Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Lioniemar Reyes
Interviewer: Esperanza Santos
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Esperanza Santos: Today is October, 26 2019. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I'm interviewing Lioniemar Reyes, or Lily.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: At Queer Newark or at Rutgers Newark for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Welcome.

Lioniemar Reyes: Thank you.

Esperanza Santos: How are you feeling?

Lioniemar Reyes: Okay. I think I'm not nervous. I guess it's not awkward, but I don't know. To me it's a little awkward.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's like we're on Oprah, or something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so we'll just—it'll be simple. Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Okay.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so to start, can you tell me when, and where you were born?

Lioniemar Reyes: I was born in Newark, New Jersey, November, 14 1990.

Esperanza Santos: It's almost your birthday then, huh?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, three weeks.

Esperanza Santos: You're a Scorpio?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: I know.

Esperanza Santos: My sister's a Scorpio. Can you, just to set the stage, can you tell me how you identify ethnically, or sexually, or whatever you want?

Lioniemar Reyes: Okay. I guess ethnically I always get confused with city, and race. I always felt like it was a confusing difference, maybe I didn't try hard enough to get the difference. I consider myself Puerto Rican. Then if I have to pick, sometimes where there's boxes where it's white, black or Native American. If they don't have Hispanic, or Latino, I pick white, black and Native American.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, all of the above.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, cause it's just I feel it's like I haven't done my ancestry—I really don't know. I feel like we have a mix of things.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, that's Puerto Rico for you.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Even on a lot of like—people will have the three phases, like the conquistador, indigenous, and then the black people from the slave ships.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I guess if I was gonna identify myself anywhere else, if people—it depends on my mood, I guess. Sometimes I can say, "Oh my gosh, we're so gay," or "I'm just such a lesbian," or but—I feel like it's because I'm saying it. I don't think I would let anybody put me in a box. I always had this joke when I was in college, I would say, "I'm just on the spectrum."

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't—

Esperanza Santos: I am the spectrum.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, it's just I am the whole thing. Sometimes I could feel on one side or—I don't think I ever hit each extreme, all the way straight, or all the way whatever the other end of the spectrum is. Whatever anyone identifies any category they wanna put at the end, but just I'm just on it.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, cool, beautiful. Welcome. Can you tell me more about—we're gonna go back to your childhood and family of origin.

Lioniemar Reyes: Okay.

Esperanza Santos: When you were growing up, who raised you?

Lioniemar Reyes: My mom and my dad.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, so they were together then?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, they were together then, they're together now. It was typical—I feel like I have that privilege of having both of them. They both worked really hard, but I feel like my dad worked not more, but further way. My mom did a lot of doing nine to five, and then my dad did weekends and nights. Yeah, it's good.

Esperanza Santos: Are they also from Newark, they have generations here?

Lioniemar Reyes: It gets tricky, right? I feel like they do, and they don't. I think, not my dad but my mom, my mom is from—I think they were both born in the Bronx. I think I'm third generation Puerto Rican, if I went down the line. I'm not 100 percent sure about the storyline about my grandparents. I feel like they have time for the Nerwak and Puerto Rico, but you never know.

'Cause I just—I don't know. It was so long ago, and I'm not sure if—I'm not sure how that happened, how they got to Jersey. I feel like when they got—my mom said she was born in the Bronx. My dad said he was born in the Bronx. Then my mom went to high school in Newark. She went to Barringer. Then she went back and forth in Puerto Rico.

Esperanza Santos: Where is Berenger again?

Lioniemar Reyes: It's in North Newark.

Esperanza Santos: North Newark, okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so it's like—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so above the freeway in that area?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: She went to Berenger, for some time. I know I've heard those stories, and I know I've heard my grandparents, and cousins and her first cousins. I remember her saying that she's grown up in North Newark. My dad mostly, I think, he spent most of his time in Puerto Rico. I think when he was maybe—I could be getting this completely wrong, but I know when he was maybe 16 if not older, then he moved back to the Bronx. I don't know the story, but I know that he spent more—it seems like he spent more time in Puerto Rico than my mom did.

Esperanza Santos: What is it about Newark that drew your parents over here?

Lioniemar Reyes: I'm not sure. I think maybe North Newark is known, for having a lot of Hispanics, Puerto Ricans. It's like if you were to separate Newark on a map, I think. Then growing up I've heard a lot, "Oh, you live in North Newark, that's where all the Spanish people live."

Esperanza Santos: Oh, they say that.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. When I was growin' up, when I was in high school, or in middle school, so early 2000s. I think that may have been—I think it might still be, but I'm not sure. That may have been the reason, but I wouldn't know for sure. I think maybe my mom's—my grandmother's sisters, or her family may have moved first, and then they followed. I think maybe they just felt, I don't know, more comfortable, more opportunities.

I think the US alone was more opportunities. Then New York is what people think of like, "I need to go to New York." If you read when I was Puerto Rican, it's like they go to New York. I feel like that's a common thing that New York is a place, for opportunity. I think maybe my mom's family for sure, 'cause I don't have any of my dad's family in Newark. My mom's family, for sure, may have just been like, "Well, New York is great, but maybe New Jersey's cheaper. Maybe it's like the same thing."

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: Newark is just a 20-minute train ride from getting into—if that to getting into New York.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I feel like they may have figured out that they could get more for their money here.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, just rent wise, and community wise.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You can just have a commute, and it'll be fine.

Lioniemar Reyes: I'm assuming, but that's the way I put it together in my head.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: That's what makes the most sense. Then I feel like other family members moved on to Florida, which is even more opportunities, for your money to go further depending—I think that's why.

Esperanza Santos: Well, this is your story, so you get to think whatever you want. Okay?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Can you tell me about did you mostly grow up in North Newark, or was it everywhere? You moved around a lot, or you were pretty this is your neighborhood and this is where you're from?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I think we were—I think, I feel like this is my neighborhood, and this is where I'm from.

Esperanza Santos: What's your neighborhood?

Lioniemar Reyes: North Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Any streets you could name?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, North 12th Street, or North 6th Street, around Bloomfield Avenue mostly. My mom was always very careful about the streets that she picked. You hear like, "You live in Newark? Oh my God." I've heard that before like, "You survived Newark. I feel like it's offensive, but maybe it's just not my story, and it might be someone else's story.

North Newark, Bloomfield Avenue, North 12th Street, North 6th Street, that's most of my life. We've only moved three times. The first time I don't remember at all, 'cause I was a baby. The second time was when we moved from North 12th Street to North 6th Street. Okay, so four times. The fourth time we literally just moved across the street, it was just literally across.

Esperanza Santos: Like boop!

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I don't know what reacts to me, but North Newark is what I consider home.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. When you were growing up, who made up that household? 'Cause I know it's your mom, and your dad, anybody else in the picture?

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh yeah, my mom I—it was mostly my mom, my dad, my brother. I have faint memories of my mom, my dad, my brother, my grandmother, when I was very, very young, they're very faint. I think it was mostly just the four of us. We might have an uncle who stayed with us, for a week or two, or now my grandmother comes and stays, for months at a time.

Esperanza Santos: When your grandmother, or uncle come, is it to hang out? Is it 'cause they need support? Is it 'cause you want their love? What is it that makes them come around?

Lioniemar Reyes: Mostly it was just either support, or they were just trying to be around. I think support is the best word. I think when I was first born, my assumption is that my mom and my grandmother, and my dad were all working together to help. I'm my grandmother's first grandchild.

Esperanza Santos: You're a big deal.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Then my brother would just be the second. I think for my mom's side, it's a lot smaller. A lot of firsts were with me, and my brother, so I think that's where the support comes in. Then if my uncle—my uncle and my aunt, which are my mom's brother and sister, always stayed around each other. If they ever needed support transitioning to a new apartment, or anything they would stay with us.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so they were like—they were always around to support?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, babysitting, everything like birthdays. A lot was surrounded with—my dad's family is there too, but my mom's family was in Newark within a two three, maybe four block radius.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, so it's like nothing.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, you could walk over and borrow, I don't know, azucar or something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, exactly.

Esperanza Santos: How would you describe your neighborhood growing up?

Lioniemar Reyes: I was saying before my mom always picked the streets where people were just trying to—I don't bother you, you don't bother me raise their families. I remember when I was young, we lived in an apartment where it was a two story house, and there were four apartments. It's not, I guess, big city living, but it's still city living. It was like, you would get the occasional things that happen, or you would hear sirens and stuff like that.

I always felt safe to a certain extent. I knew that if you just drove too far, or wandered too far on another end it could be considered unsafe just, because people are no longer minding their business. You know what I mean? People are on the corner, and it's not a problem that they're on the corner. Then they're also cat calling you or saying something—you know what I mean?

I think that's where, I guess, safety or comfortability, the line gets crossed. There's a difference between just hanging out on the corner. Then, I don't know, crossing boundaries into somebody else's space without, I guess, not checking that it's okay, but in a way that someone would perceive as polite.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It's like, "This is your neighborhood. This is where you belong. This is where you can stand on your corner, and hang out with your friends. If you go too far in another direction, then it's you're entering into someone else's territory."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, or there might just be more people. There might be more people per square feet. In my apartment, it was just four, where if you—for family units. Where if you go too far, then you start getting the projects, or you start getting where it's a lot of people.

Esperanza Santos: It's really concentrated.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, really concentrated, so you might just—they might not be like, "Oh, why are you in my neighborhood." It just makes the—

what's that word? The chance of it goes higher. You never know who you're gonna meet, you never know—I think, I don't know. I can dissect it so much further. You don't know what everyone's going through in that area. The poverty level might go down, so you might have people struggling more. You might have less people who have support. I think that just builds, for an environment where people feel more protective of themselves. They feel like they have to question other people. I just feel like maybe the socio-economic status goes down when you go four blocks in, and you have people dealing with things that I never had to deal with.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: They might be defensive, and I might be defensive on how we—I feel like, to a certain extent, communicate differently, or consider our space differently.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: If that makes sense.

Esperanza Santos: It's like a clash. You just—

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It's like a big question mark.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You just don't know what's gonna happen.

Lioniemar Reyes: Exactly, that's how I feel.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. We've been talking a little bit about where you grew up, where your parents are from. Can you tell me how was your adolescence? Starting, I don't know, 11 years old to when you went off to college.

