

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Amina Baraka

Interviewer: Kristyn Scorsone, Christina Strasburger, Whitney Strub, and Mi Hyun Yoon

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Location: Residence of Amina Baraka

Christina Strasburger: Today is Friday, March 2, 2018. The Queer Newark Oral History Project is here with Amina Baraka. As a public figure, we're not going to delve too much into personal biographical information. But we are going to treat today's interview as an opportunity to talk more about anything in particular in Newark and communities.

My name is Christina Strasburger. We're gonna go around and introduce ourselves.

Kristyn Scorsone: I'm Kristyn Scorsone.

Mi Hyun Yoon: Mi Hyun Yoon.

Whitney Strub: Whitney Strub.

Amina Baraka: Amina Baraka.

Christina Strasburger: Thank you so much for taking the time out to do this with us today. If we can start out with when and where were you born?

Amina Baraka: I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, 1942.

Christina Strasburger: And your birthday?

Amina Baraka: December the 5th.

Christina Strasburger: December 5th. When did you move to Newark?

Amina Baraka: My parents brought me here as a baby in arms. I lived in Newark all of my life, just about.

Christina Strasburger: Which schools did you attend?

Amina Baraka: Morton Street School, which was elementary school. Then I went to Robert Treat. I think it's now called Marcus Garvey. Then I went to Arts High School.

Whitney Strub: One of the questions, just to get the ball rolling here is, we wanted to know, what was your earliest awareness of homosexuality or LGBT people?

Amina Baraka:

Well, interesting enough, the community that I grew up in, it was on Howard Street, the old Howard Street. My grandparents were superintendents of the building. There was this couple, maybe I shouldn't mention their name, but one's name was Mary and the other one's name was Ruth. They used to visit my grandmother. My grandmother was a very open person. Because everybody came to visit us and sit and talk. She made hot biscuits with syrup and greens and stuff for everybody.

They were gay and lesbians. Nobody said anything. They used to take me to the movies. They were very nice to me. So then, when I went to school—I don't know, I guess because I was an art major or something, I had a couple of friends, they were males, who were gay. We never talked about it. We used to hang out together.

So that when I got older, when the gay movement started, it wasn't different for me. It really wasn't. Because my parents, they didn't mind. As a matter of fact, a lot of their friends were. So I just said, oh, that's it, that's it. But there were people in the community, and I must say, they weren't very kind.

But see, back in the day, this thing about gay people not defending themselves, well, I didn't grow up with them. The ones I knew, if you came after them, you was gonna be in some trouble—particularly the males. They would definitely fight back. The women was a little different because you really didn't know. I mean, they weren't overtly—you would have find that out after you've been friends with them for a while.

But the men were much more open. They had more power, I guess, to announce what their sexuality was. The women were not. Yeah.

Whitney Strub:

When you would become aware of a lesbian couple, would people discuss it explicitly? Or was it something that was understood without being spoken?

Amina Baraka:

It was understood.

Whitney Strub:

Okay.

Amina Baraka:

It was understood. Nobody had to talk about it. That's the point I was trying to make. It was understood. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone:

Did women at that time—that you understood to be gay—were they like feminine dress or masculine?

Amina Baraka: No. Some of ‘em were masculine and some dressed in feminine. Actually, they dressed the way I dressed and everybody else dressed, generally. There was no distinction, you know, like that. No.

Whiney Strub: Were there places in Newark that were sort of specifically gay and lesbian, like bars and nightclubs, things that you were aware of when you were...

Amina Baraka: When I was a kid—I got aware of it much, much later. But when I was a kid, they used to have something called The Jewel Box Review. They used to have programs downtown Newark here. Bobby Lee one, and the other one is—I can’t think of her name—she was a nurse. That’s when they dressed up. They would have fashion shows and everything.

Actually, Bobby Lee, I didn’t know she was a man. I swear I didn’t. She was able to—she was just beautiful. I mean, like you say, it’s a pretty man. She was beautiful. Of course, my grandfather, it was a little different. My mother wanted to go. She wanted to go down there because everybody could attend ‘em. He told her he didn’t want her to go. But she went anyway.

I think, as I can recall, somethin’ happened, and everybody—not everybody, but a lot of people ended up going to jail or something. Then, of course, my mother was among those. They had to go and bail her out. That was the first time I figured out that it might—what you go to jail for? I don’t get it. That was a time that I began to understand there might be a problem here.

