

Queer Newark Oral History Project

Interviewee: Kiyon Williams

Interviewer: Esperanza Santos

Date: October 11, 2019

Location: Via phone call from Rutgers-Newark and Richmond, Virginia

Vetted by: Cristell Cedeno

Date: November 24, 2019

*Interviewer:* Today is October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm interviewing Kiyon Williams at Newark—at Rutgers Newark while they are in Richmond, Virginia, for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hi Kiyon.

*Interviewee:* Hello.

*Interviewer:* Hi. Well, thank you so much for taking time out to be with me today.

*Interviewee:* It's really a pleasure. I'm so excited that we found the time to connect.

*Interviewer:* Right. We've been emailing back and forth for a minute, but we made it work.

*Interviewee:* Totally.

*Interviewer:* Tell me, just to start off the conversation, when and where were you born?

*Interviewee:* I was born in Newark, New Jersey.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me your birthday if that's okay?

*Interviewee:* Yeah, I was born on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1991, at UMDNJ.

*Interviewer:* Does that make you an Aquarius or an Aries?

*Interviewee:* It makes me a Pisces.

*Interviewer:* Oh, it makes you a Pisces. Okay. Who raised you when you were growing up?

*Interviewee:* I was raised by—primarily by my mother and also by my grandmother.

*Interviewer:* Okay. When your grandma and your mom were raising you, did you grow up in one place, or did y'all move around a lot?

*Interviewee:* I mostly grew up in East Orange, in North New Jersey. I spent all of my childhood and my teenage years between Newark and East, which are adjacent cities that are right next to each other.

*Interviewer:* In your household, was it just you, your mom, and your grandma, or did you have any siblings?

*Interviewee:* I mostly grew up in a house with my mother and later my sister, who came into the world when I was seven years old. I lived primarily with my mother and my sister up, and till I was 17.

*Interviewer:* Then, at that point, you went off to college, right?

*Interviewee:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what your neighborhood was like or your home life was like?

*Interviewee:* Totally. I guess my adolescence and coming of age mostly took place on 490 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Well, a part of—I grew up in North Newark. I lived in Bakery Village, which was a subsidized housing complex on Fourth Avenue, right on the border between North Newark and East Orange. We called it under the bridge 'cause it was—this building was right underneath a bridge that separated East Orange from North Newark. Also, by the bridge where the New Jersey transit train passed.

I grew up primarily amongst black american and afro diasporic people. Like me and my family who were descendants of black people who migrated to the Northeast New York and New Jersey area from the South and the Caribbean during the Great migration when black people were leaving the South and the Caribbean to Northern cities. Then also a Caribbean community. We're in a community that we're; also, there were a lot of Caribbean folk, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans and Haitians and some West African immigrants. In a very black afro diasporic city or neighborhood. Yeah, what else should I talk about?

*Interviewer:* How was it living in that neighborhood or in that kind of environment by the bridge in this community?

*Interviewee:* In hindsight, I guess it was like a typical childhood. I know to be through the normal childhood, but at the same time, it was—I grew up in a community of working-class and working poor folks who were economically disenfranchised, though who simultaneously collaborated and worked together to support each other's collective survival. While also navigating and negotiating different kinds of violence from being in a resource drained and resource-deprived community. What that looked like was that I knew everybody in, I wanna say a five-mile radius. Growing up, I just knew everybody, everybody knew my family, everybody knew who my mother was. There was a sense of, it was like extensive and expansive community where I lived in the neighborhood with my cousins, and some of my family members lived.

*Interviewer:* Was all these all people on your mom's side or your dad's side also?

*Interviewee:* This is most people on my mother's side of the family. It just felt like you just—like I knew everybody in the general neighborhood that I grew up in. Everybody knew my family. There were always some kinds of—there was some kinds of communities relationship whether somebody went to school with somebody else or somebody dated somebody else.

*Interviewer:* The degree, the separation were super small.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. Now, in hindsight, having moved and lived in different parts of the world outside of where I grew up, that just felt like a very distinct experience. Growing up and literally having some—living in a network of people who knew your people and whose people you know. What else? I also grew up in Newark in the '90s and 2000s. At the end of the crack, cocaine epidemic, and the height of the war on the drugs. I also grew up in a post-riots Newark. After the riots in the '60s when white flight took place and a lot of the economic and other forms of resources that were in the city.

The city lost a lot of its economic resources. That totally informed the particular experience I had growing up in the city in the early '90s under the Clinton administration when he attacked welfare and social programs and the safety net and support working-class or poor folks. That larger political context I think definitely shaped both the city I lived in, but also my experiences as a black kid raised by a single mother in Newark in the early '90s.

*Interviewer:* What year were you born again?

*Interviewee:* Ninety-one.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Oh, my gosh, I was born in '91 too. In this space of a village, that's really trying to look out for each other, and there's a short degree of separation. Were there adults who shaped you besides the people who raised you? Or you can talk about your mom if that's important to you.

*Interviewee:* I mean, I feel like—I mean, I feel like my relationship with my mother and my grandmother were really important growing up. In terms of adults who shaped me, I'm trying to think of close relationships I had with adults as a child. I'm blanking.

*Interviewer:* No, it's cool.

*Interviewee:* Yeah, I feel like mostly from the child experiences that I'm thinking of, I'm mostly shaped by me being away from adults, being outside and amongst people my age or friends and people who I grew up—who grew up in my neighborhood. That's where I spent most of my time with as a child growing up, yeah.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Is there a kid that you looked up to or someone who inspired you in any way? Or just hung out and just kicked it.

*Interviewee:* No one comes to mind at the moment.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Can you tell me what schools you attended in your neighborhood?

*Interviewee:* Yes. For kindergarten, I went to Sarah Ward Nursery, which was in the—I think it's considered the central ward of Newark. Then for elementary school, I went to Dionne Warwick Institute in East

Orange, New Jersey. Then for middle school, I went to a public charter school called Greater Newark Academy Charter School. Which had different locations but more permanently from what I last know, was housed downtown Newark on Central Avenue. Then I went to high school at Science Park High School, formerly Science High School, which is also a public school in Newark.

*Interviewer:* 'Cause it sounds like you went to schools all throughout Newark, did you see any differences or did they just feel like everything was pretty the same?

*Interviewee:* They weren't the same because I was at different stages in my development as a child, I was different ages. I always went to public until university I was public school educated. In most of the schools that I went to had a lot of black teachers, administrators, and students. Now that you brought that question up, there was this significant shift when I went to public charter school because charter schools in New Jersey operate under a different system, a different governing body. They have an independent board, and so they function autonomously outside of the regulation of the Board of Education in any given city. My experience in charter schools vary drastically than my experiences in other public schools.

*Interviewer:* How.

*Interviewee:* In part because, like I said, charter schools had their autonomous governance. Had their own rules that didn't necessarily align with or weren't accountable to the city's Board of Education. The public school I went to was fairly newly founded. I wanna say I was the second or the third graduating class.

*Interviewer:* Oh, wow.

*Interviewee:* It was an experiment if you will. I ended up in charter school mostly because the public schools, the public middle schools in my neighborhood, weren't the best. They were known for being really violent places where kids just fight a lot with them. My mother was looking for alternatives and better options for me to go to school that were also affordable and accessible. I ended up going to this charter school where you had to go through this lottery system 'cause there's a shortage or limit of students who can go, where you had to go through this lottery system and all these weird systems that are really rooted in scarcity.

Anyways, so I ended up going to this charter school that was very newly founded, but that offered some—you're offered a smaller class size and a smaller student to teacher ratio. It was somewhat modeled after or model itself after private schools. They're like, we have to wear uniforms. All of these things made it appeal to parents like my mother, who wanted their kids to have educational

experiences that were better than the ones offered in public schools.

*Interviewer:* Your mom found an opportunity, and she was like, "I want my baby to go to there."

*Interviewee:* Right. Then the challenge that I had being in this—being in private, I mean, in this public charter school. For one, it was like the principal was this patriarchal white dude—also, this weird disciplinarian who had this white savior complex.

*Interviewer:* Can you give me an example of that?

*Interviewee:* Oh, totally. An example is they were very disciplinarian and approached I think often too many educators, particularly white educators or any educator who isn't from black and a brown community or trying to educate black and brown kids. Often will criminalize young black kids and think that discipline is how you—it was an approach to disciplining kids. Yeah, disciplining black kids is how you stop them from growing up to be criminals and drug dealers, which is not how that works.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. That's misguided.