Lioniemar Reyes: 11 years old to when I went off to college. I'm trying to—I'm so technical, I'm trying to figure out where I was when I was 11. I feel like 11 to college was pretty decent. When I look—if I look back on it, I had not cookie cutter growing up, but almost cookie cutter growing up. I remember thinking that I was in the middle class, because in my head, I was like, "Well, there are people who really have nothing."

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: There are people who have—yeah, there are people who really have nothing, there are people who have what we have, and then there are people who are rich. I didn't understand the gap until I got to college. My mom would be like, "No, we're poor." I'd be like, "What do you mean? We have a house. We have two cars."

Esperanza Santos: We have food.

Lioniemar Reyes: "We have food. We have TV, computer, cable, we have—"

Esperanza Santos: What are you talking about?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, and then when you get older, after I graduated college, I worked in the middle class, and I was like, "Oh, now I understand the gap between." Because it's like these people have million-dollar homes, but then you have people who have more than that. It's like that's the middle class, and then I'm just like, "Okay, now I get it."

Esperanza Santos: You're like, "Dang."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: "What?"

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Can you tell me—it sounds like your middle school, and high school experience was pretty—you say like, "basically cookie cutter".

Lioniemar Reyes: It's basically cookie cutter, right? I had my own insecurities. I was always the chubby one. I don't know, I would have my own personal insecurities, but I feel like—well, I went to a charter school.

Esperanza Santos: I'm sorry, can you tell me the schools you went to?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I went to First Avenue which is—I would literally would be able to walk to school. I feel like, I remember walking into school with me, my brother and two other kids who lived in my little apartment complex. We had to be really young, because when I switched out from First Avenue, I was nine. We must have been seven eight, around there.

Esperanza Santos: What? Just go by yourself? That's a big deal.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. We would be in a group, or sometimes one of the parents—I know that the parents of the—one of the parents would come with us, but it was literally around the corner. It was less than a block. It was half a block to the end of the corner, and then half a block to school. I feel like it was really close in the area that I feel in Newark that my mom strived to live in. I remember that being fine. Then I went to a charter school, I think.

Esperanza Santos: In middle school, or elementary?

Lioniemar Reyes: Middle school, and high school. From fifth grade all the way to 12th grade I went to middle school. I think that's when you start—I started getting exposed to people who live in different sides of Newark who—I guess they did a really good job in making us all feel equal, even though we lived in different parts of Newark.

They were proud of where they came from just like I was proud of where I came from. They were just from a different area in—North felt so much bigger, felt so much bigger, when I went to charter school 'cause you would have people who live by Weequahic, or—those are high schools in that area, or Chavez, or West Side, East Side.

I had no idea where these places were, but people from all of those areas would come together to that one charter school. I think you start learning about different people, and differences in people's families. That's why I feel like I had a cookie cutter life. I feel like I was privileged in ways that maybe my classmates weren't. I was fine.

There were people who lived in different areas of Newark that were fine as well. There were people who lived in the same area that I live that would make me feel like I appreciate what I have. I feel like having two working parents who worked really hard to make sure we were in a safe area, and had everything we needed. I was like I had a cookie cutter experience. All I cared about when I was in high school and middle school was boys, and my grades. It was stupid.

Esperanza Santos: That's not—

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it's stupid now. I wish I'd paid more attention in school.

Esperanza Santos: Why? No,

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. It was cookie cutter in my head.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. How was it like being in those charter schools? How were the teachers like? How was the administration like? Did you feel comfortable? What's the vibe?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, while I was going through it, it was like—I felt like it was too strict at certain points.

Esperanza Santos: Like what?

Lioniemar Reyes: I'm sure—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, and can you tell me the schools from middle and high school too?

Lioniemar Reyes: Middle and high school is North Star Academy.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, it's all one thing.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. North Star Academy Charter School Newark, it's literally up the street from Rutgers.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, they have one right over here.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Wait, you went to that one?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, it was the only one at the time.

Esperanza Santos: Wait a minute. 'Cause at first I thought you said it was right around the block from you, but you actually—

Lioniemar Reyes: No, that was Elementary School.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, and so for this one you traveled down from North Newark to, I guess you could call it, downtown Newark.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You would go—oh, so you went to school right here.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, and because my mom works at North Public library. It was very convenient for her.

Esperanza Santos: Because she would already could be coming over.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You could come with her and go with her.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, or I can take—or the light rail came out around that time.

Esperanza Santos: What time was that?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't remember. I remember—

Esperanza Santos: Or how old are you, you think?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think maybe 14, 13.

Esperanza Santos: When were you born?

Lioniemar Reyes: 1990.

Esperanza Santos: 1990, so 2003.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so I think that's when the light rail—I could be wrong, I think that's where I remember sitting down. It could be a little bit earlier than that, sitting down in the cafeteria at North Star, and they did this whole presentation on how to be safer on the light rails.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, 'cause I think construction was—either it was opening, or construction was starting. I don't think construction was starting, 'cause I remember starting to take the light rail when I was 15, 16.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it would take longer than that. I think it was just opening around 2003 like you said.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, how do you think the light rail changed your access to Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh my gosh, I feel like it made it so much easier. Especially from it connected North Newark to downtown.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: Very easy, it would go all the way to Grove Street where Bloomfield starts, and then end at Penn Station. I remember when I was really little my dad used to take the bus to Penn Station, because he used to work in Brooklyn. He always worked in Brooklyn. He still works in Brooklyn. Yeah, so I remember he used to take the bus. By the time it opened, he started driving himself, but the bus only comes a certain amount of times where the light rail will come every five minutes. It made it easier to get to downtown.

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely, 'cause buses can be unpredictable.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It's like especially in the snowy season, forget about it.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: So, we're talking a little bit about high school middle school. For you, who are the adults who shaped you in this period? Or you could be like, "No one."

Lioniemar Reyes: No. My mom and dad always, because they always worked really hard, and they were always very present. I think that's how I account, for who shaped me, who was there most of the time. My mom, my dad, my aunt, my uncle from my mom's side, my teachers a few here and there, and then I guess my friends. I'm not sure, my mom's friends. I feel like just—then that with a mix of just myself. I was always known as being a difficult—not child, but I always pushed boundaries, and stuff like that. I feel like they let me.

Esperanza Santos: I wanna learn more about that. Was it you were like, "This rule is dumb."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: "This doesn't make sense. I wanna wear the shoe that I like," or "I'm in the classroom I finished my homework." For you, what does that consist of?

Lioniemar Reyes: I always had a argument. I can't think of anything specific, but I guess just, because we're the nature of the project that makes me think of dealing with LGBT things, or queer things. It's just sexuality, or anything like that, it was like—I don't know. If my mom, or people around me, her or her friends would say something

like—there are some Latino people who get accused of not liking African Americans, and stuff like that. I understand where that comes from. I've witnessed her friends, or friends of friends that were in my mom's inner circle who would feel that way, or say comments that I felt like were completely stupid and then—

Esperanza Santos: Really anti-black?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I wouldn't want my daughter to deal with. I don't think it was just anti-black, I think it was very—they said the word nationalism, national, nationalist, but very Puerto Rican pride. I want my Puerto Rican daughter to be with a Puerto Rican guy just so that they can—I guess it was they wanted their—they were very proud of their roots, and they wanted to continue to keep their roots pure instead of blending. My dad is very argumentative person, which is probably where I get that from.

I don't know if I really remember him arguing back to that, but I remember being the type of person that's—I'm a kid, so I'm just like, "That's stupid. What's the difference? Why do you care what your daughter wants to do? It has nothing—" I was always that argumentative person who was just like, "I don't care if you're my mom, my dad, I don't care if he gave me everything in the world, and you busted your ass to the bone to give me everything I have. That doesn't mean that I now owe you my choices in the future.

Esperanza Santos: You don't own me.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I was always that type of person. If I ever heard something along those lines of like, "Oh, my mom would like, or my dad would kill me if I dated someone who was black, or who was white or who wasn't Puerto Rican." I'd be like, "That's stupid." I was always that type of argumentative person.

Esperanza Santos: I can imagine, so in my brain I'm thinking, "If charter school is really strict, and if you're argumentative, I imagine that you may, or may not have gotten in trouble."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I did, but I probably deserved it. I just was—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, why?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't know. Sometimes I don't think I deserved it. I remember when I first started dating some—my first boyfriend.

Esperanza Santos: How old were you?

Lioniemar Reyes: I was 14.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so 2004.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I think so. I got detention just, because he had his arm around me and I was holding his hand. I just was like, "That's so stupid. Why do I have to stare at a wall for an hour, because—" It was called inappropriate contact, conduct or contact. I was just like—I was the type of person who was just like, "That doesn't make any sense." Inappropriate conduct is maybe making out on the stairwell or inappropriate touching of body parts, but he literally had his arm over on my shoulder. I would get into those kinds of arguments, or I would get into arguments where they wanted so much structure.

I just remember getting into an argument with a teacher that I was really close with, because I was laughing and I couldn't stop laughing at something that happened. She was like—she kicked me out of the room. She was like, "How did you feel if you prepare to have a lesson, and the person—you have people laughing at you?" I was like, "Well, I would be confident in the work that I did and ignore the person who was laughing." I would get in trouble for stuff like that because I just felt—when I felt like I wasn't being heard or people were just treating me unfairly, because of their own reasons, I would attack back. I don't know, I remember—

Esperanza Santos: It felt like you were ready—not ready, but you had that in you to be like—

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, or I remember—I also felt like, I don't know, if I was singled out or not, but I remember getting in trouble. I will never forget it. I will remember getting in trouble, because the one time my brother got suspended, my dad had to come in. They took that—

Esperanza Santos: Oh-oh, he's coming in from Brooklyn.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so they took that time to tell my dad that I was being inappropriate my boyfriend, making out in the hallways, making—no, the parents had—I will never live it down, I'm 28 about to be 29, that parents from the school were complaining, because I was making out with my boyfriend after school, in front of the school, or in the train station, or just places around the school. It's like I'm not gonna sit here, and say that I never did those things, but I was so—I knew for a fact that it wasn't me, just because at that time period there was—I'm a very factual person. There was evidence

that that could never be the case, because my boyfriend at the time was doing a after school piano program at that time, and I was doing—it was Black History month and Latino celebrations were going on. It was not Black History month, it was Latino celebrations going on.

Esperanza Santos: September, October.

Lioniemar Reyes: November.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Or end of October, November. They would do it like near Thanksgiving. It might be end of October. At the school they would do Latino celebrations, and so I was practicing, for that. I was just like—

Esperanza Santos: What were you doing to practice?