But the people didn’t make fun of them or anything. But then again, I grew up in a really working-class neighborhood. Unlike some neighborhoods, people just like saw ‘em and just, you know, waved their hand or something. I never heard any gossip until I got grown and was around other sorts of people. So I have never—I don’t have any poor story to tell about that. I don’t.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you see any drag kings perform or just drag queens?

Amina Baraka: They were mixed up.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. They were mixed up. But they weren’t mixed up like the ones I see on television. I mean, if you

didn't know, you wouldn't know. They didn't overdress or underdress or do anything. They looked normal to me.

Whitney Strub: Did you ever see The Jewel Box Review yourself?

Amina Baraka: No. I was too young. I had the brochures that my mother and them had.

Whitney Strub: Oh, wow.

Amina Baraka: They showed it to me.

Christina Strasburger: I guess one of the questions that I would have is about your experiencing growing up through the Newark Public School System. It seems like you didn't have—and, thankfully, there was the unspoken, and you didn't have to encounter. It sounds like the homophobia and stuff was more prevalent. But I'd like to see—if you could just share a little bit with us, in school, did you see any of the...

Amina Baraka: To be very honest, I did not.

Christina Strasburger: Okay.

Amina Baraka: I did not. Now there were people—people would point out and say, “Well, you know”—they would use the word fag. “You know he's a fag.” “She's a lesbian.” They would say things like that. Honestly, I really don't recall—I'm tryin' to think. No. It was us that was straight was around here fussin' and fightin' with one another. But they didn't—I really can't—they were part of the community.

It wasn't until, I'm tellin' you, I got grown and got “intellectuals” and other people that I began to hear this talk about somebody being gay and this and that and the other and so forth. But it didn't bother me because I didn't pay 'em any attention. Now during the '60s and the BLM, there was a real problem. By this time, I'm married to LeRoi Jones at the time. All of his—not all of them, people like Allen Ginsberg and people like that were hanging around, friends, Jimmy Baldwin, and all of that. But that was their circle.

It really wasn't too much of a problem, except for you would hear people say negative things about them about—it was like somehow, because they were gay, their thinking wasn't like

everybody else's, thank god. Yeah. People would try to belittle and down on 'em. They really would.

They would always find something wrong about something they wrote or something they said when—and at the end of the day, you would find out that they weren't looking at the work they were doing, they was looking at their sexuality and making comments about that. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Were you personally close with James Baldwin?

Amina Baraka: Yes.

Whitney Strub: So is that something you ever discussed with him? I mean, did he...

Amina Baraka: No. You didn't have to discuss it with Jimmy, honey, because he wasn't—he was not hiding it.

[Laughter]

Whitney Strub: Yeah.

Amina Baraka: No. That's interesting that you asked that. No. He's never said anything about it. You could read it because he was very outspoken about his sexuality and very proud. No. You didn't wanna bother with Jimmy intellectually or otherwise. Hm-mmm.

[Laughter]

Amina Baraka: He knew we knew. Because Jimmy would tell anybody. He'd slip that coat on his shoulders and *[inaudible 11:51]*. He was not—he was very brave, too. See, he wasn't interested in trying to disguise it. He didn't see anything wrong with it, so that was your problem.

Whitney Strub: Well, how about this. So I've got one more question, and then I think, Mi Hyun, you have another question that's a follow up. So during the early Black Power era in Newark, with United Brothers and the Committee for a Unified Newark, were there gay or lesbian members of those groups?

Amina Baraka: I don't know because they were so homophobic and sexist. We was busy tryin' to stand our ground as women. That kind of male supremacy was very, very heavy in the black liberation movement. It was very heavy. As a matter of fact, there are books now just

coming out where women and men are talking about this kind of attitude.

Most of us, like myself, we always have problems because we were open and aboveboard and actually, some would say, aggressive. If you would get into a debate with somebody, and you stood on your ground, and some of them, they were accused of being gay.

Mi Hyun Yoon: Could you speak a little more about your relationship or interactions with the women's movement? Also, the last time I was here, you mentioned how you had a relationship with Yuri Kochiyama.

Amina Baraka: Yes. Yes.

Mi Hyun Yoon: I was really interested in that.