*Interviewee:* Right, totally. Yeah, this school was of that, operated in that same kind of disciplinary model. I remember very—just very often getting into arguments with this principal in particular because they were policing what I wore and things of that nature.

*Interviewer:* Let me get my words together. What is it about what you wore that set them off?

*Interviewee:* Oh, totally. Fashion has always been like a form of self-expression and self-empowerment, self-adornment for me. Even though we wear—we had to wear uniforms to school. I would wear shoes that I really liked that weren't necessarily the dress, shoes that the school—the school's dress code warranted. In the wintertime when it was freezing outside, and heat wasn't working in the school building, I would keep my coat on, and I would get into arguments with the principal over my dress code. Because either I would wanna be warm and therefore keep my coat on and not subject myself to being in frigid cold classrooms. Or I would wear the shoes that I wanted to wear to school or that my mother bought me and, yeah, he would try and police my clothes.

*Interviewer:* It's like, "I'm warm; I should be able to keep my jacket on."

*Interviewee:* Right. It's like, I know what my body needs, my body needs to be warm, and it's cold in here. You're not providing us with a comfortable learning environment, and I refuse to be cold, so I'm gonna keep my jacket on.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Like, I'm not trying to disrespect you; I'm just trying to build a learning environment where I can actually learn. Right now, you're not providing that.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Then, what happened? I imagine that in some school environments, a principal keeps an eye on people, and this happens multiple times. How did it progress to your senior year?

*Interviewee:* Yeah. This is in middle school, so I was only, yes, I was in fifth grade. We would get into—me and this principle, we'd get into arguments that were verbal and sometimes escalated to being physical harassment. Like in this one particular instance I'm thinking about with me being in class, having a coat on because I was cold, I remember him distinctly yelling at me to take my coat off and me refusing. Then him physically trying to remove my coat.

Then when he was removing my coat, and I was holding on to it. He's trying to literally yank my coat out, and he's being loud and screaming and verbally harassing me and costing me. I let the coat go so that he flew back. Needless to say, I would—occasionally, I would get punished a lot, be ordered to go to detention. Sometimes I got suspended, sometimes my mother had to come into my parent-teacher conferences all because I was a self-determined black kid. White people were literally criminalizing and policing me and which causes her some tension to everyone.

*Interviewer:* Then, what did your mom say?

*Interviewee:* Well, sometimes my mother would side with me, but then sometimes she would side with them 'cause they're the authority figures or whatever. Sometimes that created the social tensions between me and her because I'm having these issues in the school where I'm being policed, and I'm being verbally harassed and screamed and yelled at. I'm like, "I refuse to be treated this way by these people." Again, some people might have said I moved up. Some people called me rebellious; I called myself self-determined. Then that also meant that I would get into conflicts and confrontations with my mother because she would also try and punish me for being suspended from school. On one similar occasion when I was suspended and maybe because I had my coat on or for some very similar reason. I was in a car riding home with my mother, and I think she tried to—I got suspended, and she tried to hit me or punish me or—for getting suspended, and I jumped out her car and ran away from home.

*Interviewer:* Wait, you ran out the car? Wait, say that one more time for me.

*Interviewee:* I jumped out the car and ran away from home.

*Interviewer:* How old were you?

*Interviewee:* I was in like seventh or eighth grade.

*Interviewer:* You were like what, 13? Twelve, thirteen?

*Interviewee:* I don't know if I was a teenager yet. Yeah, I was probably like 13, probably 13.

*Interviewer:* You ran away, and then what?

*Interviewee:* I ran away from home. I went to my cousin's house and my aunt's house, and maybe after a few days of not being home, I went back home. That just became a series of me running away from home and then going to a family member's house and then going back home.

*Interviewer:* What made you take the jump to be like, "I'm done? I'm moving on." For a 13-year-old, that's pretty gutsy.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. Again, I think I was just a self-determined child who having had already experienced different kinds of physical and emotional violence. There were certain boundaries that I had for myself around how people treated me even as a child, and this included adults. I was just of the mindset that, like, "If I'm in a situation and environment around people in which I felt unsafe, I'm just gonna remove myself from that environment." Be it, my mother, be it a principal or a school teacher. I just was not—I just made my mind up that I was not going to allow people to disrespect me.

*Interviewer:* You're like, you knew at that point like, "This is my self-worth. This is how you respect me. This is the conversation we're gonna have. If at the end of the day you're not gonna recognize any of that, then I'll remove myself from the situation.

*Interviewee:* Totally. Part of it was because I grew up in a neighborhood and around people where instead of listening to the needs and feelings of black kids, mostly adults, including black parents, and in this case, white educators, enacted punitive... approached us. So, dealing with or engaging with me instead of actually listening to my needs and feelings.

*Interviewer:* This happened mostly in middle school. Then what happened in high school?

*Interviewee:* Well, high school, I went through some shifts. Well, I guess I should also say that also in middle school, I was pretty visibly read as queer or gay to my classmates and everyone around me because of my voice and because my comportment and how I walked and moved my body. I was also being bullied for those reasons, and then as a way to navigate being bullied, I developed, had to develop tough skin and learn how to be on the offensive or defend myself. Moving back to also where my sense of self-determination,

refusal to be demeaned or mistreated came from. In high school, I very—I went to a magnet school. I went to a school that I had to take a test to get into, where they had certain set of academic standards in order to enroll there. What was I telling you? Sorry, I wasn't sure.<sup>7</sup>

*Interviewer:* We were talking about your journey from being, for lack of better word, bullied by educators, parents, and peers to now going to a magnet school and seeing or not if that dynamic stays the same or changes.

*Interviewee:* Oh, yeah. Well, magnet schools are different because—well, high school was totally different because I was in a different learning environment. I actually really enjoy school. I enjoyed learning. Yeah, I've always enjoyed learning. Classrooms have always been spaces for me to—spaces for me to explore my curiosity and my love of learning. In high school, because I went to an academically rigorous school, I was always engaged in the classroom, but still also beginning my own journey of self-discovery. I remember very distinctly masculinizing myself or performing a masculine effort.

*Interviewer:* How?

*Interviewee:* When entering school, when preparing to go to high school, I remember very distinctly deepening my voice and not talking with a lisp or not moving my hands a lot when I spoke. I started to wear clothes that were baggier, and I concealed my body but was also this style of time. Those were very conservative and intentional decisions as a way to try and circumvent and navigate violence I would experience from being read as femme or queer.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that changed your high school experience? For lack of a better word, assimilating to what people wanted you to be?

*Interviewee:* No, not really because eventually, I came—I went through my own little journey of self-discovery in high school where I came back into terms or my sense of self.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, a little journey, this sounds like a big journey.

*Interviewee:* Oh, yeah. Well, a big journey. I'm trying to think distinctly back to high school.

*Interviewer:* It sounds like you were read as femme and queer, and then in high school, you really try to put on this mask to be mask. It's like your—this little journey to come back to yourself. What pushed you back in that direction?

*Interviewee:* Oh, totally. Okay. That makes sense now. Also, between my journey from middle school to high school and even in high school, I was becoming a teenager, part of my performance of my very contrived performance of masculinity.



*Interviewer:* What a good verb, contrived.

*Interviewee:* I'm sorry?

*Interviewer:* What a good verb, contrived.

*Interviewee:* Oh, yeah, totally. I mean, I was totally contrived, altering genders. After I started getting into—I started very distinctly getting into fights with other boys in my neighborhood as a way to prove my masculinity. What else? Yeah, I mean, this was definitely a very distinct phase in my life that I recall of trying to prove that I was a man or man up as a response to the adults in my life, and then the people in my neighborhood reading me as femme or queer or gay. Then the then subsequent forms of violence moved to interventions that adults and people in my neighborhood tried to make in order to 'correct' my failed performance of masculinity. Now, damn, all these things are coming back to me.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. It's funny how it you floods you.

*Interviewee:* Right. In middle school and then elementary school, part of those interventions was my mother made me play football growing up. I remember her distinctly dropping me off at the football field and her telling my coach that she couldn't make me a man, so she needed them to make me a man. This is like her way of internalizing perhaps all of these myths by which single black mothers are demonized and blamed for raising kids who are either assigned male at birth and ended up becoming queer. A part of the ways that black women have—and specifically black single mothers have been pathologized.

Part of that was her internalizing ideas that she couldn't embrace me correctly or that the way I performed gender was somehow a reflection of her failure as a parent. She dropped me off and part of her intervention—where her intervention was making me play football. That all began this process by which I started performing this contrived masculinity. Then that escalated because then I started getting into fights with people in my neighborhood. I grew up in—I grew up around drug dealers and gang members. Physical fights could very easily escalate to—

*Interviewer:* You getting shot.