Lioniemar Reyes: We would do dances that were like—that we felt represented our culture, we'd do salsa, bachata, stuff like that just to show the community, or our school, our Latino pride. I just knew that it wasn't me, and they took that time to tell my dad that that's what I was doing. I got in so much trouble, and I was just like they were—

Esperanza Santos: Who got you in trouble?

Lioniemar Reyes: The principal and the—I don't know if she was the guidance counselor at the time. I just remember going into the office, and the guidance counselor at time was like, "You're so fresh, you're just fresh." I just was like, "This is not how people are supposed to be talking to students."

Esperanza Santos: What does that mean?

Lioniemar Reyes: Right. Because, apparently, I was making out, and parents were complaining about it.

Esperanza Santos: What does fresh mean?

Lioniemar Reyes: Right. I felt like it was I was being nasty or—I was being too grown. Obviously, I'm talking about it now, and I'm about to be 29. I just feel like it was just such an unfair moment. I don't know—for some reason I felt singled out, because of it. I think I felt like, I don't know, I was never really—that school just offered so many

opportunities, but I also was never heard past—I don't know, it's hard, they're teachers, right? It's like we did all of these how to be confident seminars or how to open up and all of these mental health seminars. Here and there growing up, I remember in high school having days where we would just talk about mental health or how to deal with stress or how to deal with anxiety.

I felt at the same time it was like, if you don't follow the rules, you're in trouble. We're not gonna talk to you about—you're not gonna know what—you don't know why, but we're not gonna work with you on why you still have to be punished, for the mistakes you've made.

Esperanza Santos: It's very like, "Here's how to heal and be well, but if you mess up we're gonna get you."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, that's how it felt.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: In high school and middle school, 'cause it was the same school.

Esperanza Santos: Well, that sucks.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Just really quickly, why did your brother get suspended, if you wanna say?

Lioniemar Reyes: He called his Spanish teacher a bitch. I don't know if someone—if she heard him, or if someone told on him, but I know that was why. I know that, again, you're a kid and they're adults, I don't wanna say that she was a bitch. My mom might have made a slight comment, like, "She was a bitch, but he shouldn't have called her that." He was still in trouble for it, but she agreed, I guess.

Esperanza Santos: She's like, "You're in trouble, and this is bad, but I agree, but you're still in trouble."

Lioniemar Reyes: That's not how you do—I don't remember what she did to him or—my brother is the type person who, he's mostly quiet, or if you don't bother him he's not gonna bother you. For him to be like, "You're a bitch," Just what happened? I don't remember what happened.

Esperanza Santos: I wanna come back to you real quick. It's like for your brother, he's got—I don't know, for some reason I'm getting the idea of a goat. You don't bother a goat, a goat's gonna do what it's gonna do, but if you bother a goat, it's gonna ram in towards you.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: For you, between being "an argumentative person," and being in a super, not super, but a pretty disciplinary school, and then being a teenager, and wanting to kiss your boyfriend, or hold your boyfriend's hand. How did you manage these challenges, or these moments where you have to follow the rules, but also do what you wanna do, because those rules are dumb?

Lioniemar Reyes: Well, me and my brother are really close in age. My birthday is November 14th, his birthday is November 22nd, and I'm 1990, he's 1991. We're basically one year—exactly one year apart, or one year and one week. Unfortunately, while my parents worked really hard, there were days where my mom would have to work the weekend, then we were by ourselves a lot when we were teenagers, as long—we had rules as long—we had to make sure the house was clean before my mom came home, because obviously she worked all day or—we had a lot of—

Esperanza Santos: You make sure you defrost the chicken or something like that.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so we definitely had a lot of times where we were alone. I'll ask my brother like, "My boyfriend's coming over, don't say anything." It would never—I don't know, I never—I felt like I'm always the—because I'm so argumentative. I always like to have my facts straight. It might not—it might be like, oh, we might make out and hold hands, but I would make sure I would never do anything that would be like, "You're really in trouble." Go to my room and have my door closed, so that if my brother did—brother sister doing or like, "Well, she had her boyfriend over." If they- and so what, all we did was sit in living room and watch movie.

I always tried to make sure I had my argument straight if I had an argument. Yeah, my mom also, and my parents, were not too strict, but not too lenient. I was able to go on dates, and go to the movies by myself when I was 16, 17. Go to the mall by myself, and stuff like that to hang out. I got that freedom at home that I may not have gotten at school.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like your parents gave you freedom but with boundaries.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, which I thought were appropriate boundaries.

Esperanza Santos: For you, it was pretty refreshing because meanwhile at school, you can't do this, but at home you're not just thrown to the ocean. You still have your pool, but you can swim around.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Which is nice.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. This might sound like a weird question, but did you—did religion play a role in your life growing up with your mom, or your siblings, or your aunts and uncles?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yes and no. I remember when I was little—I don't know, now my parents are really religious. I've learned, 'cause I was a psych major, I learned that happens when—it's something that could happen when you get older, people start thinking about their life more, and they start getting more religious and stuff, or start getting more existential whatever. When I was still back there, they are really religious now. Not really, really religious, but—

Esperanza Santos: Into what religion?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think Catholic. It's definitely not Christian, it's like Catholic.

Esperanza Santos: You know what church they go to, if they go to one?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think they go to St.—not St. Francis, that's the one that I went to when I was really little. St. Lucy's maybe, it's around the corner.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it's St. Lucy's.

Esperanza Santos: From here?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Over here?

Lioniemar Reyes: It's up a little bit—you know where there's big, that big silver—I don't know if you've seen Newark, but there's a big silver apartment complex. It's like Branch Brook Park is here, and there's a big silver apartment complex, and it's up a hill. I think it's St. Lucy's.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: It should be St. Lucy's. When I was growing up, they were religious, but I wasn't forced into it. When I was really little I would go to church on Sundays. I definitely made it as far to get my communion done.

Esperanza Santos: That's like what, fifth grade?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, fourth grade. For me it was fourth grade, 'cause I remember I broke my leg in fourth grade and I had to—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, my gosh.

Lioniemar Reyes: I had to be in a wheelchair, for my communion. It was fourth grade, I was maybe nine years old, I did my communion. Then after that I didn't really continue. I did my confirmation recently.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe two or three years ago because I wanted to be—

Esperanza Santos: You were 26.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I wanted to be my best friend's daughter's godmother, so you—

Esperanza Santos: You have to go through that process.

Lioniemar Reyes: You have to go through the process.

Esperanza Santos: You did, what is it called? RCIA.

Lioniemar Reyes: CCD. Is it called CCD? It's a Catholicism—I don't know what it's called.

Esperanza Santos: Catholic school for adults.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, Catholic school for adults.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, where I'm from it's called RCAA.

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh, okay. Yeah, I'm glad that it wasn't super strict. I remember my dad when I was really young, maybe six or seven—I will say between six and nine, 'cause I don't know if it was a memory that I have coming back from my communion or a memory that I had before then. But, I remember him saying something like, "I don't need to go to church. Church can be filled with people who follow the Bible, but then will leave and be rude outside of church."

Esperanza Santos: Hipocritas.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, but he was like, "I can go to church in my room, if I need to talk to God, I can do that in my house." I think once he said that, it might be the worst thing he ever said, because now he goes to church every Sunday, and I'm just like, "I don't need to go to church. I can go to church in my room and talk if I need to talk to God." I'm more spiritual, sometimes I think, because of when I grew up, some of the prayers or the customs get stuck with me, and I don't know.

I'm interested—I have a hard time, so I'm doing something wrong when I say like, "I believe in Jesus, but I also believe in Buddha, and I believe in Buddha but I also believe in Mohammed." Whatever everyone else believes in, as long as it has a positivity and love, I believe in it. Sometimes I think it's ingrained in my brain that's like, "You're not supposed to do that."

Esperanza Santos: Jesus is your only savior.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, and it bothers me why—that bothers me. That it's like, "This is the only savior, and this is the person that you supposed to worship, or that—"

Esperanza Santos: That's like one of the staple prayers in Catholic mass.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, it bothers me. When I was older and I was about 26, there was a priest, I think his name was—I don't remember his name. He was really good.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know what church, or what year he was then?

Lioniemar Reyes: It was St. Lucy's.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. What time period?

Lioniemar Reyes: It was 2016, '17, or in 2019. I would say 2017, '16 or '17, 'cause it was right before I got with my girlfriend that was in 2016 I think. I think it's '16, and we've been together three years. I think it was 2016 Spring, 2016, I don't know if his name was Franco—I really don't remember his name, but he was definitely like, "The Bible is a metaphor, maybe the Virgin Mary wasn't technically 100 percent a virgin, but she was open into letting the Lord into her life, so that made her a virgin. The religion is like—" I was like, "I can't believe this man." He was Italian. I know for sure that, just sat in front of a bunch of Hispanic people, told them that maybe Virgin Mary is not a virgin. No one flinched.

When I did my confirmation and I told him I was like, "I don't know how I feel, 'cause I only did this, 'cause I wanted to be my best friend's grandmother. I wanna be honest about that." Because we were doing a confirmation and his only thing to repent was to be happy. It wasn't do 10 Hail Mary's, and then you'll be forgiven. I feel like the world is changing, hopefully—

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Into thinking past these are the 10 commandments, and you have to follow them to the tee no matter what. Honor your mother and your father, but what if your mother, and your father addicts, so I'm like they don't take care of you. You still love them, and you want them to be okay, but you can't do everything they want you to.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: That answers your question.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, it does. 'Cause I just got—what is it called to be dunked your head in water?

Lioniemar Reyes: Baptized.

Esperanza Santos: On April.

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh, yeah.

Esperanza Santos: I'll tell you after that later. We talked a little bit about your family of origin, where you come from, what's your deal, what's the 411 on Lily? Now I wanna learn about—a little bit more about you in Newark, is that okay?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Can you tell me what's your earliest memory of Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think 12th Street, just that apartment building on that street. Columbus Hospital was at the end of it. I think First Avenue was at the beginning of it, 'cause that's why the name of the school is called First Avenue. I just remember—like I said, it was like—my earliest memory is very cookie cutter like. I remember riding my bike with my dad even though I still don't know how to ride it.