Amina Baraka: Yuri and her husband Bill, in Harlem, they used to put out leftist newspapers and magazines and stuff. She was very active in the Black Liberation Movement. She and her husband and her sons and daughters, they were very, very active. I was telling you she was the one that ran up on the stage to try to resuscitate Malcolm when he was shot.

Because after Atallah, Malcolm's oldest daughter, when she speaks, she always talks about how everybody was running away, and Yuri ran toward Malcolm and leaped up on that stage. But, of course, there was nothing she could do. I remained friends with Yuri until she died. Yeah. Most of us did.

It would be all, honestly, all Afro-American people, and there would be Yuri. Then when we brought—now that we had a multi-national organization, there would be Yuri. She was always—man, you talk about fiery, ooh, lord. I was very impressed when I first met her. I met her at a rally in Harlem.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did you attend the Newark Conference?

Amina Baraka: Newark, which?

Kristyn Scorsone: Conference, the one after the riots or rebellion. Did you attend that?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. That was the Congress of Afrikan People where we started a Committee for a Unified Newark and a Congress of Afrikan

People. Then in an organization speaking about the sexism, we started a women's group. Because the men would come, and they'd discuss politics and so forth. They would bring their wives or their girlfriends. We would be in one room, and they would be in the other room.

Problem was that they were organized, and we were not. So we started to—well, I came up with the idea that maybe we needed a women's division. I talked to LeRoi about it. He said, "Okay. If that's what you all wanna do." That's what we did.

Kristyn Scorsone: At the convention, did you happen to be at the workshop with Flo Kennedy?

Amina Baraka: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Where she invited the women from NOW? What was that like?

Amina Baraka: Well, Flo, a lot of the—she stood her ground. She wasn't backin' off for nothin'. So if you was gonna do somethin' or say somethin' about Flo, it better not be where she can hear it. Because she was also—as a matter of fact, I was always very impressed with her because she proved that women could think, too. Because a lot of the point it was like, somehow you could never make a real analysis because whatever equipment you have, it ain't workin'.

But that was not a very nice time durin' that period, for women or for gay people. A lot of people hid their sexuality for a long time. Now that I'm thinking about it, there is a few women I later on found out—and that's when it got popular for you to be able to express it. Then it would be like, I didn't know. At least I didn't say it. I knew it. That kind of thing. There was no way. Then when I found out, I said, oh, okay. It makes sense. It makes sense.

Whitney Strub: Actually, on that note. Can I run a few names by you of people to see whether you knew them and interacted with them?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: Is Frank Hutchins somebody that you worked with and knew?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: Can you describe your memories of him?

Amina Baraka: Well, he was a student activist. We were a little older than Hutchison. He was a student activist. We'd be in meetings together and in forums and demonstrations and so forth. He was a very clear—and his analytical skills were very good. They were very good. He was always—he was more to the left than we were.

Whitney Strub: That's saying something.

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. He was. Yeah. Well, you don't know how we were. Yeah. Because we were the Black Nationalists. He tended to be in a multicultural, multinational environment. That was a split, too, between the Black Nationalists and the more middle-of-the-road kind of—well, I'm ain't gonna say middle of the road, they were further to the left than we were. Like Tom Hayden and them when they were here in Newark organizing with the welfare rights and tenants and so on. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Actually, from Tom Hayden's group, how about Carol Glassman. Is she somebody that you worked with at all?

Amina Baraka: No. I don't recall the name. I may have worked with her, but I don't recall her name. But during that time, with Tom Hayden and them, as Black Nationalists, we didn't wanna have anything to do with them. As a matter of fact, they were accused of coming into the community trying to run our lives, when we thought we should have been doing it ourselves. That went on up until the Newark Rebellion because that's when they all left.

There was a lot of animosity between the Black community—not the Black community because the Black community was working with them. But those of us who were political and was talkin' Black Power, we wanted them out of here. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: What about Derek Winans?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. I haven't heard that name in a long time. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Can you tell your memories of him?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. He was with the leftists. Yeah. Mm-hmm. But, see, I'm trying to tell you, what I'm trying to explain, there was very little interaction because we were Black Nationalists, and we thought that they should not be in our community trying to help us. Even though their intention was good, and they did some very some very, very good work, but usually when we came together, it

wasn't on common terms. It would always be, "What are they doin' here?" and blah, blah, blah, and so forth and so on.

Whitney Strub: Did you know that Derek was gay at the time or not?