*Interviewee:* You getting shot or somebody stabbing you. What was I saying? Oh, yeah. All of this starts and really heightens when I was in high school, but this was the climax of that time. Part of me going to a magnet school meant that I didn't go to school in my neighborhood. I went to school—

*Interviewer:* Oh, yeah.

*Interviewee:* - to a different neighborhood that's closer to downtown Newark but actually not far from Rutgers Newark. I just stop really just—then I

formed new friend groups 'cause I started to meet people from other parts of the city who didn't live by me before I went to school with. I entered a different community other than the community people in my neighborhood.

*Interviewer:* Your reputation doesn't follow you because it's in a different part.

*Interviewee:* Right. I mean it still did 'cause everybody knows everybody through some shared community but also yeah, that too. Yeah, I get to school, and then I very distinctly—and I'm still putting on this facade of a contrived masculinity, and I'm still arguing with teachers and sometimes skipping school. I was a very brilliant, talented, accomplished student throughout my entire academic career. Teachers really—in which is how I got to this magnet school. Then teachers really started noticing that and there was this one teacher, in particular, Mr. O'Niel, who it turns out—who was my world history teacher. Mr. O'Niel, I remember very distinctly, pulled me to the side one day after class or something.

He was like, "Look," 'cause me and my friends would all sit in the back of the class. I had formed some friend group, in my freshman year, we were this click. We would all sit in the back of the class and would talk, and we would joke and be class clowns all that. I very distinctly remember this teacher pulling me to the side and being like, "Why are you wasting your time doing this dumb shit? When you're clearly really smart, really talented." He just had to accompany just a real ass conversation with me. Then—

*Interviewer:* It sounds like he really saw you.

*Interviewee:* Right. He really saw me and then also just acknowledged that. Like, "You're too smart to be doing this dumb shit. Then maybe sit in the front of class from that point on." It's so wild because years, literally years later, I found out that this teacher who saw me and affirmed me in different ways was trans.

*Interviewer:* Oh, my God.

*Interviewee:* Craziness, I know. I get—

*Interviewer:* Go; what?

*Interviewee:* Right. Totally. It was this trans level teacher who saw me and perhaps even knew what some of the shit that I was—the sources of the walls that I had to build out in order to survive. Yeah, and became—was really this catalyst who was like, "You're smart, and you're talented. You don't have to perform this hard masculine bullshit. Do what you gotta do, focus on school, and let all that other shit go. You don't have to prove anything to anybody." That really totally made a shift. Then he also recommended me for AP, for honors and then later AP English—AP history. That's the life—

*Interviewer:* He was really in your corner.

*Interviewee:* No, definitely. That made—marked the shift to my academic career, because I went from being in regular classes to being in honors and AP classes, advanced placement classes. I'm trying to think what else was remarkable about that last little freshman year. I was in a new school environment where I was being encouraged to pursue my academic talents as I was coming to know myself better around adults who had really positive impacts on my sense of self.

*Interviewer:* Oh, that's beautiful.

*Interviewee:* Yeah, it was very special now that I think about it.

*Interviewer:* Is it okay if we jump into two big categories?

*Interviewee:* Sure.

*Interviewer:* One is gonna be about Newark, and then one's gonna be about the LGBTQ identity. Does that sound cool?

*Interviewee:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Okay. In Newark, what's one of the earliest memories you have of Newark?

*Interviewee:* One of the earliest memories I have of Newark probably has to do with catching the bus to school, yeah.

*Interviewer:* How old were you when you caught that bus?

*Interviewee:* Well, the first memory that came to mind was me and my mother waking up at 6:00 a.m. and walking through the snow, just Central Avenue till the 24th bus stop and her dropping me off at school and then going to work. Then, yeah, the first thing that came to mind when you asked that question was just me catching buses to go to school.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Since that moment, do you think Newark has changed, or how has Newark changed?

*Interviewee:* Oh, totally. I mean, I haven't lived in Newark since—I moved out to Newark in 2009, so 10 years. It's been 10 years since I left Newark. I mean, think about public transportation, I would always catch the bus. I would always have to go downtown Newark to catch the bus home 'cause downtown Newark was the central bus station hub that— where all the buses converged to take you to the different—they don't call it burrows in Newark, they call it wards. Yeah, to take you to different wards. The downtown district has changed so drastically because of the ongoing urban development gentrification taking place in Newark. From the literal stores that were once downtown Newark to the new Prudential—Prudential built a new building and then demolished some historical building. The landscape and the architecture is just different. The stores are

different. I see white people in downtown Newark now, which I never saw white people downtown Newark when I was growing up.

*Interviewer:* Where did you come from?

*Interviewee:* Right. It seems like, or from year from when I do visit and mostly just travel from the downtown district to where I've been going. Yeah, one of the big changes I've noticed just over the years, it was the very visible gentrification taking place specifically in that downtown business district. Like the Hahne's building and the Rutgers developments and all the—yeah, there's just a bunch of changes in business, architecture, and people that have happened in the past 10 years.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Are there any ways that it's changed that you think most people are not aware of?

*Interviewee:* Has Newark changed in ways that most people are not aware of? I think generally, well, from what I've just observed from afar having not lived in a city in a decade. I know a lot of the shifts that are happening are primarily downtown Newark. Whatever both development in architecture and infrastructure, and even job building and the kinds of economic development, that's mostly centered downtown Newark; I don't think any of that has expanded to the wards outside of the downtown district or North side of Newark.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, 'cause there's North, South, West, there's a lot.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. I think the further you get away from the downtown districts in Newark; I think that those—the different kinds of development taking place hasn't or isn't evident yet. At the same time, I think that—well, I know that a lot of redevelopment is taking place along the New Jersey transit route.

*Interviewer:* Oh, the light rail?

*Interviewee:* Not the light rail. The New Jersey Transit Commuter Train that goes from New York Penn station travels through Newark and Essex County and eventually goes to the suburbs. I think that a lot of people from Newark who live in the outer—who live outside of the downtown district, I don't think—I'm not sure if they're aware of—well, maybe they are, that the city is changing and that the cost of living is rising. Or that Newark is in the next 20 to 30 years, I don't think Newark is gonna be much like Brooklyn, unfortunately, that style. I think that Newark is going to shift from being a predominantly black city. I think that a lot of resourced non-black people are starting to move in the city because it's more affordable but still accessible via public transportation to New York City.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. You think it's like—it's the next Brooklyn?

*Interviewee:* I'm not gonna say it's the next Brooklyn. I mean, I do, my grandmother has to move out of Newark because her rent, and she lived not too far from the train station. Her rent was increased. In my heart of hearts I wanna say it's not gonna be the next Brooklyn, but from what I'm gleaning from the ways my family has been displaced from Newark, I feel like yeah, the same ways that black and poor people are being displaced from Oakland and Brooklyn and here in Richmond, the same shit is happening in Newark.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Just to clarify, you're from the—you're from North Newark, right?

*Interviewee:* I'm from the Northward. Yes, North Newark.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Does that neighborhood have a name, this Northward?

*Interviewee:* It was just North Newark. I mean, the neighborhood that I lived and what we call it was—it was called the Ville, like Bakery Village 'cause the building that I—I live in a really big apartment complex and it was called Bakery Village. We called it the Ville. We called it Fourth Avenue and Ninth Street 'cause that was one of the main intersections where we hung out. We called it "under the bridge" 'cause it's right off the bridge. Yeah, those are the different names that we called it.

*Interviewer:* Cool. What, if anything, did you like or find appealing about living in Newark when you were over here?

*Interviewee:* What did I like? I liked a lot about living in Newark. Then there were some challenges. Again, I like the sense of extensive and expanded community of knowing my neighbors, feeling rooted in something bigger than me but a part of something bigger than me. Going out being in a city where—or being in a neighborhood where I literally knew everybody, everybody knew me and my family. That just felt very unique in one that I think I haven't experienced that since I left the city.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. That sense of intimate connection in a community.

*Interviewee:* Right. Or even just literally knowing all the neighbors in the building I live with. 'Cause I think that's one way that people, particularly black, poor folks can resist the forms of structural violence and racism, anti-black violence, economic injustice that we face by literally collaborating and being a community with the people around us and supporting each other. Whether it be going across the street and borrowing food or sugar or problem-solving or whatever there's an issue with my neighbor. I felt like growing up; there was some sense of a support network and a safety net because I could rely on other people to some degree whenever I needed help. Living outside of that context is just different.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Equal to liking or finding some things appealing, what have you found difficult or frustrating?