People say you always remember how to ride a bike, maybe I never knew. I remember playing outside with my brother, playing with the neighbors, rollerblading, playing softball, baseball. My brother played baseball, for a while. I never played softball, tee ball and stuff, 'cause I was really little, tee-ball and PV baseball. It was good. It's so cookie cutter when it when I hear it out loud, like, "I played baseball, and later I played outside with my neighbor we were rollerblading, riding bikes in the neighborhood. It was cute.

Esperanza Santos: It was fun.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Since that moment in your first memory, do you think your neighborhood has changed?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it's definitely gotten a little bit more crowded. I feel like—

Esperanza Santos: Crowded like there's no apartment buildings, or there's more people in the same places? Like what?

Lioniemar Reyes: There's more people in the same places, or I think when you get older you start becoming aware of more—you hear, I guess, stories more this person got robbed here, or you can't walk down the street, 'cause this person—there was gunshots there the other night or like—I hear more of it now, but maybe I wasn't aware when I was little, I'm not sure. I think there's definitely a little bit more.

I remember when I was really little someone got stabbed on the block that I lived, and it was literally an argument over a boy. That was the only thing I remember hearing of until I was in high school. Then you start hearing—that you start hearing like, "Oh, this person's friend got robbed at the light rail, or—" I remember our apartment got robbed once when we were a little bit older, eighth grade, right into high school, I'd say 2002, 2003. I feel like

that now there's more people sitting out on their front porch just smoking or while they have the—it's their space and they can do that, before it's like people wouldn't really—in the neighborhoods that I was in, people wouldn't really sit in the front porch, and smoke, because kids were around. Kids were about and just playing, so it wasn't really appropriate. Now, I think, there's just more people, and more people just—I guess, I don't know. Then a little bit more danger, a little bit more—

Esperanza Santos: You think it's more dangerous?

Lioniemar Reyes: A little bit.

Esperanza Santos: Or you're just more aware of it.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Maybe there's more.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I feel like you got people moving in to the neighborhood who are fighting more in public.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: You can hear them fighting outside, whereas just before you could hear them in their house a little bit, but out the street saying, "Fuck you." You hear the arguments more. I feel like before it's less quiet. Quiet doesn't mean that people don't throw parties, or you don't hear music blasting. When it's early September-October, and it's the Puerto Rican parade in North Newark, you hear people in cars.

Esperanza Santos: There's a Puerto Rican Parade in North Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: What!

Lioniemar Reyes: I think there's a Dominican one too.

Esperanza Santos: What!

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, right on Bloomfield Avenue.

Esperanza Santos: When is this?

Lioniemar Reyes: By Branch Brook Park. I'm sure if I google it. I can find an old file, but definitely early September end of August. They've always been there. Growing up I remember we used to go to Branch Brook Park all the time, and they would have—they don't have them anymore, but they would have rides, little festivals where you can get Spanish food, and you can go on the Ferris wheel. They would have, I guess, I don't know little concerts where people would sing salsa, bachata, local celebrities for us, for Latino people in the area.

They still do it. It's just not like they—I don't think they have the rides anymore. The stands are more—it was more free when we were young—when I was younger. It was more they set it up in a park. It was a little festival, and you walk around and, I think, if you wanted to set it up yourself with a table in a tent, and sell your own food.

I think it was more free. Now I think it's a little more organized and they shut down the street and they do a parade. They always did the parade. I think the festival was always after. I think they still do it now, but it's just not as accessible as it used to be. I used to be able to walk to the park and hang out there, and then walk back home.

I think now we have to go to downtown or it might end on Washington Street instead of Branch Brook Park. Yeah, as you get older, it's like things become a little bit less. A little bit more constructed, and less free. People, maybe it's like problems that they're trying to prevent from when we were younger.

Esperanza Santos: What do you mean by the word problems?

Lioniemar Reyes: People drinking in the street, or fights happening. Because when I was young, I was in by nine o'clock, but you would probably hear that afterwards people got really drunk, and there were fights in the street and stuff like that.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: It might have just gotten more organized for that reason.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, just to have it be more "family friendly".

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Not make it so that it's—it turns into a point where the cops come over.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: This brings me to my—you talk about there's maybe a stabbing on your street, or someone being stolen, or getting robbed at the rail station, or gunshots three blocks down. What do you think is your relationship to the police, or the police's relationship to your neighborhood?

Lioniemar Reyes: So I feel like I don't really—I have a weird relationship with the police. When the police are around, I feel safer, but in the back of my head, I also don't trust them. I think that—I have people who, in my family, who are officers, and they've always been great, great family members. I think growing up I thought the police were always there to serve, to make sure everything's safe. I still hold on to that subconsciously. I think now, just with social media, and you just see all this stuff going on with people getting killed every day, what was going on in Dallas.

I'm a light skinned Puerto Rican. There's a certain privilege that comes with that that I would never understand. I was not exposed to that difference much when I was younger, because where I grew up the darkest person in my little family unit is my dad. He's like two shades darker than me.

Esperanza Santos: Do you have foundation?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: What color would you say your foundation was?

Lioniemar Reyes: My foundation, I think, is like—I'm trying to think of what they call it. Not fair, but too—maybe caramel. Sometimes they have the cheesy—I don't know the numbers.

Esperanza Santos: An olive caramel, or something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe not olive, like a caramel—I also do this thing that I know I'm aware of, and I've been called out on it. I think I'm darker than I am, and I don't know why. I think because growing up I have more of my dad, I'm a little bit darker. My mom, she's fair. If she was to get foundation, she would be fair.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, totally. I get you.

Lioniemar Reyes: Then my brother is fair with—if he got some sun, he would be a little bit fair but burn. I don't know, a little burn—

Esperanza Santos: A little burnt.

Lioniemar Reyes: Not burnt, but—they have burnt orange, he would be a "burnt yellow".

Esperanza Santos: Okay, like me or something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It's olive yellow, it changes.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, like yellow.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I've been called yellow before as a joke, or whatever. I've never saw myself as yellow. I think, because my family I have an uncle, my mom's uncle, who calls me prieta.

Esperanza Santos: They call you prieta?

Lioniemar Reyes: I thought it was cute though. It wasn't like—

Esperanza Santos: Okay, it wasn't a rude—it was like a sweetheart.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, like I'm the only one basically. He had a son who's a little bit younger than me, is also almost the same complexion as me. I feel like before he was born, I was the only one in my mom's side of the family who was my complexion.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: I had really curly hair. My dad is like—I'm looking at the table, he's chestnut, or he's definitely brown. He's not—

Esperanza Santos: Indisputably.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. His mother is definitely a deeper brown. In my head without anyone telling you me what African Diaspora was, I would always say, "Well, I'm half black and half Puerto Rican." Because I would just look at my grandma, and be like, "Well, she has to be black."

Yeah, she speaks Spanish and, yeah, she's from Puerto Rico, but there has to be some African American.

Esperanza Santos: There's Afro Latinx.

Lioniemar Reyes: There's something.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: She definitely doesn't look like my mom, or like my grandmother. I think I always overthink I'm tanner than I am.

Esperanza Santos: A second ago you said your friends called you out on it. What would you that then would get them to call you out on it?

Lioniemar Reyes: I would make an Memoji, I'm gonna show you my Bitmoji.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, your Bitmoji.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Well, that's so cute. The Bitmoji is, for people who haven't updated iPhone, they can make a little character of themselves.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Design your eyebrows and—

Lioniemar Reyes: That's me.

Esperanza Santos: They think that's dark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so I'm gonna try to find it, for you just for the sake of this interview. It might not be too far down.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: I have friends—I might not be able to find it, because we've talked a lot, but I have friends who are like, "Wow, you're—" To me, I took it as a slight—less like a snippy comment, but just, because I feel like I've been called out on it before a little bit more directly. It was just like, "Oh, that's a very urban or Afro looking Memoji you got there." It's just like, "It looks like me, I feel like it looks like—" It's almost like, "You're not black, why is your Memoji so dark?" That's how I felt.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: I literally have had friends who are like, "Why is your Bitmoji so dark? You're not that dark." I just make a joke out of it, 'cause I don't wanna argue, 'cause I understand. I can understand why someone would be sensitive to my—to me maybe appearing like I'm trying to be darker than I am.

Esperanza Santos: I don't know if this makes sense or not, but I think it's also hard, because with Bitmojis or even emojis, they have different shades. Those shades are very limiting.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Because maybe you're closer to one color than you are to another. Then people are like, "Oh, why are you going with that one?"

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, like I said, it could have been both (I cant find it). It could have been both. Sorry, I paid for parking online, and I'm just making sure that I paid for it.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe I did overcompensate, that's why I showed it to you. I was like, "I'm not sure if I did." I get that a lot.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't mean to.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I've lost friends who—I've not outright been told that the reason is because I don't understand the—their struggle compared to my struggle, but I didn't understand. Not that I wasn't black enough, but I didn't—sometimes I could be so open to everyone that I can lose sight of what people are telling me.

I remember I wanted to start a website with a friend, and I was looking, for up and coming artists to post on a website just, for fun. I wanted to promote up and coming artists. I remember at the time my friend, it was maybe 2012, wanted to do Rihanna. In my head I was just like, "Well, she's already out there." She was more poppy than she is now. I think she's more RnB now.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, before she was her poppy phase before she was in her bad girl phase.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: I wasn't into it. Then, growing past that, not saying that I would post Miley Cyrus, but I would listen to Miley Cyrus. I've been called out on like, "Well, you like Miley Cyrus, but you don't like Rihanna." Which I liked both, I just feel like in the media, and it blew up in my face. There was a moment.

Esperanza Santos: What do you mean it blew up in your face?

Lioniemar Reyes: Well, because there was a moment when in—I'm saying 2012 to 2011 as a reference, there was a moment where Rihanna was being more open about the fact that she smokes weed or—she was getting into her bad girl phase. I'm just that type of person who's like, "If everyone loves Edward from Twilight, then I like a completely different character."