Amina Baraka: No. Hm-mmm. I'm tellin' you, see, I'm a bad person because I don't...

Whitney Strub: Well, no. It's interesting just to get a sense of how he registered to the straight world. Right?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. I don't like that word straight either.

Whitney Strub: No? Oh, do tell.

Amina Baraka: Know why? Well, when they were saying—so my daughter, as you know, was gay. They were talkin', she and some of her friends, and they said, "Well, they're straight." I said, "What, does that mean you're crooked?" Then they had to explain to me what it was because I—and I still kinda get—I wish they'd find another term or somethin'. They must have one.

Christina Strasburger: Oh, okay.

Whitney Strub: Sorry, I just have this short little laundry list. So there is two more. Is Hilda Hidalgo somebody that you worked with and remember?

Amina Baraka: Hilda?

Whitney Strub: She was a Puerto Rican feminist in Newark.

Amina Baraka: I don't know if she was in Newark.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Yeah. She taught at Rutgers New Brunswick at times but was also here at times. But what memories of her do you have?

Amina Baraka: I have very little except bein' in meetings with these people, like we're sitting here, or conferences. I didn't know her very well. I mean I knew her by sight or somethin'.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Then just one more name from that era. Ray or Raymond Proctor. He was at...

Amina Baraka: Why does that name sound familiar?

Whitney Strub: He was at Essex County College.

Amina Baraka: The name sounds familiar.

Whitney Strub: He ran their Urban Institute in the '70s, but...

Amina Baraka: No. I don't really know him.

Whitney Strub: Okay. No. That's fine. I was just curious.

Christina Strasburger: So, actually, you brought up your daughter. So do you wanna lead off with the [*inaudible 22:35*]?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. So what was Shani like in childhood, as a young girl?

Amina Baraka: Like every other kid. Really. Like every other kid. I had no idea, maybe because I wasn't tryin' to have one or anything. She hung out with kids, like, all the other kids and so forth. But she was always interested in athletics because she was a basketball player. She was interested in teaching school. She taught school as well. She's in the New Jersey Hall of Fame for basketball. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's cool.

Amina Baraka: She used to hang out with her brothers in the yard there. We had a basketball court. She was very, very good at it. But she had a friend, and by the time they were in high school, I began to think they were really friends. I asked her, and she said, "Yeah." She didn't back off or...

Because I have that kind of relationship with my kids. I don't try to control them. She just told me, and then—I don't know if the woman wants me to mention her name, so I won't—but her friend. They said, "We thought you knew." So from that moment on—sounds like the song, from that moment on, all of the women around the house and so forth, her friends, I got to be called mom because they would come and talk and tell me everything, even things they couldn't say to their parents.

Kristyn Scorsone: So a lot of her friends were gay as well?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yes.

Christina Strasburger: What year was this, just...

Amina Baraka: Let's see. Was it '02 or '03 she was murdered, so it was like—when she was in high school. I'm not good with goin' back.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, that's okay.

Amina Baraka: This was about, let's see—Ras was born in '72, so [*inaudible* 24:55] to go down the number. Yeah. It was like of the middle '70s or so on. Yeah. So they would gather here and go out and hang out and come back. They act like everybody else to me. But her partner, of course, was murdered with her.

Kristyn Scorsone: Right. So is this the same partner she had in high school?

Amina Baraka: No. Well, she had different partners, many different ones. But the one in high school, that's—she still remains her friend. Yeah. She still comes by to visit.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did Shani ever talk about her gender, like, in terms of like, butch or femme or any of those terms?

Amina Baraka: No. No. None of those. No. No. It wasn't 'til she got active—because got active in the gay rights movement, when Sakia Gunn was murdered. Because she came and got me to come down to the demonstration where they were demonstrating. See, she's the one who told me what had happened. She said, "We're havin' a demonstration." She said, "And we want you to come. And will you come?" I said, "Absolutely."

I was still tryin' to get information about. Because they knew what was goin' on more than even in newspapers and so forth. They schooled me on that and then went on down there.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was that like?

Amina Baraka: Oh, it was packed. It was packed. Her mother and I got to be very good friends, Sakia's mom. Yeah. Because shortly after that, Shani was murdered.

Kristyn Scorsone: Your husband, he had a sister who was also gay?

Amina Baraka: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: She was also killed?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. Kimako. How'd you know that?