*Interviewee:* Now or growing up?

*Interviewer:* Both.

*Interviewee:* Well, growing up there really was just—I mean, there's so much frustration. Just in terms of the lack of resources available to people in my community, growing up was just astounding. In particular, for me as a queer kid, there was literally no—thankfully, high school, I had teachers who were queer who became systems who offered support. There was no community center; there were no organizations to provide support for my mother or me. Or my family growing up as a queer or me being queer or resources support me in that journey. That was really frustrating. What else was the frustrating part of this? I also meant that growing up here, I didn't have—feel the sense of unity because I just didn't know how to vibe other queer people. What else? Yeah, I'll just say that for now.

*Interviewer:* Okay. That was then, but what do you find frustrating now?

*Interviewee:* What I find frustrating now, even as—well, ooh, I'll say this, something I actually do find very frustrating. There's a growing, in particular, I'm a contemporary artist nearly growing art community in New York. Even growing up, but even now it felt like or it still in some ways—no, I can't really make that blanket statement.

*Interviewer:* You can make it and then not mean it. I mean, I don't know.

*Interviewee:* No. I don't like making generalizations. I'm trying to be very specific in my language.

*Interviewer:* Okay. I respect that.

*Interviewee:* Only because I think specificity is really important. I guess I get a sense, or I know that a lot of the development, particularly the money and the funds and the resources that are being invested in the downtown district, including, I think like Amazon, Audible, or whatever has a headquarters there.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Audible has a headquarters here.

*Interviewee:* Audible, Prudential, they're all of these—there's the Rutgers Express, right? That new art space. It's frustrating knowing that there are ways that people who grew up where I'm from who were criminalized, who were—whose livelihoods were really encumbered by crack, cocaine epidemic. Who had been locked up because of selling weed, which has now become legalized. Who had been implicated in the carceral system who haven't had access to educational opportunities will not be able to access all of the

resources coming into Newark. That's really frustrating? Yeah, I'll say that.

*Interviewer:* It sounds like you grew up in a resource desert, and now that you're older, you're seeing all these things happen, but people are still affected by the past and the lack of resources in the community?

*Interviewee:* Right, and won't be able to access those communities because or those resources 'cause most of those resources are centered in the downtown district. There's that same level of investment, this is taking place in the wards outside of the downtown district where the university isn't and where—outside of the downtown district.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What's your perspective on Newark's connection or relationship to other nearby cities or suburbs or places? Do people come to Newark, do people leave Newark? What's happening?

*Interviewee:* Well, from what I know from grad school, well, we're talking about Newark in particular, right?

*Interviewer:* Right.

*Interviewee:* I don't know. I mean, I grew up in Newark and left at 17 when I went away to college and haven't been back. I having lived in Newark proper since. I know that there are people, not a lot or I don't know if there are a lot of people my age. I imagine that there are people like me, who go away to college and don't move back. Although I do know a lot—I had a lot of friends who went to school in-state and then moved back to Newark. They're really involved and invested in various social justice movement in Newark, including holding the city accountable to cleaning up the lead in Newark's water system.

I guess what I'm articulating is that as someone who grew up in Newark, I have a lot of pride still in the city. It's like the place that gave birth to me, and I'm still very much caring about, and just invested in the city. Still thinking about ways to potentially help to catalyze or energize to take part in accessing and cultivating resources for people who grew up in Newark and have been impacted by the social, political, and economic neglect that a lot of people in the city have experience. Also, know I have a lot of friends who still live in Newark who are also invested in that same vision.

I also know that or get the sense that there are a lot of people moving in from the suburbs or from just reverse migration or reverse white flight, where the white people who lived in predominantly black cities before the '60s were moved out into the suburbs, and went to highways and commuter transportation was built are now moving back into the cities. Then like we talked about earlier, black people who've lived in Newark are now being

displaced and moving outside of the city. That's a part of just a national pattern. I know a lot of people live in Newark and then for the same reason, well, because it's less expensive than New York City, will migrate or travel commute from Newark to New York and vice versa. Does that answer your question?

*Interviewer:* Yes, it does. After the riot, white flight—white people left, and they took their resources and their economic stability. Now that there's these—

*Interviewee:* We also kept the jobs.

*Interviewer:* Huh?

*Interviewee:* We also kept jobs and Prudential or all these corporations.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Now that transportation is here, and jobs are here, people of higher economic class or white people are coming back. It's just reverse white flight.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. I'm gonna ask you a few—a couple of personal questions, and if you don't wanna answer, that's cool. I wanna start with what role, if any, has religion played in your life?

*Interviewee:* I grew up in a pretty agnostic household. My mother wasn't very strong, or a devout—didn't follow religion. Yeah, my mother didn't really practice religion. Then because I lived with my mother, I didn't necessarily practice religion. Me, and my mother have never even been into a church together. My grandmother is Southern Baptist. I grew up participating and going to the Baptist church on Sundays until I had made a decision not to. I also have some of my mother's brothers, and sisters are Muslim, so I practiced Islam as a child 'cause I was really close to one of my uncles. I'm mostly; I'm interested—my experiences growing up with religion.

I was mostly interested in the rituals of both Islam and Christianity. I never was too really invested in the dogma or the scripture, but I was mostly interested in what happened, how people congregated, got together. I was very interested and fascinated by Islam, the call to prayer, and the sound in the music that were a part of the rituals of prayer and the movement that was part of like prayer. Similarly, in Christianity, I was very much interested and fascinated by gospel music and the transcendental and ecstatic experiences that people had at church.

That was mostly my relationship to religion and Christianity because I got to opt-in and opt-out of participating in religion 'cause I didn't grow up in a household. I only was forced to go to church when I was at my grandmother's house, but I didn't—because I live with my mother's and most part I didn't grow up in a



household where I was forced to participate in religion. Yeah, I got to—I participated in it as a kid and whatever I was interested in.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. It sounds like you had a lot of spiritual freedom.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. I never was really invested in anti-queer other biblical passages 'cause I just—I've never really believed in this shit anyway.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. From what I'm hearing from you, there's this ritual and cultural and connection aspect of religion that you appreciate. You didn't really subscribe to its anti-LGBTness or the dogma behind what they might represent to some people.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Oh, that's beautiful. I wanna get into this. How, at this point, would you describe your sexual orientation or gender identity?

*Interviewee:* That's a great question. That's a funny question because actually, I think it's—isn't today, allegedly Nationally Coming Out Day?

*Interviewer:* Today is National Coming Out Day, how do I know, is my mama's birthday? I always know.

*Interviewee:* *[Laughter]* That's so funny. Yeah, I was thinking about that earlier, maybe I said something and post about it on my Instagram. I was like, "I actually never came out to anybody in my family." Well, I never had to coming out experience really. It happened in my body on my own terms. Now, it's just passing, or that's not just a part of my gender embodiment. There's no in or out to me. I'm just here. What was that you asked me about? Oh, how do I describe my gender and my sexuality? I would describe myself as non-binary, as trans-femme, as banjee kind, *[laughter]* as a boy-girl. Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Can you describe to me, because those—different people describe those things differently. I wanna know what do those things—what do those, I guess, 'labels' or descriptions mean to you?

*Interviewee:* Right. The language of non-binary, gender-queer, trans femme is language that I encountered when I was later in high school. When I was a senior in high school and then in college that described my gendered subjectivity. Then what I realized was that similar to—well, I also realized that being black was such an integral part of my gender embodiment, which is why I've said the term banjee kind or boy-girl. Because I think my gender embodiment and my experience of gender is very intimately tied to growing up in Newark and having a dialect. You can call it an accent that is North East that is very geographically specific.

My sense of gender embodiment very much has to do with growing up in the streets in the hood. That's why I use—ascibe the terms banjee kind, boy-girl, hood fag, all of those describes the

ways that my refusal to part or how both my sense of blackness and the gender embodiment I experience as someone who doesn't ascribe to normative gender. My best inner—and as someone who is also from the hood, I feel like all of those experiences of class of margin of race, of geography, of gender, are all embodied by terms like hood fag, banjee kind, boy-girl that aren't necessarily defined by words like trans femme or non-binaries. Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, because as I understand it, the beautiful thing about language is that we can break or create it as we need.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Sometimes, there's a limit to a word or a word was described—was created by a certain set of people who represent certain values. As I hear you talk about—identifying as boy-girl, hood fag, banjee kind, it's like your geography, it's your body. It's like the origin of your family. It's like where you come from; it's your class. It sounds to me like a part of describing your gender orientation or sorry, your gender identity and your sexual orientation is creating a language where you can exist without having to qualify it any other way.