I just don't like mainstream stuff. When everybody loved Gaga I was like, "I loved her. I love her, but now everyone loves her. Who else can I love?" I was the underdog. I was just like, "She's smoking weed everywhere. I get it, you like weed." I was annoyed by that very early on. Then Miley Cyrus wasn't there yet, and then—

Esperanza Santos: She hadn't gotten to her bad girl phase yet.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, she hadn't gotten to her bad girl phase yet.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, okay. She was singing country or pop, or something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, and then blew up in my face, so it was just like woah. She's doing all of this. Now, she's in her—she had fucking weed on her tits, or something, or she was a costume weed at some point. Then it's just like, okay, I get why people would be like, "Oh, why are you favoring Miley Cyrus." There's obvious colorism there, Miley Cyrus and Rihanna. It could be misinterpreted, but it's not my intention.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: Because I'm so open, and I'm so accepting of everyone, and everything that sometimes I may not realize that—it's like I may have inadvertently offended someone, but because I so much believed that I didn't mean it, I may not take into consideration that they felt hurt by it. I'm like, "I would never do that, what do you mean? I just like this one song better than this." I feel like now it's 2019, and I definitely would probably choose Rihanna over Miley Cyrus, but maybe at that time that person may have been like, "They always like the white girl, but not the one who's an island girl singing the same pop music."

I'm just like, "Oh, I can see how you have felt that way." It's hard to talk about it, because it's like, "Lily, why do you have to psychoanalyze everything. Maybe I was just mad." I'm just like, "Yeah, but then why did you say my Memoji is so dark?" You know what I'm saying?

Esperanza Santos: Can I, I guess, like frame for a second?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: To me it sounds like it's like you're—number one you're Puerto Rican.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Number two is on a census, there's not Hispanic, you're gonna write black, white. What was your last one?

Lioniemar Reyes: Native American.

Esperanza Santos: Native American. Then on one hand with your Bitmoji people will say, "It's too dark. Why are you acting black?"

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Then you're listening to Miley Cyrus, and they're like, "She's white. Why are you putting this white girl first over this black girl?" It's like no matter what it feels like people are always gonna be saying something, because you are in this position as a Puerto Rican where you're not just a Latina, you're not just Afro, you're not just—you're not just this. You're this bigger thing.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. It's almost like it, I completely understand it, but it's almost a competition about who is worse off.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, like oppression Olympic status.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yea. Who's the most privileged in this scenario. If I'm in a room with my friends, it's subconsciously, because we've gotten to a really good place where I feel like this is a good place where people are speaking out on how they feel about the oppression that their ancestors may have faced, or oppression in general. Even though it may seem like you see a cop shooting a black person every fucking weekend, we're talking about it. I feel like it wasn't as talked about when I was in high school.

Esperanza Santos: It happened, but you didn't get the attention it does now.

Lioniemar Reyes: Now, you can't hide from it. It's almost like you wanna respect everyone, but it's almost like you said, a privilege Olympics, or an oppression Olympics. You don't know how good you have it, because of this. Latinos have not been oppressed as much as African Americans have been oppressed.

Esperanza Santos: You're both.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, it's really hard, right? Because it's I'm not in a period where you can—I feel like 2019 is not a time period where you can—it's not as apparent. I think that's what's hard, for people who are me. Or if I'm gonna speak for myself, I think that's what's hard, for me. Because when you pick a side, on what side you're gonna be on in an argument, it's hard to pick a side, because it's not back when you really had segregation. When you had segregation, they were segregating things specifically. You know that's wrong. You know that a white person saying, a black person, a colored person, Mexican person, gay person who can't do this is wrong.

Now it's I don't know if—this is a personal struggle, I don't know if I'm gonna listen to Kanye West's new album, because he's been very politically—I don't really support the things that have come out of his mouth, and the things that he's done. Am I separating music from personal opinion of a person? Well, I don't know if I can separate that anymore. The lines have become way too blurred of what's right, what's wrong? What artists, books, movies, music celebrities, you're gonna support or not support, it's become very politically charged. Yes, I feel like it should be, I think it's important, but I then think it makes it hard, for someone to pick a side or have an opinion.

Esperanza Santos: Or think for themselves.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, you're right. It's hard to feel like you're being a good person. You're making the right choices, because it's I don't know if I'm thinking—I'm not intending to think I'm better than anyone, because of my skin tone, or I'm not trying to be pretentious or anything. I don't think it's connected to my skin tone, or the fact that—I don't think I'm prettier than anyone, because my hair is curly, and I'm light skin and I'm curvy compared to anyone else. I also don't know—I haven't experienced that. I haven't maybe been aware of times where a friend may have felt like passed up, because of privileges that I have. I think it's really hard.

Esperanza Santos: I wanna take this idea of, I guess, knowing what's right, and what's not, and your relationships, your communities, and your friends. Is it okay if we bring that conversation over to Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: For Newark, it sounds like there's this conversation around—I guess, for lack of a better word, it's like everything is political and we're talking about that now. It's like, "Well, why are you gonna support Miley Cyrus if she represents A, B, and C. Or Kanye if he's gonna be talking about C, D and E thing."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: It's become, according to you, more difficult to separate the art, the music, and the artist from their politics. That's you're trying to be a good person, but it's still difficult. Bringing back to—bringing it back to Newark, are these conversations you're having mostly with friends in North Newark, or is this like friends you made from college? Where are you having these conversations?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think both, friends from college who I went to college in North Newark, or in downtown Newark, I went to Rutgers Newark. The friends that I went to Newark with—it's mostly college. I have some from high school. I think that you start—what I was talking about before about not knowing how to have a conversation, how to pick what you like, or whatever. I feel like that's if you're spiraling, if you're—

Esperanza Santos: What do you mean spiraling?

Lioniemar Reyes: If I think about it too hard, and I'm spiraling like, "Oh my gosh, I'm not a good person, because I chose Miley over Rihanna, or whatever." Then I have friends who are from Jersey City, I have friends who are from Maplewood, I have friends from Union,

friends who are from not necessarily Newark, but went to school in Rutgers Newark. From Newark, I have friends who grew up in Newark and moved out of Newark. They remind me that I am a good person because I'm even thinking about it, or I'm learning from mistakes that I've made. If I think too much about it, it's like, "I don't know if I should listen to Kanye's new album. He was wearing Make America Great Again hats."

It's just I don't—personally, if you're gonna ask me I don't support that, because I understand how that could represent something that's hurtful or represent someone who—if I'm gonna say it, I feel like our president is a very inappropriate person, and he should not be in office right now, not just, because of his beliefs, but the way he speaks is inappropriate, the way he conducts what you would consider "business" is inappropriate. That's the spiral. Then it's just if I just stay true to who I am, and who my friends know I am.

Who know that I'm considerate and I'm kind, and I listen and I try my best to be loving and positive, then I would just—I always go back to like, "Okay, maybe I'll give his album a chance just to see what he has to say. It doesn't mean that I support him as an artist, but let me just see. Let me do the research." Sometimes opinions get in the way of just doing the research.

I know that Kanye wore Make America Great Again hat, because I saw it on Instagram. I don't know what he's specifically said, because I never went and googled the interviews that he's had. I'm not sure that he's even had interviews, but anything that he's said on camera. I haven't listened to him speak.

Whether I disagree or not, it's always important just to hear what people have to say. That's the part where my friends come into play, because here in Newark—I'm the one from Newark, so when I'm hanging out with my friends, I may have two, or three who are from Newark, and then you blend them to the outside cities, and then you get—we're growing into listening each other, and to respecting each other.

All the kids that I grew up with in Newark, I may not have conversations with them, but I follow them on Instagram, and we've all grown up in a really positive way. There are strong opinions about how every different person is being treated politically, or just interacting. People listen to each other. They create boundaries, and they're just using social media in such a positive way that it's like—I have someone who I follow on Instagram who's a little bit younger than me, who I see them

posting like, "These are conversations that I have with my friends. Do you think you could date someone who didn't go to college?" Conversations are happening, that I feel like, in Newark that weren't happening when I was younger.

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: I feel like people are evolving. Like I said before, I had family members who have friends who were like, "I wouldn't let my daughter date someone who isn't Puerto Rican." I'm pretty damn sure none of the people that—they had four, I would say four kids, three girls and a boy. I'm pretty sure none of them had kids with someone who's Puerto Rican, or maybe towards—maybe they were Hispanic.

They've grown out of that, or that conversation is not so black and white anymore. I feel like maybe my mom and my dad are like, "I'm not gonna argue with him today because that's just how he thinks." Maybe now my mom my dad will be open to be like, "No, that's not right." Or maybe their kids are more open to being like, "No dad. That's not right." Or wouldn't have that same conversation with their kids.

Esperanza Santos: Beautiful.

Lioniemar Reyes: That's how I feel like Newark is evolving.

Esperanza Santos: Evolving. Yeah. it's it sounds like people, from your perspective—maybe through social media, or knowledge or just like whatever news. People are open to having a conversation, or stating their opinion if it's controversial.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, there's less people who are just like, "No." There are more people willing to speak up than there were before, I feel.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. It sounds like one place where you have these conversations is Instagram, or social media, specifically Instagram, which is cool, Instagram's fun. Is there places, and I imagine that a part of that is you have a LGBTQ network. Is there LGBTQ places that you associate with LGBTQ people in Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so growing up not so much, but when I went to college, definitely. I feel like I'm gonna sound like a commercial, but I went to Rutgers Newark, so the LGBTQ, and diversity center was really big for me. I did unity theater at Rutgers, RU Pride at Newark. I feel like it was a little bit separate from—RU Pride was

if you wanted to be part—in my head it was like if you want to be part of people who made decisions, and made planned events and stuff like that. Just the center alone, having that safe space where people just hung out. It was just like a—I don't know if you guys still have it, but it's just like a thing—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, the lounge.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, it's just a lounge where people hang out. I've made friends through that, and through Unity Theater in Rutgers that I feel like then after that, I don't know, we just—I have dinner with friends, and we have the conversations where we go to—we can go to the city and then we'd later go to a bar go to a bar and have these conversations.

In Newark, I went once. To be honest, in Newark, outside of college, I'm probably a little too shy to reach out to my resources. I know there are resources outside of Newark. Actually, I'm not sure they're connected with Rutgers, but it was outside of Rutgers.

I won tickets one time. I went to like a salsa class that was sponsored by the LGBTQ community in Newark. I'm not sure what it was called, but it was—it's around campus. I think it's just for Newark. I don't think it's not necessarily connected with Rutgers, and I hung out there, and I would go to clubs that I know are LGBT friendly.