Kristyn Scorsone: I saw it on something that he had written that was posted online.

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Because they weren't very open about that. Yeah. That was kinda sad to me.

Kristyn Scorsone: Did Shani know her?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. As a matter of fact, one of Shani's friends told me, when she was murdered, that she said, Ms. Baraka, Shani said she was always worried and said that she was gonna get killed just like Kimako. That's what she said. I had never known that was on her mind. So I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah. She was always fightin' about that."

See, I don't know what their lifestyle or what it was. She probably had to come up against some very mean and cruel, ignorant people. I know one time she did. She was working. She was in college, and she had a summer job. This guy came on to her. Of course, she rejected him. He called her a dyke or something. Her older brother—well, I know he's sorry he did that because I had to pull him off of him.

They were very, very, very protective of her. You wouldn't even look like you was gettin' ready to say something or bring any harm to her. But she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, by the way.

Mi Hyun Yoon: So after Shani came out, did the...

Amina Baraka: She didn't have to come. She was already out.

Mi Hyun Yoon: Right. But did the family dynamic change in any way once everyone kind of found out and she...

Amina Baraka: Hm-mmm. Hmm-mm.

Mi Hyun Yoon: I mean you had already suspected, as you said. But so her siblings, her father, or...

Amina Baraka: No. No. Hm-mmm. Hm-mmm. No. No. No. It wasn't anything like your sister is a gay or your sister is blah, blah, blah, blah. Nobody. I think it had been pretty well established you don't bother us. Huh-uh. Even the people in the neighborhood, like her friends or other guys, they also were very protective.

It could have been the time, place, and condition that she didn't have to go under a lot of things that other people had to go through. And the politics of her mother and father because by this

time we done found good sense and we on the left and so on. She didn't have to have those problems. I didn't allow anybody else to have 'em. None of us did.

Kristyn Scorsone: When she was killed, that was definitely extreme misogyny. Do you think homophobia also was a factor?

Amina Baraka: Well, I was married before. Right? By my first marriage, my daughter Wanda, Shani's sister, she was living with her. She was married to this guy who was abusive to her, to my daughter, my other daughter. I didn't know anything about it. Shani was the one who told me finally. Then she was murdered a month later, so to speak.

Yes. A part of the things he used to do—because when he was beatin' up on Wanda, which we had no idea of or else I would have been in the jail. Then Shani told me that when she told Wanda to call the police—she had 12 restraining orders against this person before he murdered Shani and Ray. But Wanda wouldn't tell me because she kinda know that if I had known...

But Shani, he hated her because she was the one who was pushing Wanda to put these restraining orders on him. Then on the other hand—we found out about this durin' the trial that he'd call her dyke and this and that. A couple of times her brothers had to leave the room. Because to sit there and watch this murderer sit up there and talk about he's innocent, it was the worst thing.

But I'm very proud of her brothers and her sisters and all of her friends. No problem. No problem. I'm sure people—you would be surprised. Most people have very good sense. They know what to say around certain people and what not to do. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do you feel like you got justice in the courts?

Amina Baraka: Well, can you ever get justice when—no, truly, because he got 169 years. I think the death penalty was pending then, but I'm against the death penalty. That's how he got a hundred and so many years. I am gonna tell ya' the truth, though. I didn't want him dead. I knew his mom and everything because he was married to my daughter. He was my son-in-law, so to speak.

I guess I did. Not unless you can bring her back, and you can't do that. She and Ray, you can't bring them back. He's in that jail. I hope he stays there. That's all I can say. But I wasn't willing to sign off on the death penalty. Thank goodness one of the

prosecutors or one of the—yeah, I think it was one of the prosecutors, he was Catholic. He didn't give me any trouble about bein' against the death penalty. Because some of the people were sayin', these right-wingers, they wanna kill everybody. He was very understanding.

Kristyn Scorsone: I read also that afterwards the community held a vigil to stop violence against women. Were you a part of it?

Amina Baraka: Yes.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah. How was that?

Amina Baraka: They organized here. A lot of people in the community started to organize against women's abuse, period. Yeah. We had meetings down at—we used to meet at Rutgers. Then I got friendly with the sister LaQuetta Nelson. Do you know her?

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Newark Pride, right?

Amina Baraka: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Because she and me got to be very close. I joined in with them. That was after Shani's death. Her father, too. We used to go down to the meetings.

