It was just like I felt like everything was on the line. It was my reputation. Personally, for me, I felt like it was my reputation of, I want to prove that, not only can I be a good poet, but I can make young people into good poets. Then I'm a competitor. I want to win. I don't do anything to not win. I win. *[Laughter]* Then I get to Virginia. These kids have no infrastructure or literary writing. Then you see deeply what levels young people are at academically at some of these public schools where I walked in and my students did not know what a personification poem was. I remember my freshman year in my English class being taught the different types of poems. Being able to not only say, "Now I'm not just being a poetry coach, but there's a level of English efficiency that we have to reach in order to even accomplish our goals."

It was a month of hard—and then there's no infrastructure, so there's no reason to respect this. It was just like how do you build—I've always

respected poetry, because I guess I was always competing, or I was always in front of a coach who was immensely older than me. It was like, how do you gain a respect for poetry? Even when you watch young boys. I watched my little brother play football across the street from our house. There's this respect that you have for your coach. Getting these kids to learn certain levels of English, and then to respect the art form. Then to memorize, then to write, then to express what they want to say, then to be good storytellers. Oh. It's just like, and the biggest goals is have them grow, instill things in them. Teaching them that if you fuck up, you still perform. I watch poets everyday. I go to open mics. I go places everyday. I watch people completely choke for about 20 seconds.

One thing I tell my students that, "You either end your poem, or you make something up, but the stories always there. That if you said—I promise you that if you're talking about your shoulders, you're either gonna talk about another body part or something on your shoulders, but everything leads—your knees are gonna lead into your calves. Your calves are gonna go to your feet. There's always a connection." I taught them not to choke. That was one of my biggest things. I taught them to do a flawless performance is to not give into your flaws. It's like when you create them to continue going.

I remember my student completely knocked the mic offstage during his performance. I'm talking about in front of 3,000 people, and he kept performing. All of his teammates knew his words, so they said them for him. It was because he was trained to do that. You're not trained to give the perfect performance, but you're trained to go beyond your flaws. I think that was the most rewarding thing. We took second place internationally.

Lorna Ebner: I was about to ask—

[Laughter]

Lorna Ebner: - how you guys did.

Jasmine Mans: We took second place.

Lorna Ebner: Wow. In a month's time.

Jasmine Mans: In 21 days. We made them, and then one of my students published her first book a couple months after that. It was just and it made me realize, I can do that for my city. If I can take some kids who never want anything, I can take some kids and make them great. It's not me making them great, but I think I've been trained to see what the discipline looks like. That no one ever thought that poetry would need discipline. People think that it's this cute journaling hobby, and that it doesn't come with a discipline. One thing that I've always been taught is to respect poetry. I guess it also becomes about the history. When you know poets got up during riots and did poems and did poems that changed the world or that every time *the Crisis* published a magazine that it always started with a poem. **[01:20:00]** When you realize the black history around poetry, you gotta be respectful of it. You gotta handle that with care. Then you become so humble to it where it's just like, "How do I do that? How do people respect my craft like that?" Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: How old were these students?

Jasmine Mans: They were about to be freshmen in college. They were between 15 and 18. That's how old. Fourteen and eighteen. I had a fourteen year old. A lot of 'em, yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Do you still keep in touch with any of them?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. Some, and the funny thing is they call me Coach Jasmine. It was like to have a title in someone's life, it's like, they don't see me as a friend. I have a level of respectability that makes me more responsible.

When I talk to them, it's to get them to another level. It's just like, they're not my friends. These are my babies. It's just like, you want them to grow. You wanna teach them the game. It's just like, one of my students called me. It's like, "Coach Jasmine, got something to tell you." He was thinking about taking—he was thinking about skipping a semester because of his health. I was like, "No, you take all online classes, and then if you have a struggle, you just get a tutor and have your tutor do the assignments with you." Then he did that, and then he also went back to school.

It was like, because he had a coach, he had a person. I have that person who's like, "Nah, you play the game this way." He was like, "Coach Jasmine, I'm gonna release an album, and I want to"—you know one of my students, he has my heart. He had to reach $500. He took little jars to barbershops and he left his jars there for two months. He got hella tips, and that's how he paid for it. Then he called all of these business owners who've been supporting him. He's like, "I'm a black man. I'm going to college. I'm a rapper, too." He's from Zimbabwe. He speaks Zulu fluently. We did a poem in English and in Zulu on the stage. He's like, "Yeah, Jasmine. I'm releasing an album, Coach Jas. I went to the business owners. I raised $5,000. They just gave me a bunch"—for his mix CD. *[Laughter]* He sounds brilliant.

It's like, "Whoa. I wanna tell you I love"—and then two of my students, they came. I was like, "Yeah. Get your parents to let you come on a Greyhound. I'll make sure I pick you guys up. You hang out for me for a week, a weekend." Then they're like, "We've never been to New York City." I took them to New York City for the first time. It was just like, they're gonna remember that.