I don't know, just my friends' group is so small, but social media definitely helps, and events that other people put together that are LGBT based help. Six Flags does this “Out Day” or whatever. I don't know. I guess, when it comes to me, and the LGBT topic I've always been in and out. I'm in it, 'cause I don't think there's anything wrong with it, but I've grown to be like, this is a part of me, but not all of me. If that makes sense.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

Lioniemar Reyes: That's why I said I knew Whitney Strub, because I was a LGBTQ minor one. I dropped it 'cause I think it was just a point in my life where I was trying to do too much, and it was just a lot of information that I was taking in that was good information, but I felt like I was making it all of me to certain—does that make sense? I was just like—I always get into this weird debate, and it's not that I don't understand it. As I get older, I'm understanding it more, but me being on the spectrum was never a thought. I was never questioned about it, because I did have a boyfriend growing

up. I never neglected it. My mom was not surprised when I had told her I had a girlfriend, because she knows I'm just open to everything. I always had this weird debate where it's just like, "Why do I have to talk about the fact that I have—that I'm LGBTQ when it's just—the only reason we're talking about is, because I have a girlfriend." That would be the only reason that you're making a big deal out of it, because I like a girl and I'm a girl. 'Cause I identify—then I know that they're—

Esperanza Santos: Wait, pause, so how do you identify?

Lioniemar Reyes: I identify as female on the spectrum. I always say on the spectrum if I have to pick an identity.

Esperanza Santos: You don't have to pick an identity.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Just so you know.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I know. Sometimes, I feel like just if I wanna shut someone up, I'm really not shutting them up, but I would say I'm pansexual. I just really don't—I never cared if you were a cisgender, anything. I didn't care if you were cisgendered, I didn't care if you were trans gendered, I didn't care if you didn't wanna identify with any gender.

I know that people have a hard time with it. Some people, not everybody, or it's just people feel like it's so literal that if I'm attracted to someone, then I'm attracted to someone. I think I get attracted to someone first and then I'm like, "Oh, you're a girl. Oh, you're boy." or "Oh," you're like, "I don't know who you are. You never told me. I never asked. I just like you." I think when I was trying—when I was minoring in LGBTQ studies, I felt like I was pigeon holing myself too much.

I wasn't sure where I was at with it yet. It was too much, for me at one time. Maybe I just didn't need to be the minor, I just needed to take the classes to learn the information, because I felt like once you're the minor, you should be doing more with it when it was—in my head, that's just how I interpreted it. If I'm gonna be a minor, what am I gonna do next to support this community when it's just I'm just trying to respect, and understand the community that I belong to.

There are reasons why it's important, because the only reason I have the privilege to be like, "I have a girlfriend right now" without getting my ass beat, or arrested or there being a problem with it, is because there's a minor on it. There are historical moments that happen to get us there.

I think that when I was in college, and I declared that minor I wasn't—I didn't come to that realization yet. I was just like, "Let me just like who I wanna like, and let's not—why do I have to come out? Why do you care who I'm sleeping with?" Who cares? That's where we should be getting to, when it's just—you also have to understand that we can't—there's a reason why I wanna be out loud and proud, even if I'm not the loud type when it comes to that. Does that make sense?

Esperanza Santos: Oh, just 'cause now you have my academic wheel spinning. There's almost an urgency to come out, and there's—not because you're like, "I like what I like, I do what I do like," and no one's gonna mess with me, but it's not just about me, myself, the individual, but us as a community, and what we're going for.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: A part of that process is to say something.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, originally when I came in, I was like, "You might wanna talk to my girlfriend, because she has a really interesting story. It might be more interesting than mine." I feel like that comes from—I know that that's not true. That actually just supports exactly who I am as a person, right? It supports my story as being the person who's on this spectrum, who has had a boyfriend, but has a girlfriend.

I don't mix those two experiences to be like, "That's why she's bi, 'cause she had a boyfriend, and now she has a girlfriend." I just happen to like this person right now, and be in love with this person now, and that's my experience right now. I don't really mix the two. I'm very go with the flow.

That's my story, and I think that's what's important to—if I were gonna say what do I want someone to get out of this conversation, for the queer Newark Oral History Project, is that I want people to get that some people just wanna be. It's important for me in my growth to learn that the reason why I'm able to be is, because people fought for it. Originally when I was learning, getting to that point, I felt like if you don't have a dramatic story where you got

kicked out of your house when you announced that you were out of the closet, and you didn't go through these struggles then it's almost like your story is not important. Because we want to hear—not that we wanna hear all these traumatic stories, but they're more important. I do get why they're important, but—maybe I shouldn't say that they're more important.

Esperanza Santos: They're important, they're not more important.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, that's what I had to learn, for myself. That just because to me it's a—privilege is a very big word, and to me just because—it's like when people say, "Yeah, there are people in this world who have no food to eat, and they are in worse situations, and they're kicked out of their house." That doesn't mean you shouldn't get your mental health checked.

Your problems are just as important. You shouldn't not take care of your problems just because other people have it worse. That's how I feel about myself as a person. I need to remind myself that just, because I have certain levels of privileges, I've also had learning, and growth, and struggles and difficulties in my own story.

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely, yeah. People who are kicked out of their home are important, and you, and your story are important also.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. It's a good example of growth. Hopefully, it's like people—It's like I almost feel that's not gonna—it won't stop happening. That it's horrible when people get kicked out of their home, and people feel like they can be themselves, and it's a struggle to come out. I feel like my story—the way I make sense of it to myself is like my story's important, because hopefully that'll happen less.

That will be less of a story. It'll give people hope to just be themselves. The more that you are yourself, and you fight, the more you make a path, for people that come after you to be able to continue to—the story will never be wiped out if you continue to just do exactly what we're doing right now, continue talking about it, continue being brave, and acknowledging that you're privileged, because someone else worked really hard to allow you to have that privilege. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: That's pretty beautiful.

Lioniemar Reyes: Thanks.

Esperanza Santos: One word I liked that you talked about was path. I wanna talk a little bit about, more about, your path. When was the first time you noticed that you are attracted to someone, and then specifically attracted to the person who you would label as a girl?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I don't remember the first time per se, but like—

Esperanza Santos: Or just the first memory, it doesn't have to be the first time.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I think it might—my story is always a zigzag, or a circle, right? I feel like in my present time, I can notice things in my past. If I were to pinpoint when I met my girlfriend, my current girlfriend, it was 2012 and I was like—I think it was 2012. No, it was 2010, 'cause I was in—I started—

Esperanza Santos: You were 20.

Lioniemar Reyes: I was 20. I remember when I first saw her, she can—if she ever hears this is like, "Don't get a big head." It's too late, I was just—

Esperanza Santos: Feed her ego.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I was just like, "Oh my God, I love her." I felt like I was just magnetically attracted to her.

Esperanza Santos: About what? Was it her hair? Was it her skin?

Lioniemar Reyes: No.

Esperanza Santos: Was it her eyebrows?

Lioniemar Reyes: It was just nothing. I just think I literally—I will honestly say I'm one of those people it was literally energy. I was just stuck. I had met her, and I just thought—maybe it was her style, she was maybe a little bit more, I guess, you could say masculine, but not really.

Esperanza Santos: Butch?

Lioniemar Reyes: No.

Esperanza Santos: Maybe not a masculine style but a masculine energy.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe a little bit. You'll just meet her and feel, but like me but a little like—I have a sweater on with flowers, and black tights. She might just have a plain sweater, the same color. It's a burgundy

sweater with like little daisies all around on it. She might just have jeans, and a plain sweater. I don't like to be she was—she wasn't really butch. Maybe she was just—

Esperanza Santos: Androgynous.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe androgynous. When I looked at her I could tell that she was probably into girls.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, you look like a lesbian, like that?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: I can already tell.

Lioniemar Reyes: Then, I don't know, I just liked her. I don't know, I just really liked her when I first met her, and maybe personalities are similar. I thought she was cute, but—that's why I say I don't know the first time, because I feel like at that point I was already like, "I don't care if she looks like a girl.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't care if she's a girl, I like her. Maybe in high school, I feel like I may not—I may have been like—I think my earliest memory may have been college, but not—maybe, yeah, like you said, when I was 19-20, where I would say I don't care if I'm with a girl, or a guy. I would say it out loud. I don't care if anybody heard me, my mom, I wasn't afraid of family hurting me.

Not afraid, I was not ever afraid. I wouldn't care to have that argument or explain myself. Then if we went back a little further, maybe high school, when I was 15-16, I would definitely at least tell my best friend. I would be like, "I don't see the difference between kissing a guy, and a girl, it's like lips are lips."

I just didn't understand—I never understood the difference. Then if you go—I have to go that way to make sense of it. Then if you go back to when I was nine years old. That's the furthest memory I can remember of being like I don't—it's like I never really thought about it until I saw girl I liked, right? That's why I started that way. For myself, I'd never thought about it until—I never saw a girl I liked until I was 19-20.

Esperanza Santos: You never saw a girl you liked until you saw a girl you liked.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I was 19-20 when I saw a girl that I would be in a relationship with, had a crush on. I never had a crush on a girl until I was 19, or 20. When I was like nine, eight, around there, I never counted it out. Because I feel like I grew up around people who were gay, or I grew up around—it was like I grew up around a guy, my mom's cousin, his name was Tony. He was like—you would have to—if you ever get a chance, Google him. I don't remember his drag name. He was into drag and he was on the *Cristina Show*. He was like—

Esperanza Santos: He was in your neighborhood?

Lioniemar Reyes: No, he was related to me.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, what?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, his name was—

Esperanza Santos: Is he from Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: He was from New York.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: He was from the Bronx, I think.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, 'cause your family's from the Bronx.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, his name was Tony when he was not in drag. I don't know his name when he was in drag.

Esperanza Santos: His girl name.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Well, so was he the first person that made you realize LGBTQ people existed?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I feel like—

Esperanza Santos: He was related to you? How did you learn about him?

Lioniemar Reyes: He was just always there for everyone. He was just a family member, and he was really close to my mom. He's on my mom's side. We would go to this house. He was raising at the time, her name is Aniayah now, at the time it was Donovan. It's crazy, right?

It trips you up 'cause it's like, you're such an open person until—it's not that I'm not open, but I feel like, damn, I wanna make sure I'm respecting Aniayah, which is then like—I don't know if you're gonna have to cut it out, 'cause I'm talking about her. I grew up with Donovan, and then Aniayah transitioned into Aniayah, so had such a hard time being like, "No, it's Aniayah." 'Cause you have the memories of this person.

Esperanza Santos: To you yourself, or to you, and your family? Who are you talking about?