*Interviewee:* Right.

*Interviewer:* Oh, that's beautiful.

*Interviewee:* Thank you.

*Interviewer:* Yes. No, this is like, oh, I love. Can you tell me, it sounds like your mom paid attention—it sounds your mom was watching you as a little kid, hence why she puts you to do things like football, which I'm assuming is American football?

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* How did you first become aware of your LGBTQ difference from your heterosexual or it's just gender counterparts?

*Interviewee:* I guess I was—it really was first grade where I knew that I felt different from the other boys. I think, in part, because in first grade, was really when—within the social context of school and my peer group, where people started to segregate based off of gender. For example, we're on the playground, right? In high school, oh, no, in elementary school in first grade, we're on a playground, boys would go play tag and run and play football. The girls would be on the other side of the field playing jump rolls and double dutch, playing hand games, like getting pat. I would always want to go play with the girls and play hand games and play double touch, and just on the playground, I would just go play with the girls because that's what I wanted to do. Then my peers would sometimes be like, "Oh, you're a boy. Go over there with the boys. Why do you hang out with the girls?"

*Interviewer:* Telling you who you are?

*Interviewee:* Right, or identify, that's when I became aware of like, "Oh, people are telling me I'm a boy even though I want to hang out with the girls." I just saw this space where I feel comfortable, and I feel safe, and my sense of self in a way that would move my body, and the games that I wanna play are the games that the girls play. Yeah, it was around those times when I started to realize that I was—I felt differently than how other people—the way I felt and my body was different than how other people experienced or read my body.

*Interviewer:* How did you first learn about the existence of other LGBTQ people?

*Interviewee:* Well, kids are really perceptive. Even in first-grade people would call—I knew what gay—I didn't know what gay was. I didn't know what it meant. People would call me gay in first grade 'cause I was so feminine. That was the way people marked my difference. I knew that gay meant—gay was about—gay describe men who liked other men. In first grade, other kids were calling me gay, and I think I once asked my mother what gay was, and she didn't tell me. Maybe she said it was a bad word, don't say it. I don't really remember how she responded. I distinctly remember being called gay in first grade and having this awareness that both gay described boys who like other boys, but that also gay was perceived as something that was bad.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. It's the two things.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. It sounds like from the jump in first grade; the girls are telling you to go with the boys, people are probably calling you gay, I'm assuming. Your mom, for lack of a better word, is trying to fix you. I think we already answered the question, but I'm gonna answer ...ask it anyway. How did other people in your life become aware of your, I guess, LGBTQ vibe, essence, being?

*Interviewee:* Mostly through my embodiment of gender. As a kid, I was the feminine. I walked around with lymph wrists. My mother, adults, would tell me to fix my hands. I liked to do hair. I would do my aunt's hair when she came to my house. My sense of—my embodied gender was always read as a feminine. Then I enjoy participating in the games, play, participating in different forms of play that girls participated in. People just always read me as gay, even as a child. When I got into high school, when I finally arrived at language, both language to define myself, but also the confidence and the self-worth to just inhabit my body on my own terms. I started to wear makeup and express myself through fashion and paint my nails and dress and present myself in ways

that people read as gay. I never told my mother that I was gay. I never came out to my mother or my grandmother or anybody in my family.

*Interviewer:* You just are.

*Interviewee:* I just started to, I knew for myself that I was—I think I started to describe myself as genderqueer even at the time. I knew that my embodied gender experience was—that I didn't feel like a boy or a girl that I ascribe to. I had an affinity for femininity or femme expression even though people told me that I didn't, or it wasn't, or it could it be so. Then I started to reclaim those things in high school, and so I just—I've literally just started painting my nails and wearing makeup, and I think one day my mother asked me in the car if I was gay. I was just like, "Yeah." Then that was just that.

*Interviewer:* How old were you when she asked that?

*Interviewee:* I was a junior or senior, and so I was like 17, maybe.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. That was right before you left.

*Interviewee:* Exactly, it was probably, yeah, exactly, the months before. It was the school year. It was my senior year in high school, and subsequently, right before I went away to college.

*Interviewer:* It sounds like—but at least what I'm learning is first-grade people are noticing you're a boy, act like such, and people are trying to correct you unless you really fix yourself. Then in middle school, you're getting into these fights with parent, administrators, peers. Then in high school, I think it's Mr. O'Neill. Right?

*Interviewee:* Mm-hmm.

*Interviewer:* Mr. O'Neill in freshman year was like, "Hey, you don't have to front. You can just be, and I know you're smart, and you're—you can do great things. Let's do that." How did that moment change you in your sophomore, junior, and senior year after having that conversation with him as it relates to you not having this masculine mask anymore?

*Interviewee:* Yeah, well, and mostly for me, it meant that I just allowed myself to be a nerd and invest in myself and focus on doing well academically. Which was always a safe, not a safe haven. What's the one before? Always a source of confidence. It was like, "Oh, people call me a fag, will call me gay but guess what? I'm smart, and I get good grades." At some point, that was a source of no, not that really was a source of—I always had pride in the fact that I'm smart and exceeded well academically. I think that after I had this conversation with Mr. O'Neill, I no longer felt invested in trying to perform or prove a certain kind of masculinity.

*Interviewer:* Ooh, okay.

*Interviewee:*

I'm trying to think about my sophomore year. What happened? I'm trying to be more specifically. I know that my sophomore year in high school, let me think I was in some honors classes. What else? Oh, we moved buildings. My sophomore year Science High School moved from our old building, which was on, oh, my God, on Rector Street. It was a really small brick building that used to be a beer brewery. We moved to this brand new campus. That was in maybe 2010. I'm trying to think, my sophomore years, I wanna say that my sophomore year maybe—oh, because I also was taking different classes, some of them advanced classes, I just wasn't around the same peer group. The boys who I was hanging out with, I wasn't really hanging out around them anymore.

I was meeting new friends. I was exploring my interest in fashion outside of school. I was participating in these fashion shows. Oh, that's it, yes. I started doing all these fashion, hanging out with people outside of—I found just a new group of friends outside of the people who I hung out with in my neighborhood and outside of the people that I hang out with my freshman year. I actually started hanging out with more gay people. It was the first time when I really started to hang out or see more gay people. Really it was my first time spending time with people who self-identified as gay because all of them felt—I would do these local high school fashion shows or college fashion shows on different colleges.

A lot of the fashion community in Newark is catalyzed and really pioneered by gay men who were runway coaches, who were designers. Even though I didn't necessarily start to identify as queer or gay yet, I was actually thinking around other gay people. Just really fascinated by and inspired by being around men who inhabited femininity just so comfortably. I started very specifically, I remember my sophomore year, in particular, I was doing these fashion shows, and a lot of the people who, well, a lot of the designers and a lot of the models and the fashion shows that I would participate in were also a part of Newark's Ballroom Theme.

*Interviewer:*

Work.

*Interviewee:*

They would model and walk runway as—in the same way that you would walk runway within the ballroom community. You're in a runway, which is swing your heads and moving in this very stylize feminine gesture with very long legs, long neck, hip slaying. Oh, so I'm learning about the ballroom scene and runway by these runway coaches who I'm walking fashion shows with, and they're teaching me about the different styles. I wanna learn how to walk European runway, but I was literally—I just went, I was both, in fact, comfortable and what do you call it? In this masculine performance that I had come to have it out of survival, but wanting to break out of it, but literally just not knowing how.

I remember learning about just different styles of runway and wanting to walk European runway, but being afraid to. Anyway, I just started to like that experience of participating in fashion shows and meeting gay people. For the first time, I seem to hang around gay men, and being introduced to the ballroom scene and men who deviated from hegemonic unlimited masculinity was definitely inspiring. In part, it mostly gave me the inspiration to continue expressing myself through fashion. Even though I didn't—I wasn't quite ready, but I didn't into my gender embodiment yet. Yeah, that was definitely some experiences where I was around adult gay people.

Spending time around adult gay people more, mostly being a voyeur in these spaces, not actively participating but being fascinated, bearing witness, and being inspired by these communities. Then also around the sound—so that was my sophomore year. Then my junior year, I started to become even more academically inclined. I was excelling in school in my sophomore year. Was it between my sophomore year and my junior year that I became a page? It was in my senior year. Let me get my timeline together.