Lorna Ebner: What did their faces look like? *[Laughter]*

Jasmine Mans: Yeah. Then they're just like—and then the funny thing is they're going into Forever 21, and they're buying a shirt. There's fucking Forever 21 everywhere. They're going to Forever 21 in New York City. We ate at

Friday's, but they're eating at Friday's in Times Square, and it was a life-changing experience for them. I remember one of my students didn't have enough money to pay to get on the train back because she just wanted to experience every single thing. It was just like giving them some of their first experiences.

I know some of the things that my mentors have done to me to bring me to another level, where it's just like I know one of my mentors taught me how to run a website. One of my mentors taught me how to publish a book. One of my mentors got me a five-year scholarship to college. Then so it's just like—then I remember some of my mentors seeing me more successful and not wanting me to be that successful. Or mentors that have to talk to you so that you know that you're younger than them. You're under them. I want—it's such a big responsibility to be so thoughtful and to be like, "How do I remain nurturing and not take anything away from them?" That's always my goal. To nurture them artistically and mentally and never take anything away, and make them more great. They need to be great. I think that was my biggest accomplishment. Then honestly they wanted to win. They won.

Not only did they win, but my biggest goal was—you know when you win by how many YouTube views you get. People will go crazy if they heard. Poets will absolutely be horrified if they heard me say that, cuz it's about the art. It's not about how many people who see it. It's just to see young kids who no one never met before, and they get—they have a poem that got 30,000 hits, it's because people thought that that poem was creative. That resonated. **[01:25:00]** It's about creating art that resonates to a people, that resonates with the masses. They did that. Not only did they place, but that their views, their videos are in this bigger portfolio.

It's just like you watch basketball all the time. You'll look at the highlights. You'll always remember certain highlights of when Jordan did this, or when Jordan was dunked on, or when LeBron did that. It's like you will always remember highlights. There are highlights that happen before I was born that I know of. There are highlights that Muhammad Ali

has, that we know of, but we never saw *[laughter]*—we may have never saw on television, but we know of. I can honestly say that their art, their work, their poems, are now gonna be in this bigger highlighted portfolio of performance poetry. I was a part of that. Not just even from everything from the Google Docs and writing a poem, but then how do we structure this. We did a poem. This is gonna be my biggest accomplishment. I'll send you the poem that's on YouTube.

Lorna Ebner: Oh.

Jasmine Mans: Before I was coaching, I heard this story about these girls, who—three black girls between the ages of 14 and 16. They steal a car. They go joy riding, but then the police find them. Then they're on a police chase in the middle of the night. They end up in a graveyard. They're in a police chase in a graveyard, and then they hit a pond, and before you know it, all of these girls are sinking in this pond. You hear the police officers like, "I'm not going in. I'm not going in the water. I'm not going in."

It was just a tragedy. That's also the criminalization of the black body, where it's just like, "They were already wrong. You don't need to save their lives. Their lives aren't worth saving." I tell my—I get the reports. I have my students talk about it and write about it. We're building up this story about these girls and what are they saying. What would these girls be saying if they're panicking? Then I ask them what is the car saying? Now we have someone writing from the perspective of a black girl drowning, but then a car that's sinking, too.

Then the girl—one of my students is like, "It's like a miscarriage. It's like someone dying inside of me." Then this car is just sinking. Then you ask yourself, "Well, how does this look onstage?" They have to be a car, right? *[Laughter]* This one girl who's the car and she's standing like this, and then there's one girl who's inside of her who is standing, steering the car. Then there was a moment where she turns the car, and even the car

goes. Then it's these thoughtful motions that they're not words, but the whole moment is poetic.

Then I'm thinking about my favorite song in the world, which is this Tracy Chapman song about, "You got a fast car, and I wanna go anywhere." The song—the poem starts off with them singing Tracy Chapman. "You got a fast car. I wanna go anywhere. Get me out of here. Let's make a deal." You see these 3,000 people in the audience, and it's just like, some of these kids are 14 and they never heard Tracy Chapman, but then there's a 60-year-old woman who knows that song. A 60-year-old queer woman who knows that song who's gonna be like, "Yo! This is mind-blowing!" Then just seeing these girls. Then I remember one day during rehearsal and us trying to figure this out. One of my students just having this complete attitude. I was like, "Bend your knees like the car." I made her stand like this for two minutes. I was like, "Act like you're drowning." I was like, "The least we can do is try to—we can't get anywhere near what these girls felt, but perform your heart out. Drown! Drown!" I watched her for two minutes just in rehearsal silently just crying and panicking. Bust the windows out the car. Get out the car. It's like just someone just standing behind her. It's like you could see her in this car.