Lioniemar Reyes: Both. My family might have a little bit of her harder time, because I feel like there's still—I feel like my family has always been open, right? My mom has always been open. My dad is like, "Eh." He's open, he's not gonna be disrespectful. He's not gonna call Aniayah Donovan, and be rude. He's gonna call Aniayah Aniayah. He will probably not understand it.

Unlike my mom would probably—she'll understand it, or she's not gonna—they're not gonna be like, "She's crazy. She's wrong, but she shouldn't be doing that." They're just gonna be like, "I don't understand." I understand it, but I just—it's a trip. It's like I remember Donovan, right? I just remember.

I would have never guessed that Donovan was like—I don't know her story—I don't know Aniayah's story. I don't know how Donovan grew into Aniayah. 'Cause we were so far. It was once, or twice a month I would go and see Tony and Donovan. Then, unfortunately, Tony passed away from HIV/AIDS.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, how old was Tony?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't know how old he was. I know I was maybe 12 or 13.

Esperanza Santos: This was in 2002.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: He passed away of HIV.

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh, well, I guess at that point—I think he had pneumonia.

Esperanza Santos: HIV related complications.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I remember it, and I remember it was really sad. I'm terrible with dates, 'cause I may have been a little bit older, might have

been between 2002 and 2005. I remember even when—then we're older, right? This person has been in my life since before I can remember, so you can say birth, until like 12-13. Then I would say 12-13, 'cause I remember I got a boyfriend when I was 14. I don't think that boyfriend was around when Tony was around. That's how I can remember maybe it was—I was 12 or 13 when he passed away and Donovan was still Donovan, up until maybe early 20s for me.

Esperanza Santos: 2010.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I think it's not that I don't respect the transition, is that—you don't realize how much it's a transition for everybody else that makes it just so much harder for her. I understand, but it's just you don't wanna be too overly apologetic when you call Aniayah Donovan by accident.

Then you don't wanna make a big deal out of it. For me, I get it. I don't love her any different. I don't see her as any different. It's like muscle memory almost. If this was 2010, it's 2019, I feel like now it's definitely easier. It's hard in the beginning, but now I don't see Aniayah as Donovan anymore.

I barely remember Donovan at all anymore. I think that's a good thing. I think that family for sure—see, that's why I have to go backwards, because I remember things now. That family before was definitely important to me being more open to even considering liking girls. or whatever. I think—

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like Tony, and Aniayah were two people where you're like, "Oh, cool. I love and accept you." Then as you, I don't know, learned about new people and liking people, you're like, "Wait a minute, maybe I'm cool—I'm cool with myself too."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I never questioned myself if that makes sense. I feel like when was—I always say that when I was nine years old, I was in fifth grade, and someone was like, "Tony is gay." I was like, "What?" I didn't know what gay was. I knew that he liked men first.

Esperanza Santos: You knew what he liked, but there wasn't a label, for that before.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Then you had to learn the label.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I feel like when I was younger than nine—

Esperanza Santos: How much older was Tony than you?

Lioniemar Reyes: He was maybe my mom's age.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Oh, so he was pretty significantly older.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, he was maybe if not a little bit younger than my mom, or a little bit older.

Esperanza Santos: 20 years?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, my mom is 20 years older than me, like 21.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, so she had you when she was 20?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I think she had me when she was 21 or 22, so maybe 21,20—about 20 years older than me.

Esperanza Santos: That means he must have passed away when he was what, 34, 30?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe 34-35.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Then I do remember when I was younger, I would—when you have play dates and stuff, I wouldn't mind playing doctor with a girl. Then if you kissed a girl, that's why I laughed, 'cause I was like, "Oh, maybe it was before that." Like I said, I didn't have a name for it.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Also, you're a kid, and kids have fun and play.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You don't have the stigma of society embedded in your brain.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. I remember playing Titanic on a play date, and it was just like, "Oh, the boat is falling, give me a kiss." It was two girls. I didn't think of anything different of it. Then I remember doing play dates when I was a little bit older, and maybe experimenting with my sexuality, and wanting to make out with a female, and the female being like, "We can't do this.

We're gonna get in trouble." I'm just like, "Why? If we just like each other, why can't we just—" I didn't understand that there even was a whole stigma behind it until I was older. Then, maybe when I got to high school, maybe I might have been like, "No, I don't like girls." Because I was so boy crazy. I play that off as media, you see all the hot girls get the cute guys, or if you watch a teenage TV show, it's boy girl. If you watch—

Esperanza Santos: Oh.

Lioniemar Reyes: If you watch movies and this person is trying to get with this person, it's always girl guy. Subconsciously, I felt like that's how I would measure being liked, if a really cute guy liked me. Maybe I never really thought about it being a girl. Then maybe that would have been 14-15. Then 16 to like now 28, I'm 28 about to be 29, I feel like you let go of it. You're like, "Well, I found a girl that I liked. They make me feel that I'm liked. Or I'm special, it doesn't matter if it's a boy, or a girl. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: That's pretty cool.

Lioniemar Reyes: I had to go backwards.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and sometimes that's how it works. I think we know what we know when we know it.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Then it's cool to go back from that point and see how it comes up also.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. How did other people become aware of you, and—right now we'll just label it your sexuality, but your sexual openness, how did other people know? 'Cause it sounds like, first it was on a play date before there was a huge stigma. Then there was she was like. "No, don't. We're gonna get in trouble." You're like, "Okay, so and why are we getting in trouble?" Then the third time was when you're in high school and you're like, "Oh, if that's what's normal, then I wanna be that hot girl. I want this hot boyfriend." How did other people become aware of your sexual openness? Or your not sexual, but your openness to being attracted to whoever?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't know.

Esperanza Santos: 'Cause you said your mom was like, "I knew it."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, just my personality. People maybe wouldn't have been like, "Yeah, she could—Lily confirmed that she is sexually open for—open to whatever." They would have put it past me, they would assume, like no one could figure me out. Then maybe everyone knew 100 percent once I got a girlfriend.

Esperanza Santos: It wasn't like a checkmark, straight, it was a question mark.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Then once you got a girlfriend, they were like, "Oh, okay."

Lioniemar Reyes: They might have been like, "Whoa, she has a boyfriend so she must be straight."

Esperanza Santos: With squinted eyes question mark.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I guess no one when it comes to my openness, no one—the conversation was never really had. If I was assuming from my mom, or other people who were like, "Oh, I'm not surprised." I think it would just be by other behaviors not connected to my sexuality. I don't know, maybe the way I dressed, or it was always more on the girly side, but it was almost always not in a box, I guess or—

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: Just the type of person I was people would just be like, "Well, she's always pushing some type of boundary. She's always like, "If I say the sky is blue, she's gonna say it's orange." She always has something to say." The fact that when I did have a girlfriend it's just like, "Well, why would she question who she's dating if she's gonna question me on the color of the sky."

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: "Why would she care if who she's dating is male, female, or anything in between, if she will argue with you on the color of the sky." I think that's how.

Esperanza Santos: It's like how your style, and personality extend into your sexuality and you just being open minded.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Does that make sense?

Lioniemar Reyes: Exactly. It's exactly that. Like no one would question my openness with my sexuality, because I'm just always open with everything else or I'm willing to try everything once.

Esperanza Santos: It's like YOLO.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Let's, let's have fun. Let's figure it out.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Let's go from there.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Real quick, you said that in your family it was at first Catholic, you went to church, they're not really, then you did it to become a god mother to one of your nephews, nieces, friends, something like that. Then you identify as a Puerto Rican, nationality wise. If it had to be on the census, and there wasn't Hispanic, you'd be native, black, white. How do you think both being Catholic, and both Puerto Rican affected your LGBTQ identity?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't know. I don't think it did, not for me. I don't think it did, for me. The last time I was in a setting around Catholic people, and having a conversation about what's right and wrong, it was I was either eight, or nine getting the communion done. Then I was 26. That was the last time I sat somewhere where the converse—I was in a space where the conversation—I was in constant conversation with people who consider themselves religious, or Catholic. Because, again, it just sounds so self-centered sometimes. I knew that people use the argument that being gay is against the Bible, or whatever, but number one, I never saw the proof.

Number two, I thought it was stupid. I literally was just like, "You can say—" When it comes to my spirituality it's I just feel like I know the difference between right and wrong, and being mean, or physically abusive or turning people away for things that is frivolous. That's not God, that's not religion.

Esperanza Santos: You have the clarity to know the difference between something that's wrong versus something that's dumb.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Can I understand why it says, don't—it's says like, "Don't sleep with your neighbor's wife or don't sleep with somebody else's

partner." Why that's in the Bible or whatever. Yeah, I can understand that. That's not dumb, that's not wrong. That unless everyone has consent, that's wrong. I guess, you're doing something wrong, or you're being dishonest. Those are core wrong things, but I could not rationalize why he likes another guy or she likes another girl.

Or she was born, maybe scientifically speaking, a male but she prefers to be a she. It's like I don't understand how that hurts anyone or affects anyone so religiously. It never affected me, 'cause I was just like, "I don't have to believe that. I don't like to be—." Growing up I was in the age where it's like there were churches that were accepting of—

Esperanza Santos: There was?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Where you're from?

Lioniemar Reyes: Well, when I started to care—I'm really close to New York City and really—it's a really urban area that—

Esperanza Santos: No, I'm talking about churches in Newark.

Lioniemar Reyes: Newark. Like I said, the last time I was in a church where I cared about the conversation, I was presently going to church, I was nine. Then I was 26, when I was 26, yes. I went to St. Francis I don't know it's the same church.

Esperanza Santos: In Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yes, the same church that my parents go to now.

Esperanza Santos: Not St. Lucy's.

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh, St. Lucy's.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: Not St. Francis, St. Francis is the one I went to when I was really really young. St. Lucy's, I think it's St. Lucy's, and I think his name was Luigi, to be honest, 'cause he was Italian and I—whatever.

Esperanza Santos: The pastor or the person who came?

Lioniemar Reyes: The priest.

Esperanza Santos: Okay.

Lioniemar Reyes: The priest.

Esperanza Santos: The guy who talks at the front.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, the guy who talks in the front, exactly. See, I'm not that religious, but when I was getting my confirmation done, we would have to go into classes where it was just an open communication. At that time, it wasn't reading the Bible. It was more like, although it was a Catholic Church, the class that I was taking to get my confirmation done was not very—it was more core values, or being loving, being accepting, being understanding, understand why Jesus did these things, and the metaphoric comparison of what Jesus was doing in that moment. At some point I asked because I just got to that point I was already in a relationship. I was just like, "Is it a problem that—how do you guys feel about being gay?"