Kristyn Scorsone: I wanted to ask you, too, about her partner Rayshon Holmes. What was she like?

Amina Baraka: Sweetest person you ever wanna see. You know, she looked like Diana Ross. She did. She was little, like, that face and everything. I saw a picture Shani had of Diana Ross in her bedroom. Right? I looked, I says, "Oh, I can see. She looks like Ray."

[Laughter]

Kristyn Scorsone: Was she from Newark, too, or...

Amina Baraka: Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm. She lived around up here.

Kristyn Scorsone: How long were they together?

Amina Baraka: I really don't know. I know they were friends—I really didn't know when they were lovers, so to speak. But since they were

little, I guess, like teenagers. Yeah. Mm-hmm. I wrote a long poem to Shani and Ray and talked about the day that she brought Ray home and introduced me to her. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: What was that like when she brought her home?

Amina Baraka: She said, “Mommy, I want you to meet Ray.” I said, “Oh, hi.”

[Laughter]

Amina Baraka: That was it.

Kristyn Scorsone: What’s something you would like people to know about Shani?

Amina Baraka: I think she was—one thing I really liked about her was that she was very open. She was honest with people. She was a good teacher. For one thing, she was—it’s hard to describe Shani because she could do so many things and do them so well. I mean, she was really very good.

She had a temper like her mom. She could get fired over right quick, you know. But you rarely saw it. You rarely saw it. She was patient. She had a lot of empathy for other people. She was always bringing her friends to the house. She felt very comfortable with—I don’t think she felt that comfortable around her father, but she felt really comfortable.

Whitney Strub: I think we only have a few more questions. We won’t keep you terribly long. Are we recording?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yes.

Whitney Strub: Actually, can I jump back. Kind of like the way you were fleshing Shani out and bringing her to life here and characterizing her. Could you do the same thing for Ray? Like what did she do for a job?

Amina Baraka: She was a social worker. They both were interested in working with young people and so forth—the gangs. Her mother, Ray’s mother, also was a very nice woman. We got to know each other pretty well. She also was active in the community.

Whitney Strub: Do you know anything about her coming out story to her family?

Amina Baraka: Ray had been married. She had been married. She had a son. I’m trying to think of his name. She brought him over for me to meet.

He was around. He loved Shani and the family and so on. So I don't know, to tell you the truth. I really don't know. Because only thing I can recall is at the funeral that they did have a picture of her when she got married, even though she and her husband were separated or divorced or something. Of course, we had the double funeral together. Yeah. Yeah. I would have to guess. I don't know.

Whitney Strub: Sure. Am I correct in remembering that then you and your husband tried to start a Newark chapter of PFLAG around that era? Does that...

Amina Baraka: P...

Whitney Strub: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Amina Baraka: Yes. That was LaQuetta Nelson that's helped us with that.

Whitney Strub: Oh, okay.

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: So how did that go? Did that take off or not?

Amina Baraka: It didn't. It didn't. Because you know what happened? We were so involved with that trial, because the murder took place in Piscataway. We was back and forth from here, there, goin' to court. The people in this community—I'm glad they found him because my sons were huntin' for him. Their friends were hunting for him. Because after he shot her, or shot them, he took Ray's car. He knew Shani had a tracker on hers. So he parked Shani's car away from the house. Came back and got Ray's car.

How they were able to get him, they tracked him through the E-ZPass. The fools went through the E-ZPass, and they picked his picture up. This is how they found him. He was in the south somewhere. He had skipped town. Because, I mean, everybody was lookin' for him. I was prayin' nobody found him but the police because I didn't want nobody else to have to go to jail. He was on the run.

Whitney Strub: So the PFLAG just—it kind of didn't come together because of the chaos of all of that?

Amina Baraka: No. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Okay.

Amina Baraka: Yeah. Everybody was focused on the first part of it—I don't think—how long did it take 'em to find him. It took a little while. They was just focused—then people began to focus on gay rights and start doing some activity around it. One thing that I think our family did that was really good, it made it possible for other families to see that there was nothin' wrong. It was normal. People treated her like it was normal because it was normal.

That's the good that came out of that. There's no more hide and seek or anything. They were happy. People who had been kind of disguising or trying to disguise it, because of the prominence of our family, and they saw how we were embracing everybody, they came out right away and got involved.

