Queer Newark Oral History Project
Interviewee: Taj Shareef
Interviewer: Esperanza Santos
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Esperanza Santos: Today is February 22, 2020. My name is Esperanza Santos, and today I'm interviewing Taj Shareef at the — over the phone at queer — in the Queer Newark office for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Hello!

Taj Shareef: Hi there.

Esperanza Santos: Well, Taj, thank you again for making time for this. I know that you have a pretty busy schedule. There's a lot going on in LA, and thank you for making time.

Taj Shareef: No problem. Happy to take part.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Let's get started. We're gonna go through childhood, family of origin, talk a little bit about Newark, and then about your LGBTQ identity. Sounds good?

Taj Shareef: Sure. Yeah. Sounds good.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Can you tell me when and where were you born?

Taj Shareef: I was actually born in Warwick, Rhode Island, and that was in — on July 21 of 1986.

Esperanza Santos: When you were growing up in your Rhode Island — if you grew up in Rhode Island, who raised you?

Taj Shareef: I was raised by my parents. We didn't spend much time in Rhode Island. I was born and six months later, we moved to Irvington, but I was raised by my father, Saleem Shareef *[00:01:22]*, and my mother, Carol Shareef.

Esperanza Santos: Aw, and it sounds like you were in Rhode Island for a little bit and then were in Irvington. Did you grow up in, besides any of those places, anywhere else or was it just those two?

Taj Shareef: Nope. No. I was born and then maybe six months, within six months of being born I was — we moved from Warwick to Irvington, and that's where my family lived for most of my life, but I've gone to school in Newark and raised in Newark and worked in Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Nice, and in your house, who made up the household? Of course, your parents, but did you have any siblings or were aunts or cousins in and out?

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Actually, we lived in a two-family house, so in the upstairs portion, it was my dad, my mom and my older brother and older sister and me. So there were three—two siblings—two older siblings who still live there, and in the other part of the house were my great grandmother—my maternal great grandmother, my grandmother and uncle.

Esperanza Santos: Oh my gosh. You had a lot of family around then, huh?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, pretty regularly.

Esperanza Santos: Was it mostly like this was your family unit or did people come and go?

Taj Shareef: That was the probably the stable family unit because those were all the people who lived there, but growing up, the house was kind of the hub for the family, so during holidays and stuff—and cousins would come over, cousins on my dad's side, my mom's side would come over, older and younger, so that was kind of the gathering place for most of the tri-state located family.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and having this hub at your house, were you like, ugh, I'm tired of my family or was it like oh my gosh, it's a party I love it. How did you feel?

Taj Shareef: I loved it. I think it's part of why I like being — living with other people. I enjoy the — I'm used to the house having a lot of activity. Yeah, no, I loved it. I mean I didn't get along with all of my family — everybody in the family.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Welcome to family.

Taj Shareef: But I think that's to be expected, but for the most part, it was — I liked it a lot.

Esperanza Santos: Mm, and during this period of—I guess you could say, I don't know if you stayed there until you were eighteen or left to college or left to another city, but in your adolescence and childhood, do you recall any events that were transitions or turning points in this part of your early life?

Taj Shareef: Yeah, I think so. I think it was ’93 if I’m not mistaken, my mother passed away that year and so did my paternal grandfather. My father’s father passed away, and so — and then a few months later, my mother passed away. I think those moments were pretty heavy shifts in my perception of the world and what could happen in my family, especially in terms of how I thought about safety. I realized that was something that I didn’t really think too much about until those things happened and then I became hyperaware of them.

Esperanza Santos: You must have been like what six, eight?

Taj Shareef: Then I was about eight. I was like eight going on nine.

Esperanza Santos: If you don’t want to get into it, you don’t have to, but what happened to your mom and grandpa?

Taj Shareef: My grandfather, I don’t know what happened to him. I know he just was ill one evening and then he passed away very suddenly. To my knowledge, he wasn’t in bad health because was pretty active, and I don’t know, led a pretty stress-free life for the most part. My mom had cancer. I don’t recall what kind because I think a lot of times when you’re younger and people sort of — when an older person, especially a parent or somebody gets an illness, they don’t really talk about it too much.