There was this one moment where I was like—she was like, "The car is like this, and these are the windows." She was like, "The police were watching." When she says that, the girl looks out the window. Then her arm goes down. She's like, "The police were watching, and they didn't do anything." Then you see the window roll back up. It's these little moments that just—and then to see these little black kids who have never performed for more than 100 people, and now they're in front of 3,000 people.

[01:30:00] Everyone's watching them. They told the stories with their hearts, with their bodies, with their words.

Then the other poem we did, it was accomplishments of my life. I asked them. I heard this other girl in New York City. We actually dubbed it. I heard this girl in New York City. It was Harriet Tubman responding to

being on the $20 bill. Mind-blowing. I go to my students, and I say, "Listen to this poem, and I want you to write a poem about Harriet Tubman responding to being on the $20 bill." I said, "Someone's Harriet, but then someone's something else." It was this guy—a guy who made a brilliant idea, 'cause I saw this newscaster. There's this newscaster. Then there's Harriet Tubman. They're just juxtaposed having these two different conversations. I remember watching the news story. On the news story, it says, "The $20 bill is the most used bill. Why not put the woman on the most used bill?" It was just like, "Oh my god." They took the concept of this unaware man and this black woman, and then Harriet Tubman is just like, "What do you think dollar bills are made of? Cotton. Did my people pick the cotton, too?" She's saying all of these things. She's just going off. Then the transition. Then I remember I honestly was watching a speech and debate video. I watched these two kids transition. I was trying to figure out how do you transition from a newscaster to Harriet Tubman, these two girls, and so every time they transitioned from one voice to the next, someone would go [roaring]—and it became this start—this dark, eerie performance that everybody just started roaring form. It was impact—I was just sitting in the audience like, "Oh my god." It's crazy, 'cause when you—just like basketball, it's like you know the teams that you can win, the teams that you can beat, and the teams that you have no chance against. It was just like, I brought this team in that everyone—no one even heard of before. They changed the game up. No one was prepared to—no one had enough poems to beat them. *[Laughter]* It was the first time where I was the head coach. It was all me. It was me left alone with these six students. The strategy that I presented was the strategy that they went with.

The best thing I could do was think the smartest, and then believe that my strategy was smart. I went in there believing that my strategy was smart. Then it was. It was so fulfilling to know, "I know what I'm doing. Holy crap!" This wasn't just—I didn't fail these kids. I knew what I was doing. Then I gave them that, or together we gave each other that confidence.

They know that they can win something. They're not just here to take up space. Their voices are the most important voices. I think that they get—and even to see these kids, like they're young, and they're around, and they're at a poetry festival. They're all staying in the same dormitory. You see cool kids from Chicago who have their own style, their own hair. You see kids, girls, natural black girls. You see all these cool young kids. You're just like, "Am I cool? Are my clothes nice? Do I smell okay? Do the girls like me?" Then when they started winning, they became the cool kids. You saw their attitudes change. You saw them confident. It's just like, you saw one of the bigger boys who was a little larger than the other boys not concerned about, "Am I big?" It was like, "Naw, I'm Big Daddy. I'm the man."

You saw all of their confidence. Everybody shifted. It was just so beautiful to see them grow. I wanted them to know you're not here to take up space. You're here to win, and you can win. It was strategy. It wasn't, "Oh, they're the most talented people, so they're gonna win." It was like, "No. We're gonna tell a story that is provocative and important. Then we're gonna write well. Then we're gonna say things that people understand. Then we're gonna put the poems in our bodies."

That's what made them win, 'cause I can tell you—I can pick out 100 kids who can write better than them, **[01:35:00]** but it was like, none of them—but they had a package that was so undeniable that I invested in, that no one understood. Even the heads of the organization hated me, 'cause they didn't understand why everything else was so important. It was just like, "Have them write about their homes and their hoods. Do some self care." They didn't understand all of why they had to run laps, why breathing was important, why holding your—not losing a poetry book was important, why bringing your poetry book was important everyday. *[Laughter]* It was just like—it gave them another layer of confidence and value and respect for the craft that I'm happy about.

Lorna Ebner: Thank you so much for sharing that. That was fantastic.

Jasmine Mans: Yeah.

Lorna Ebner: Last question, do you have any advice for LGBTQ people of color in Newark?

Jasmine Mans: Yeah, man. One, I always feel like the biggest thing is that God doesn't want us to feel shame. That beyond anything. God doesn't want you to be ashamed, so I think pride is the perfect word, and is the most important thing. To be prideful of who you are. To be safe. We can't tell LGBTQ people to just defend themselves all the time or to jump into every chaotic moment, because sometimes it is safety over feeling triumphant. There are some moments where I felt weak because I chose my safety over my pride. It is okay to choose safety over pride. That Newark is not the liberal place that we want it to be yet, but we can work together and cautiously. And then to fight back. If you feel like you need to sue someone or you need to file a complaint to do those things, not only to get mad personally, but also to affect people's bottom lines. Write a Yelp article, write a letter to the mayor. I'm big on, "No. Fuck with them where it hurts."