*Interviewer:*

No, hey, it's cool.

*Interviewee:*

Essentially, I started spending more time away from my neighborhood and people I grew up around. Then also I started to spend—find communities outside of school, I'm just trying to think of all of them. Oh, so my sophomore year, I also participated in this peer education program at the Greater Newark Conservancy. Again, it was another community outside of school. Then also outside of my neighborhood where I just met new people and almost learning about ecology or something I was interested in. My community started to expand even more. It was between my, yeah, between my sophomore and my junior year, I started to—I participated in this Summer College Prep Program at Princeton.

*Interviewer:*

Work.

*Interviewee:*

Yeah, it was the Summer College Prep Program where the W.E. Du Bois Scholars Intitute. It was a summer prep program on Princeton's campus for—and they mixed—part of the program was young black teenagers in a public school district from Newark. We got scholarships because we were from Newark. Then some of the other, the rest of the people in the program were—some people were from California, all over the—black people from all over the US and also black people from different class backgrounds. It was a mix of people like me who are poor from the hood, public school educated, and wealthy black people who came from families that were college-educated and vacation at Martha's vineyard.

That was such a transformative experience for me. Both being an in intellectually rigorous environment, but then also living outside of Newark for the first time. Living on Princeton's campus and living in Princeton, New Jersey, which is a suburb and a wealthy city. Being around just so much wealth and resources and being around black teenagers who had different class and experiences than I did, yeah, that was super, super transformative. I became really good friends with—my friend group just expanded so much so outside of the hood, the neighborhood I grew up in, and even my high school. I met all these really wonderful, amazing friends who introduced me.

I just had a range—I got a real range of black experience in the US that was very different than my own. I was able to make connections, very authentic connections around my growing consciousness-raising. Yeah, my growing, budding consciousness development around—what I'm I saying? Oh, yeah, around activism, learning. It was the first time that I took a black history course. I felt really empowered, to learning about my history and the history of black people in the US, and being in community of—was really talented and smart and different black people. Yeah, I probably won't—I'm probably repeating myself a lot. It was very informative.

*Interviewer:*

No, it's okay. It sounds like, correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like some turning points for you was first being seen by Mr. O'Neill, so you don't have to front and then learning how to stylize and see and bear witness to the expressions people have on the runway in fashion. Then learning about what it means to be black in different places and just being exposed to a different economic—people of economic background. These are all different turning points that opened your eyes to something different.

*Interviewee:*

I guess what I'm realizing is that all these moments really introduced me to communities of people who didn't have the same gender expression or expectations around masculinity as where I grew up in the hood. 'Cause growing up on Fourth Avenue, Ninth Street; you had to walk a certain way in order to get through the block and not be harassed or assaulted.

*Interviewer:*

Yeah. Acclimate because otherwise, you're a target.

*Interviewee:*

Exactly.

*Interviewer:*

In this neighborhood, it's dangerous to be a target. You do not wanna be a target.

*Interviewee:*

Right. I just really started to meet people who had a range of different—who just operated and moved through the world differently. I got to see the possibilities of both, what my life could

be like in terms of pursuing my interest, living—inhabiting my body on my own terms. What life could look like outside of the constraints of growing up in Newark?

*Interviewer:* Yeah. It sounds like different moments of breaking free.

*Interviewee:* Also being in communities of people for the first time who—unlike my mother or my high school, middle school principal who respected my agency and autonomy as a human being and didn't feel the need to punish me. He listened to my needs and engage my curiosity and my world view. I felt affirmed in seeing again in all these new spaces that I was inhabiting. Does that make sense?

*Interviewer:* Yes, that makes sense—this next question is long. If you don't get it, then I can repeat it or reword it. Actually no, before we jump into that one, we've been talking about this throughout the interview, but just to state it explicitly, how has your racial and religious identities affected your LGBTQ identity?

*Interviewee:* As I mentioned, a lot earlier, even throughout this conversation, being black has been very central to my experience as a queer person. Part of that means that for me, politically as a person invested in the liberation of black people and queer people. That means I'm definitely invested and living a life to dismantle simultaneous—the forms of oppression that inhabited me and my community's lives, including anti-black violence, including the carceral state that polices and criminalizes black people and black and queer people and black and trans folks. Dismantling transphobia, liberating folks from all of these systems of violence, and living a life liberated from all of these systems of violence. The way how that looks in my life is that sometimes I haven't always been in communities, but in queer communities where there was black people. When I went to college, I went to—undergrad; I went to Stanford.

*Interviewer:* That's all the way in California, right?

*Interviewee:* That's in California, in the Southern Bay area. Going to and living in California, but in particular, Stanford made me realize that there are hegemonic assimilationist gay and lesbian people who are not invested in the liberation of black people or trans people.

*Interviewer:* Period.

*Interviewee:* Period.

*Interviewer:* 'Cause I think there's—as a witness there was you experiencing the queer community through runways at Newark. How was that different from your experience over at Stanford?

*Interviewee:* Yes. Those communities they really exist when I went to Stanford. It was liberating on one hand 'cause I was in this new place. I was living on my own; I was in California for the first time. I was away



from my family, having had various ongoing struggles of running away from home and not throwing your forums at home. It was really exciting to have this sense that I could really recreate myself on my own terms. I went to Stanford very much embodying like a boy-girl kind of hood fag aesthetic, but arriving into a place that was very sterile, very sanitized, very white, very assimilationist in some aspects. While I felt liberated to some degree because these conditions of being black and queer in Newark weren't there. I also was feeling—there was some challenges of—and releasing culture, transitioning to being in a culture of abundance, living predominantly around white people around rich white people.

*Interviewer:* Around really rich white people.

*Interviewee:* Around really fucking rich white people. Yeah, all of that.

*Interviewer:* I mean, that's what? Palo Alto, right?

*Interviewee:* Yeah. The Silicon Valley.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, that's right. That's mad money.

*Interviewee:* Mad money.

*Interviewer:* I'm hearing that to one extent, it sounds like you were able to identify that difference and be like, "Wait a minute, you're not about black people, you're not about trans people? Wait; what? It sounds like it was another way coming into how you define your identity and also the purpose of that identity and exploring and defining what liberation means, occupying and embodying who you are.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Aw, this is so beautiful. How has being LGBTQ plus-minus whatever, made your life different from the way it would have been if you did not have this identity or different embodiment?

*Interviewee:* To be honest, I think the only reason I'm alive and have survived some of the conditions of growing up poor and black and in the hood is because I'm queer. By that, I mean, being and inhabiting and embody in difference and people telling me I'm different my whole life, and then me coming to accept. And understand my difference as a source of strength, as a site of abundance, allowed me to really lead a life and explore and cultivate the possibility of a life that's so different than anybody around me and my family or in the neighborhood I grew up in. I just really had to—I've really just had to—there were no possibilities of what it looked like for me to be a self-determined, liberated, affirmed, black queer person in Newark whose life was not limited by various kinds of structural violence.

I had to go out in the world and build and create that life on my own terms and cultivate a community who affirmed and supported my vision for myself. If I wasn't queer, I wouldn't have done that. If I wasn't queer, I would probably still be in fucking Newark either be subject to all the shit that black people from Newark are subject to, in jail or are dead or whatever other ways that people are denied livelihoods from—who grow up where I'm from.

*Interviewer:* How has your perception of that identity changed over time?

*Interviewee:* How's my perception of my queerness changed over time?

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Or do you want me to ask a different way?

*Interviewee:* Sure. I think I gotta be asked a little different.

*Interviewer:* I'm curious to know people at different points in their life might use a different label, or maybe a language is created around the label that people more closely identify with. Or at one point, they might just be like, "None of this works for me, so I'm just gonna invent myself something new." I'm curious to see your perception of a label or an identity and how it's changed?

*Interviewee:* Totally. My freshman year in college, I remember this was the conversation that came with me every class. A lot of me and my teachers often talked about what's the need to define or describe oneself as queer? Because queer had really within academia had now become a discipline, queer studies was a canonized field—legitimized field of study within the university system. There was scholarship and knowledge being forged around that identity. A lot of my teachers who were now queer had grew up or came of age as either lesbian or gay and that the language that they use to describe themselves. Then, of course, language evolve, gender and—I guess gender and sexuality became more expansive.

There was also—I feel to say that it felt very important when I was in college to identify as queer both as politics as a way to affirm my difference. Because queer was—didn't feel as limiting, gay never fit me 'cause it didn't—it cuts away my sense and my gender identity. Anyway, I say all that to say that it felt really important to name myself when I was in college. Now, it feels important to name myself down in part because I'm aware of the need to build both—visit community around being—now I'm an artist, and I'm a professor.