They were already involved, but they weren't open. But then they felt it was okay. It was okay. There was nothing wrong happened.

Whitney Strub: Can I ask just a couple of questions about your husband?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: I always think of him as Amiri, but you called him Roi?

Amina Baraka: No. But that's his name. We changed our names in this—when we were involved and that. Hesham Jaaber gave us that name who was with—he was a Sunni Muslim. He named him Ameer and me Ameena. My husband changed the spelling of it because it means the same thing in both Arabic and Swahili. So he changed the spelling of it from Arabic to Swahili. That's how the Amiri got in it. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. I was gonna ask, so back in the '60s and '70s, he occasionally had some pretty harsh things to say about homosexuality. I'm wondering if at that time you ever debated him on that. I mean, if at that point you challenged him or—how did that play inside the family when he would say those things?

Amina Baraka: Well, mostly on paper, and he would write it. I could not, I said, what. Because what I couldn't understand—this is the problem I had, as close as he and Allen was, and as friendly as he was with—well, it's just a lot of that beat generation, there was a lot of them were gay. I couldn't get it.

But then they all had kind of split when he left from New York and moved over here. The Black Liberation Movement was—you talk

about homophobic and sexist, you ain't seen nothin' yet. I think he felt obligated because he and Allen stopped speaking. Allen was the one I called when he got arrested. Allen was the one who helped me find him when he was locked up.

They got to be friends. But even after that, there was still a lot of tension. Only thing I can say is this. If you're in a circle, you in a church or something, and the congregation insist that you believe—let's do it another way. If you're not in the congregation and you say—let's say you're atheist. Right? Then those who are not, you're surely going to hell. They attack. They attack you verbally. They probably would attack you physically if they didn't know they was going to jail or something. But they were very mean.

I'm just gonna put it straight up. They were mean. They were mean. It hurt my heart to—because, especially, I had never met Allen. Then when I met him, we got to be very close friends as well. I don't know. You know what? I think, in all honesty...

Oh, I'm gonna tell you something. Right before he died, he was layin' on the bed. All of a sudden, I thought he was asleep. I was watchin' the TV. He jumps out of the bed and run into the next room and start banging and saying, "Allen was my friend. Allen was my friend. Allen was my friend."

So whatever it was, he was now rethinking or—he was hurt. He knew what he did, what he had said, and the things he had did. What do you call that when you—he was reflecting on and having self-criticism. I felt so bad for him. Because he said, "Allen was my friend." I said, "I know Allen your friend." I said, "What is wrong with you?" Because he had just jumped out into a frenzy like that.

He had a lot of stuff to regret in terms of—then he had to admit he wasn't good with women either. Then he began to reflect on that. He began to change, as much as he was gonna change, his relationship to women. Because he was definitely a chauvinist. He writes about him bein' a chauvinist. I can say that.

[Laughter]

Amina Baraka: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: But even through those years, he still remained friends with Allen Ginsberg and James Baldwin despite a sort of tension in the air?

Amina Baraka: What happened when—some of us were determined to get them back together. We were successful. He and Jimmy used to hang out. I mean one night they went out together. I didn't know what had happened because he wasn't home. I'm calling up people thinking somethin' happened. Six o'clock in the morning he strolls in. I said, "Oh god," and just went to sleep. I said, "Thank god." Because I thought somethin' had happened.

When you're involved in those kind of politics and stuff like that, you're always on edge. But no. Allen would come here and so on. They got to be friends again. Yeah. Thank goodness he didn't go out of here without reconciling. Yeah.

Whitney Strub: How about just one more quick question on that. Bayard Ruston, I mean he also had some pretty harsh things to say about—back in the day. Did they ever...

Amina Baraka: He had harsh things about everybody.

Whitney Strub: That's true. Did they ever reconcile or no?

Amina Baraka: No. You know why? Because I don't think he got a chance to. I think if he had gotten a chance to—he was very homophobic at that one period there and sexist. I can't recall him—because not only was Bayard Ruston's sexuality was about and them, but he also, at that point in his life, was against...

Whitney Strub: Politics?

Amina Baraka: That's right, the politics of the civil rights thing. People would call him King and them, you know. Same thing as Malcolm said, they were Uncle Tom's and what have you. But I don't think it was Bayard's sexuality. I think it was more his politics.

Whitney Strub: Yeah. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: What was it like for you to see the Shani Baraka Women's Research Center open?