Esperanza Santos: That's pretty brave. You're like, "Just so everyone knows."

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, so then the nun who ran the class was like—she was—

Esperanza Santos: You have nuns?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Catholics have nuns.

Esperanza Santos: There just wasn't where I was at.

Lioniemar Reyes: Oh, yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Or that I saw. Whatever, anyways, continue.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, there was the—I could be fucking it all up, but I'm pretty sure it's a Catholic Church. Then nun who ran the class, she didn't lie. She was like it was really hard for her to, I guess, come around to the idea of LGBTQ, gayness, or whatever you wanna call it. She told some really weird story that obviously—it wasn't a weird, it wasn't bad, it was just basically in other words she was saying that almost all Catholics deal with things that they might not—it's almost like I don't personally know how I feel about it. I don't personally know if I agree with it, but God teaches me to love every human being. It was one of those. Do you know what I'm saying?

Esperanza Santos: I know exactly what you're talking about. It's like when—I'll speak for me, myself, it's like when you can tell someone has a prejudice, but they can't just say you're gonna burn in hell in that moment.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Because they're trying to speak from a place of values, and that's different. They can't just shut down a conversation, but they can't totally agree.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Where I'm from, they call this the Pope shuffle. The Pope will say one thing, we'll do another. Say this, but then say that and it's like—that's very this neutral ground where they won't be overwhelmingly supportive.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: They get away with it, but they don't, it's weird.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah. Then I don't wanna be naive, but like from—what I would think is that she was still struggling with it, but she was trying to—you know when you meet those people who like exactly what you're saying, but are trying to believe it, for themselves. It's like, "Part of me feels that you're gonna burn in hell, but maybe I should change that." Maybe, I don't know. That's the nun, and the priest was—

Esperanza Santos: Luigi?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, was more open to it, maybe not 100 percent. It wasn't she based—she has a girlfriend, she basically said that she has a girlfriend. She can't take these classes anymore.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, I thought you were saying the nun was the one that has a girlfriend.

Lioniemar Reyes: No, me. I was in the class and it's like, "Okay, she's gay, but she doesn't have to leave." There was a church the other day, and I don't know the name of the church.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, do you know where it was?

Lioniemar Reyes: I don't know, it's right by my house.

Esperanza Santos: Okay, so where's by your house then?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it's St. Theresa's (Edit: Silver Lake Baptist Church), but I'm not sure.

Esperanza Santos: By what streets?

Lioniemar Reyes: I will say that the—it's by the Silver Lake, or Grove Street train station. I think it's Silver Lake stop, that's the stop of the train station. You can get to that church from there. I definitely, me and my girlfriend this year, saw a sign that said, "Marriage equals one woman plus one man." It only lasted less than a month, that sign posted up. If you wanted to get an idea of churches in North Newark—I remember seeing that, and being like, "Oh, no, they didn't."

Esperanza Santos: You're like, "I'mma go get my spray paint."

Lioniemar Reyes: I was. I was like—

Esperanza Santos: I'mma put WO in front of man, and be like, "Between one man and one woman."

Lioniemar Reyes: I was like I'm gonna tape it, we're gonna make that shit go viral. We never did, but I know that it's not there anymore. It didn't last there very long. I was surprised, and then my girlfriend's like, "Why are you surprised?" I was just like, "'Cause I just, I don't know, again, sometimes maybe I'm naive of how fast things are changing." I just didn't expect in 2019, that this church would even try it in such a—I feel like Newark has always been a city where, aside from Tony and Aniayah, I've had other family members that were gay.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, there's other ones?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, I've had other cousins, again, from my mom's side who were lesbians and—I don't wanna say that it was like my mom was cool until it was like her kid. I don't think that's 100 percent the way it is. I think that it might have been like that 2 percent. She was cool with it, because it was her cousins and—there were always comments like, "She's so pretty. Why is she dated her, she could get such cute guy?" Now it's 2019, maybe that was early 2000 when she would say something like that. Now it's just you don't say stuff like that. Now she would be like, "You don't say stuff like that."

Esperanza Santos: She gets it.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Lioniemar Reyes: I was surprised when that sign was up there 'cause I felt like, I may not have been surrounded by the LGBT community a lot growing up, but it was definitely there in the late 90s, early 2000s.

Esperanza Santos: Where is there?

Lioniemar Reyes: It was around me.

Esperanza Santos: Where?

Lioniemar Reyes: At family parties, or people who were walking down the street holding hands with—two women holding hands.

Esperanza Santos: In North Newark?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, maybe not two men, but definitely two women. Then in the Bronx, definitely maybe two men being together, but that's a whole other conversation. Again, sometimes I may live in La La Land, maybe these people were so comfortable, because they were at a family party and they knew that their families were comfortable with them being gay.

Sometimes to a certain extent, people in Newark have the right to be who they want to be, and not always have, but they definitely would fight for it. People from Newark are definitely the type of people who are not afraid to fight, for what they want, and who they are. Maybe I felt safe in that. I was surprised that—I was just like, "I might not take that sign down but somebody probably will." Someone will tag it up—

Esperanza Santos: It happened.

Lioniemar Reyes: Someone will slice it up or something. Religion wise, I don't feel like it affected me. I didn't know that outside from Newark—I did feel like I was lucky to come from a city instead of like a small—

Esperanza Santos: Because?

Lioniemar Reyes: 'Cause I felt like—

Esperanza Santos: Oh, can you—sorry, you describe a small where I interrupted you.

Lioniemar Reyes: It's like if I was from Ohio, or even Pennsylvania, where it's—even though I grew up in this city where I felt like I was surrounded by a lot of family, and you would never know if someone driving down the street was your cousin, or a friend of a friend. That was just North Newark. Newark as a whole is bigger than that.

If I was downtown, they might not know. Maybe North Newark might know you're gay, but if you go downtown, they might not know. They might not even care. They're probably not even taking two seconds to stare at you. I do know that there's—I have heard of history of that not being 100 percent true. I know that there's a very spoken about incident where downtown—

Esperanza Santos: Oh. Sakia Gunn

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, where—

Esperanza Santos: You were 13 years old.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, but it wasn't—I never heard that.

Esperanza Santos: You were going to school in middle school in downtown.

Lioniemar Reyes: I never heard of it.

Esperanza Santos: You never heard of it?

Lioniemar Reyes: Until college.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Again, I was until 13 years old. I was into boys and TV. I wasn't exposed to it. I wasn't aware of it until I was older. When I think about growing up, it's like I piqued in even, I guess, outwardly showing that I belong on the spectrum when I—

Lioniemar Reyes: What do you mean piqued?

Esperanza Santos: I piqued in—it's 100 percent known that she—I don't even know how to say it, 'cause I don't identify myself, so just, for the activity of trying to communicate what I'm trying to say without being 100 percent pigeon holing myself. I feel like people 100 percent know if she's gay. She has a girlfriend. She's had a girlfriend for three years now. This is not just a phase. This is who she is. That all happened between the last three years. I don't know what would

have happened if I was in high school, and said that I had a girlfriend. It might have been harder.

My mom may have had a harder time with it. I might have gotten in trouble. I might have been bullied by it. Going to high school, there were two or three girls who were gay, who said they were lesbians. It just seemed like they just chilled with the guys more. We wore uniforms, so it's not like you could say that they were more butch, but you could see maybe they were a little bit.

Esperanza Santos: Their energy? The way they style it?

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, like on dress down days, they might have worn less feminine things. It's hard to be it was butch, because it was, they may have just worn jeans, and a plain t shirt instead of a skirt, and something that was—showed off their curves. They just were probably more—it's really hard to explain for me 'cause I felt like I don't know if they were presenting anything besides what they were comfortable in.

The energy might have been more masculine and it didn't seem, from the perspective of me going to school, that they were bullied because they were lesbian. We did have someone who was gay in high school, and did he get bullied? I don't know. I don't think that he did. He never got beat up for it. How you feel like you know that the extremes could be, he didn't get beat up for it.

I don't think he really got teased for it, but he did have a good unit of friends that I feel like people wouldn't even try it, because they knew that he had a good unit of friends. This was a year below me, so this will be in 2000s, yeah, not 2000s. Well, I don't know, I'm not good with time. I would have been 15-16 when he came out officially. It's hard, for me to even be able to feel like I can represent Newark's history properly, 'cause I feel like—

Esperanza Santos: I'm not asking you to represent Newark's history.

Lioniemar Reyes: No.

Esperanza Santos: I'm asking you to represent your history.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, but it just—it makes me insecure sometimes.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, sure. If you wanna feel insecure, you can feel insecure.

Lioniemar Reyes: Yeah, just sometimes. 'Cause I just I don't know. When I "piqued" or was just when people could officially say something, I guess. Or can, like I said, pinpoint that I was not dating a guy anymore. It's just no one cared. No one cared and I don't—I'm happy that no one cared. I am ecstatic that no one cared. For my story, and my experience in Newark, it was a pretty good one. Then I learned that, for some people it's not.

[Extraneous Conversations 2:01:46-2:02:11]

Esperanza Santos: Okay, we're gonna finish. We're gonna start wrapping up. I'm so sorry I've kept you this long.

Lioniemar Reyes: It's okay.

Esperanza Santos: What do you love the most about being LGBTQ?

Lioniemar Reyes: That I could just be 100 percent myself, and nobody should, or typically would care. As long as I'm respecting everybody else, people respect me.

Esperanza Santos: What's something you wish was different?

Lioniemar Reyes: I think it's layered. I think one thing that I—I wish I wouldn't feel so insecure all the time.

Esperanza Santos: About what?

Lioniemar Reyes: Like I said, about feeling like my story is not as important. It's not that I feel insecure, it's I feel like—I wish that I felt like I guess, I wish that it was like—I guess that I wish that it wasn't so hard to get here. I wish that people, other people, who disagree—I wish people didn't disagree, I guess that's the—what was the question? What do I not what?

Esperanza Santos: Wish was different.

Lioniemar Reyes: Wish was different, I wish that—it's a tricky question. I wish that the community was just a community based on people getting together, because of preference, and not necessarily, because of a requirement. Not a requirement, but I wish that people didn't have to go through the things they went through in the past, and that it wasn't so hard—the community was just built on—like a book club. We just like to be a community of people who hang—

[End of Audio]