*Interviewer:* Work.

*Interviewee:* As you might imagine, there are not many black gender, queer, trans femme artists, or professors within the US or at least in the context I know. There's lots of underrepresentation of black trans femme, non-binary professors, and artists. It feels really important for me to name myself as black and genderqueer, to attempt to

build community within the art academic spaces that I inhabit. While at the same time, I don't know how important it is for my sense of self anymore to call myself queer or trans femme or non-binary.

*Interviewer:* How come?

*Interviewee:* In part, because sometimes I really do feel like being—naming myself as—my understanding of blackness is so expansive that my—it sometimes, it extends to and describes my gender. This recent decade or no, since like the '80s, we've witnessed how queerness has become a commodity and has been whitewashed and is no longer—it doesn't feel like an identity that's about confronting and dismantling state-sanctioned violence. Queer feels like a commodity that is being sold, that has market value, that is about ascending or assimilating into the American hegemony. That does not define my politics at all.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. As you're describing this, I think about the whole conversation around Ellen DeGeneres being in the football stadium with George Bush. The whole critique around that.

*Interviewee:* Right. Queer just feels normal, and nobody's trying to be normal.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. We're above normal. We're better than that.

*Interviewee:* Right.

*Interviewer:* I have a few more questions, and then I wanna ask you a little bit about your art if that's okay. How much more time do you have? I don't wanna take up too much of your day.

*Interviewee:* I'm really enjoying this conversation, so I'm invested. The rest of my day is me going to my studio. I'm happy to keep talking.

*Interviewer:* Okay. What places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people? Then the second part to that question is the specific people that you associate within the runway world that you grew up with.

*Interviewee:* Places, downtown Newark just always felt very queer to me, but in particular, Halsey Street, 'cause Halsey Street, growing up, I would joke. Halsey Street felt a little like the Soho of Newark. You would go down to Halsey Street or downtown Newark, I would see other black gay people, and it felt like they were collected. Then there were cafes and bars and all of that—those types of things, there was a social world. Halsey Street, I always identified with being black in Newark. Then when I grew, when I became older, that's where I would go and get drinks with friends or hang out.

There's always the Halsey Street Festival. One of my friends June, no, is it June? Yeah, used to own a jewelry store, one which is a black lesbian, a legend in new Newark's queer community. A lot of the restaurants downtown—back in 2011, when I was a sophomore

in college, I spent my summer and come back—well, I came back home that summer. I was a part of the initial group of community organizers and Rutgers Newark Professors who helped organize the Queer Newark Oral History Conference.

*Interviewer:* Wait; what?

*Interviewee:* Mm-hmm. Which then later became the queer Newark, what we're doing right now.

*Interviewer:* What? Wait, so you helped start that, and this is the—is this the first time you're being interviewed?

*Interviewee:* This is my first time getting interviewed. Somebody emailed me a couple of years ago and asked to interview me, but I haven't lived in Newark so long. There's been, I think, some turnover around the initial organizers, so I know—I think it's largely run by grad students now, right?

*Interviewer:* Yeah. I'm a Ph.D. grad student, yeah.

*Interviewee:* Totally. I think between from 2011 to now, there have been shifts in the cohort of grad students who've been a part of it. Yeah, I helped organize the first Queer Oral History Conference.

*Interviewer:* How cool is that?

*Interviewee:* Yeah, that was really—I think that was so exciting to be a part of. I was gonna say is that we used to meet a lot at these little art cafe. There was an art cafe downtown. That's when we started to do a lot of this work of—a lot of just brainstorming, worked for the conference on Halsey Street. I associate Halsey Street with queer Newark because that's literally where we would go to when we started planning the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me, there—it was in your, I think you have said your sophomore year of high school, there was a couple of fashion designers who were gay man who knew how to stylize for the runway. Do you remember who these men were?

*Interviewee:* Yes. One of them was this runway coach called Timothy Smirk. He was in the house of Jordan's Ion.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. He was a part of the Jordan's, what?

*Interviewee:* Mm-hmm. The Jordan's, which is historically Newark Ballroom House.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. They participated in the Fireballs with the house Mother Bernie.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. Yeah. I was at the Fireball.

*Interviewer:* Oh, wake. Okay. I'll make sure to check them out. Any other artists or I'll just start with that one?

*Interviewee:* Not who come to mind, that was like Tim, 'cause Timothy would—was also in the ballroom scene in a Jordan's Ion. Then also would organize fashion shows a lot and produce fashion shows. That's the one who comes up. Oh, Douglaz Stylez, I think. Yeah, Douglas. Douglas Stylez would post this annual fundraiser. It was a fashion show fundraiser that was held in Newark at I wanna say Robert Choux Hotel but another black gay man who was a part of this fashion world, local fashion community.

*Interviewer:* Cool. What do you like best about being LGBTQ plus-minus A plus?

*Interviewee:* What do I like best?

*Interviewer:* Yeah.

*Interviewee:* What I love about being queer is well; I love this culture that's born from black queer culture, like voguing, runway, these creative movement forums. I love, let me think. I love the language. There's this lingo, just black queer vernacular that, yeah, that's just sounds really beautiful. Also, I feel like I'm part of a secret society. When I meet another black queer person who is a part of the parlance and knows the lingo, and we start talking, or we're in our language, and other people can't understand what we're saying. I feel like I'm part of this elite secret society.

*Interviewer:* I mean, it is.

*Interviewee:* Right. Exactly. I love the language. I loved the dance, the movement. I loved, that is born out of struggle, right, but also a way of forming unity in that struggle—also, a way to inhabit your body more fully, particularly through movement. I love literally just the culture born out of black queer experience from writers like James Baldwin and Essex Hemphill. Filmmakers like Marlon Riggs and Tourmaline. Just artists who have articulated or somehow rendered some element or aspects of black, queer, trans-non-binary experience.

*Interviewer:* What do you find the most challenging about being LGBTQ?

*Interviewee:* What I find challenging about being black and queer is sometimes forging community can be a challenge for me. Also, just in general, just being so deeply misunderstood. Knowing that I will operate and inhabit spaces where people don't understand me and that's just fine, but having to deal with that. Also, just sometimes, the loneliness of being the only person in the room, particularly as a black queer artist and professor. Those are all some challenges.

*Interviewer:* When you say forge community, and that's difficult. Is there an experience or a moment that comes to mind?

*Interviewee:* Going to college was one experience where it took me a long time to find my tribe. 'Cause even when I did find my community amongst black gay people, it was like they were gay men, and I wasn't a man or identified as gay. Black gay people, black lesbian, and gay people can still traffic and participate in transphobia, and some phobia. Specifically finding black trans femme, non-binary community was—can be a challenge.

*Interviewer:* When you said not being understood, what do you think people fail to understand?

*Interviewee:* To be honest, I can't even tell you because I understand myself and [laughter].

*Interviewer:* Yeah [laughter]. Like, "Listen, I don't know why it's so hard for you."

*Interviewee:* Right? I know who I am and so I don't necessarily know how other people—but I'm also—I'm just not—I'm also just okay with not being legible, but understood by people and that's also just fine for me.

*Interviewer:* If you see me as an outer space alien, well, that's on you. I'm not gonna come to your planet just to make you feel okay.

*Interviewee:* Right.

*Interviewer:* It sounds like you had Mr. O'Niell—so right now, the question that I'm getting at is, have you—how have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere? It sounds like the fashion was a good entry point into that? Then coming back to get ready for the conference. How did you come to know about the conference or the people who were doing this?

*Interviewee:* Also, so when I was in high school, I had lesbian teachers who became a part of—were really supportive and became a part of my community. By the time I was—when I was a senior, I helped found the first GSA at my high school.

*Interviewer:* What? You have not talked about that at all.

*Interviewee:* Oh yeah. Well, I helped find the first GSA at my high school.

*Interviewer:* Aw.

*Interviewee:* Through that, I became friends with other queer people in my high school. Then also my adviser ended up connecting me with an activist who was doing work around—who was working that—who had convened and organize an LGBTQ youth conference at Rutgers Newark back in 2009.

*Interviewer:* When you say youth, is it high school or college or both?

*Interviewee:* Highschool. They were looking for high school students from Newark to participate in a panel. My teacher recommended me,

and that's how I ended up meeting Darnell Moore who became a really great friend and mentor but who was an activist working in Newark's queer community. That's how I ended up becoming a part of the organizing committee for the Queer Newark Oral History Conference.