Amina Baraka: I was so happy. I was happy and saddened. I was happy that mayor had actually come to his mind that they were going to do it and sad that she wasn't here to see it. Her mother came. Her mother and I cut the ribbon, Ray's mom Sandy. My other son, the chief of staff, he organized it, but we were cuttin' the ribbon together.

There is a big mural in there of Shani and Ray next to each other with Maya Angelou over the top of it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Oh, I've seen that picture. Yeah.

Amina Baraka: Yeah. You've seen it.

Kristyn Scorsone: Do they have resources there for LGBTQ people? Or is it just...

Amina Baraka: They have a room. You didn't know that?

Kristyn Scorsone: Yeah.

Amina Baraka: They have an office.

Kristyn Scorsone: That's awesome.

Amina Baraka: Yeah. They have an office. It has a big flag up in there with the LGBTQ. Mm-hmm.

Kristyn Scorsone: Great.

Christina Strasburger: So you'll be marching with us at Pride this year?

Amina Baraka: If I can. I don't even know when it is.

Interviewer: July 14th through the 16th.

Amina Baraka: Oh, yeah. I don't have a problem.

[Laughter]

Amina Baraka: I don't have a problem. I'll tell ya'. All those meetings with the LaQuetta and them all the time. I don't know what happened to LaQuetta. She just disappeared. Yeah. I think she moved out of the city or somethin'.

Whitney Strub: I think so. Yeah.

Amina Baraka: Yeah.

Whitney Strub: Is there anything else that we should have thought to ask you that we didn't think about as far as Newark, your life, LGBT history?

Amina Baraka: Well, I'm just glad to see that people are getting to come to the real world and that they need to mind their business. If they can't help

it—you know, if they can't help it, then stay out and shut up. That's the way I see it. I see things are getting better. I do. I see it. I mean, I can't say for that the LGBT community, but they feel that—I know I feel like it's gettin' a little better.

Well, to me, I always associated with the women's movement because the sexism, I thought it was going to kill me. I'm still not so sure. Leave me alone. Because it's the chauvinism is—and I guess that's why I can be so open about it, especially with the women, is that I know what it's like to be able to do something or feel something and somebody is constantly trying to keep you from breathing. They got all sorts of tools and mechanisms. They are very creative about abuse. They found all type of ways. You just can't survive in that environment.

When I was speaking at that women's center, I was so happy because I said now right open [*inaudible 49:50*] got it. Ray's actually a fantastic mom. She's really done somethin'. Her sisters were there. Our whole family was there. The community was all out there and so forth. It was nice.

I just hope they can be able to maintain it. Because you can go through there and you can see 'em. I was shocked. I went in that room they have there with the big flag of LGBT community. I started doin' this.

[*Laughter*]

Christina Strasburger: I wish that was on video.

Whitney Strub: Actually, I know we're wrapping up, sorry. Can I throw out one more quick question in?

Amina Baraka: Mm-hmm.

Whitney Strub: Because just something you said there made me just kind of wonder about your thoughts on—Black Lives Matter is really led by queer-identified women. I just wonder where you see that fitting in?

Amina Baraka: I didn't even know that. See there, I don't pay that no mind.

Whitney Strub: Okay. Okay. Yeah. I was just curious what your thoughts on that is that...

Amina Baraka: I didn't even know it. I don't care.

[Laughter]

Whitney Strub: I mean, I had no way of knowing that. I don't care. Yeah. I'll tell you one thing. I'm glad they exist, though. Yeah. Now see, I don't—if you mind your business, you won't be interested in such as that, not unless somebody doing something to you. I do believe in self-defense now.

But other than that, if you ain't hurtin' nobody—it's like my grandma used to say, as long as it don't hurt nobody, it might be good. That's the truth. How is it hurtin' me? I don't care. Yep.

Interviewers: Thank you.

Amina Baraka: Thank you.

Kristyn Scorsone: We appreciate it so much.

Christina Strasburger: Thank you so much. I mean, we are grateful that you took the time to talk with us for the project.

Amina Baraka: Oh, this is fun for me because I can tell—because it makes me of things I hadn't thought about. Like sometimes people ask you a question, and you're kinda slow to answer it because, I don't know, I didn't think about that. Yeah. Yeah.

Kristyn Scorsone: Cool.

[End of Audio]