Some people only care—establishments only care when you affect their money and their reputation. It's like it's about affecting people's money and their reputation. Embarrass them. I remember there was a bar that made me feel shitty every time I went in there. I made a post. About 200 people responded and was like, "Wow. I've been to this bar." Friends of mine was like, "Oh, I've boycotted that bar since you made that." Genuine friend. It was just like, "Make a stink about things that are harmful when it comes to establishments. When they choose safety, think about how you're gonna remain safe at all times, and that God doesn't believe in shame. If you love someone be proud in that."

It feels good to hold my girlfriend's hand and to be at a bar and at a park. I know what it feels like to be kicked out of a place, and then being like, "I don't know what I did wrong." To find safe spaces, and that's why

community is so important, because you have safe spaces. Just like I remember I had a birthday dinner. I was like, "You know what? I wanna have lesbian dinner parties and just have 25 cool lesbians and just joke and drink and dine and not be—be unconcerned." We deserve freedom.

It's just like, and then it's like being black is like, you don't feel freedom, 'cause you're always cautioned about your race. Then being gay is then there is this double-caution. Then living in the hood is a triple caution of safety. It was just like I understand the cautions and the fear, but always we must always seek freedom in whatever way. Whether that means having a community that you vibe with, having a coop that you eat with once a month, being a part of the art community. I have a residency with this art space, and I don't do art most of the time. I just want the community. I want the family. Always finding family. Finding a family that you can be completely free and truthful with. No one should be—there are places, of course, that we wear masks in. We're not liars. We're wearing a mask for safety. Always finding a place that you can take the mask off, 'cause if you don't ever take the masks off, it'll stick to your face, and it'll give you bad acne, and you're not who you are anymore. Finding a place where you can take your mask off.

I think that's my advice. Knowing that Newark is growing, and that we're all a part of this growth. We're a part of the growth in making sure the weeds, the bad things die, and then we're a part of the growth of if we want to see a queer café or if we want to see spaces that have more security, **[01:40:00]** or if we want to hold business owners responsible for having queer training, that we need to implicate those things. We are well within our right to do so. Yeah.

I've also realized that I've seen a lot of black leaders just talking about how the government or Barack Obama was prioritizing gay rights over black issues. Not being so caught up in the chaos of propaganda. There is no gay issue before black issue, because there are gay black people *[laughter]* who are like—even healthcare issues with my dad. My dad is a—he's a case manager. He was working with queer men. He was like, "I

need to get queer men tested. How do I do that?" He was asking me. It was just being thoughtful. Queer issues are black issues. When we say they're not, then that's why people get AIDS. That's why people leave the church. That's why people do drugs. If it's about preserving the health and the human, then you gotta respect these issues out of everywhere.
It's hard to be—I know it's so hard to be gay. I don't know. Maybe it's just—I don't know. I feel so blessed, because it's just like I never thought that God hated me. I never thought that I was in conflict. I remember one time I went to a christening for my friend's child. It was the day of Pride. The guy was like, "What's happening over there in New York, all of those people are gonna burn." I asked this man. I was like, "Can I speak to you privately?" I was like, "I'm a queer woman, and I didn't feel welcome, and I felt like the things you said"—I've always had this audacity in me to—

Jasmine Mans: - to give people a piece of—

Lorna Ebner: To call people out.

Jasmine Mans: To call people out and to give people a piece of my mind. That's my blessing, and I think that's my—and now today more than ever, my number one priority, especially in loving someone, is safety. I want to be safe and free. What does that mean? What does that mean if I tried—if I was to get harmed? Yeah. I remember just a couple weekends ago, I was in New York City. This guy started knocking on our window. I told my girlfriend, "He gives me a bad vibe." She rolls up the window. We see him knocking on other people's windows. As soon as he knocked on the next person's window, he started punching the person inside of the window. I'm just thinking, "What if that was our window? What would I have done? What could I have done if this man just started punching out my girlfriend?" Yeah, roll up the window, drive off, but it's so much trauma that it's just like, people don't think that you're causing someone trauma.

That they're going to have nightmares about that. They might have to go seek counseling for what you did. Yeah. Safety is a priority. Freedom is a priority. Living a shameless life and a prideful life are the most important things. That there is love. There is community. Nobody is alone. Nobody. There's happiness. There is happiness. Yes.

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Lorna Ebner: Thank you—

Jasmine Mans: Thank you.

Lorna Ebner: - so much for agreeing to do this.

Jasmine Mans: Thank you.

Lorna Ebner: This is June 16th, 2017. I am Lorna Ebner interviewing Jasmine Mans.

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