*Interviewer:* Beautiful. What was the name of the person who organized the conference and the teacher who was the supervisor for the GSA club?

*Interviewee:* For the person who organized the conference was Darnell Moore.

*Interviewer:* The youth conference?

*Interviewee:* Yeah. The LGBTQ Youth Conference.

*Interviewer:* Oh, okay. Who was the GSA advisor for your school club?

*Interviewee:* My GSA advisor, her name is Mara Hughes.

*Interviewer:* Mary Hughes?

*Interviewee:* Mara, M-A-R-A. Last name is Hughes, H-U-G-H-E-S.

*Interviewer:* Okay. That's the end of the formal questions that I have here as part of the typical Queer Newark Oral history project. I think that your art is so beautiful.

*Interviewee:* Oh, wow. Thank you.

*Interviewer:* Just like kind of the ways that you're participating and engaging in activism. One is a reflection on the Stonewall riots. One is, what is it? A process of unbecoming/becoming a gender or your gender? Just doing a quick reflection on your work, is there a piece that really stands out to you as something—a piece that you feel that transformed you or transformed the audience you were working with?

*Interviewee:* Totally. I think that my first—the first performance, my first solo performance, which was entitled unearthing, it was really similar to my career, my trajectory, me cultivating my voice as an artist. That was the first solo work that I presented publicly in which I'm buried in the amount of —

*Interviewer:* Wait, pause you—is that Jaime?

*Interviewee:* Jaime Lee, yeah.

*Interviewer:* You know, Jaime Lee?

*Interviewee:* Mm-hmm.

*Interviewer:* Oh, my God. I went to college with her, and she was part of the queer and trans—she was a part of the queer and trans people of color group on my campus.

*Interviewee:* Word, yeah, that's my sis.

*Interviewer:* What. She was a intern at the Cross-Cultural Center, where I was an intern. She also worked with spaces, the Education Advocacy for Unrepresented Lower-Income Students.

*Interviewee:* Dope. Yes, for the connections.

*Interviewer:* Yes. Okay. Oh, I'm so sorry. I was looking at the pictures while you were talking, and I recognized her. Okay. Sorry, so continue.

*Interviewee:* Exactly. That's a part of the community of black trans, femme folks that who I would collaborate with or bring into my art practice. Including Gabe, who is a friend who you talked about earlier. Me and Gabe have—

*Interviewer:* Oh, millennial uncle, okay.

*Interviewee:* Millennial uncle, Gabe, has been in one of my performances. Unearthing was a way for me to—it was me literally excavating, unearthing my sensitive self, both black and queer, trans femme identity. Unearthing these seminal stories, some of which we talked about today that have been—that informed and transformed my identity. I'm buried in this mound of earth, and I cover my—I transformed my flesh with paint and glitter to become this otherworldly being that resembles a tree but that—

*Interviewer:* That's like space tree.

*Interviewee:* Right, exactly. Yeah, because it was just performance about me giving language and sharing, and coming to terms with some of my own narratives and lived experience. Then also like—but doing that within a community of other black trans, non-binary queer folks. I think that performance was really critical to my artistic practice but also me using art to share and use storytelling to uplift my experience. Also to create community with other black queer, trans, non-binary folks. Thinking through personal memory, personal history movement and embodiment and become—trying to create these metaphors and think about my sense of self. Unearthing is ongoing process of self-reflection and self-discovery.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. 'Cause I think what stands out to me in this interview is even from first grade, you've already—you've always had this spirit, this essence, this being within you. For different reasons like earthing you and then you in this process of unearthing yourself.

*Interviewee:* Exactly.

*Interviewer:* Okay, cool. If I ever connect with Jamie again, I'll make sure to talk with her.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. Esperanza?

*Interviewer:* Yeah, Esperanza. Well, I had a different name back then, so I don't know if she'll recognize me.

*Interviewee:* Gotcha. Let me see. Are you on Instagram?



*Interviewer:* Yeah, but we're still doing the interviews. I'll give it to you afterwards, okay [*laughter*].

*Interviewee:* Oh, sorry. Yeah, cause I'll probably talk to Jamie tonight or this weekend. I'm just like, "Will have to let her know that communities and worlds have collided."

*Interviewer:* Yes. [*Laughter*] Oh, my gosh, so funny. I think for me, of course, the part of the interview is to gather the crucial information of Newark's LGBTQ people seeing resistance, et cetera. Especially in light of that LA, New York City, Chicago, San Francisco got, all these highlights that they deserve, 'cause they do great work, but so does Newark. Is there a peace—for people who are listening to this interview, is there somewhere where they can go to find more of your work?

*Interviewee:* Yes. Where people can go find my work?

*Interviewer:* Yes.

*Interviewee:* I have a website [Kiyanwilliams.com](http://Kiyanwilliams.com). My work is currently—I work long view at the Brooklyn Museum so people can go to Brooklyn Museum to see my work. My website and get my Instagram, which is just @Kiyanwilliams, places that archive my creative and intellectual practice.

*Interviewer:* Beautiful. I don't think you have a Twitter, right?

*Interviewee:* No, I don't have a Twitter. I might but I don't do Twitter.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Yeah, I was trying to find you on Twitter, but Darnell Moore just says your name, but it doesn't add your Twitter handle.

*Interviewee:* Yeah, I don't use Twitter, really. I'm not even a Twitter person.

*Interviewer:* Okay. Any final thoughts that you want our audience listening out there in this universe to take away with?

*Interviewee:* I guess I do and I'm trying to—

*Interviewer:* Yeah. You can take a pause. People are just sitting, listening, and they can—people can wait.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. I'm trying to crystallize; I wanna crystallize what I'm trying to say. I'm thinking about being a queer, growing up specifically, I'm thinking about being in high school and literally searching for resources and not finding them 'cause they just didn't—I didn't know how to find queer community in Newark. I remember going in—'cause I very much was invested in activism in high school. I remember going to Montclair, which was very close to where I grew up, in a city over, but wealthy suburbs and volunteering. This was when marriage equality in New Jersey was a big thing back in 2013; no, 2009, '8.

Most of you only volunteering with—in the community of white college students, but not really finding black queer community in Newark until, really until I was in college or later right before I left Newark. I guess what I'm trying to articulate is my desire for there to be more resources to support Newark youth, Newark, LGBTQ youth outside of, no, I'm not gonna say that. I'm just gonna say more resources. While also wanting to uplift the work of people in organizations like GMAD, Gay Men of African Descent, I think is what it's called. Gay Men of African Descent, no, what is it?

*Interviewer:* Oh, are you talking about the African American Office of Gay Concerns? Something?

*Interviewee:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* Okay. I know what you're talking about.

*Interviewee:* The African American Office of Gay Concerns. Like Gary Paul and people whose names I'm not remembering right now, and Darnell Moore and what's his name?

*Interviewer:* That's a lot of who's.

*Interviewee:* That's a lot of who's. Brian, I don't know Brian's last name, but I'm mostly thinking about people who I met. Larry Lyons, June, I can't remember June's last name, but all the people from Newark Essex Pride who throw the Annual Newark Pride parade and have invested labor and love into creating an abundant queer community in Newark. I wanna just affirm and shout them out. While also naming a desire for opportunities to connect young people in Newark with queer community. Maybe there is, I haven't been in 10 years. Who knows so.

*Interviewer:* It is cool. It's okay to not be here in 10 years and still want them.

*Interviewee:* But reflecting on my experience. I'm like, "Damn, I wish there was a youth center." I know that Hetrick-Martin has a location in Newark now. Perhaps things have shifted the landscape, and the resources for queer youth have shifted. 'Cause we would go to New York trying to look for community when I was growing up.

*Interviewer:* Yeah, like in the West Village and stuff.

*Interviewee:* Yeah. Then I wasn't necessarily in the ballroom scene, so that wasn't a part of my community. I was artsy nerd looking to be around other arts and queer nerds, but anyway.

*Interviewer:* Yeah. Okay. Well, and it's a Kiyani, right?

*Interviewee:* Kiyani or Kiki.

*Interviewer:* Kiyani or Kiki, thank you so much for spending time with me. I know I took a big chunk of your time, but I really appreciate you.

*Interviewee:* Like-wise. Thank you for having—for conducting this interview and continuing to do the work of the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

*Interviewer:* Absolutely. Again, this is Esperanza Santos on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, interviewing Kiyon Williams for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you.

*[End of Audio]*