Esperanza Santos: Especially to the younger kids.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. You just kind of see what’s happening and people kind of just tell you, oh, they’re sick, and eventually, they’re like well, it was cancer, but we never really talked too, too much about what kind and when it was — I do know that she got diagnosed and then it progressed very quickly. It was like a diagnosis happened and then within months she was gone.

Esperanza Santos: Oh my goodness. Well, may she rest in peace.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, thank you.

Esperanza Santos: For you, you said it was a turning point in terms of safety. Can you tell me more about that?

Taj Shareef: Yeah, of course. I think prior to that, I never really thought too much about things like mortality and physical safety just because it was kind of a given. You’re breathing it in the whole time, so you presume you’re safe. I don’t think up until that point I had really experienced anyone passing away, so it was jarring to then have

your life very suddenly change with these two people who were very nurturing. My paternal grandfather was, again, very, very affectionate, very nurturing to all of us, and so he was gone and that was difficult and then just several — maybe just several months later then my mother was gone, and I think those two very protective and nurturing figures in my life just being removed very quickly made me aware that oh, people do — people die. You know what I mean?

You hear words and you don't really consider them until they — it's something you experience and you're like, ah, so this is what this means. Oh, people can die, and then it made me aware of—I think not even so much my own mortality. I think I was worried about my dad. I was always—I think after that anytime we would go anywhere or do anything, I was always hyperaware of locking doors and put your seatbelt on and are you okay? What time are — it became that, and that's become a very strong through line for the person I am now even.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. I mean it's kind of like all of a sudden someone's there and now they're not, and you're like, wait a minute, I cannot have my parents in my life? And then becoming hyperaware of just energy, dynamics, everything.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely, and you don't really see — I think those things, too, kind of send a ripple so you kind of see how other people are affected, so it's — with my two siblings, I have an older brother and an older sister, I think you become aware of things like — I'm like oh, you were the only — I mean it's not — obviously my grandma and great grandma were still there, too, but I'm just like oh, but you were the women, the girls of our family, and now there's only one of you.

You know what I mean? And I started thinking what does that mean for you? You're my sister, but you don't have your mother, so that's difficult, too, and I think I started thinking a little bit more nuanced in terms of who these people were to other people and who were important to me, and I was like, oh wow, this is bigger than I thought it was, you know?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, like the moment where you start decentering yourself in other relationships and consider themselves autonomous beings doing their thing.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. You know what I mean? You get to the point where you're like, oh no, that's not just my mother. That's also your mom and

your wife, and for my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, I'm like and that's your daughter. I'm like, oh wow, you've lost — your child just passed away. You know what I mean? And for my great grandmother, I'm like your granddaughter just passed away. You outlived your granddaughter. What does that feel like? So, yeah, I think when that sort of hit me as a younger person, I was like, oh wow, this is going to change things.

Esperanza Santos: These are some pretty deep thoughts for an eight-year-old.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. I think it all just kind of came crashing in gradually over within that year of that happening. I don't think I had really thought about it before. Again, just like you were saying, kind of without realizing something yourself, like oh yeah, this is me and this is my family and these are my parents. That's my brother and that's my sister, but it's mine instead of well, who are they to each other. You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely. In the place in Irvington, can you tell — if you're comfortable, nearby where you lived and what your neighborhoods were like?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. I lived on Orange Avenue, and that was very — it was near — what's that cross street? It was near Irvington Center. It was near Irvington High School, and the school that I went to was right down the street, Madison Avenue School, so that was about where the neighborhood was. What else was nearby? I mean Irvington's so small that it was just like there's Irvington Center, there's the high school, and then there's the town square which was like a block up from the mayor's office and all that.

Esperanza Santos: What was your neighborhood like?

Taj Shareef: The neighborhood—well that was interesting just because growing up, it was — it seemed very safe, very safe and just like, I don't know, a family place. Over the years, it started to gradually become a little — I think there just something that happened where it just gradually became less and less familiar. Nothing specifically changed about the environment, but it felt like the people were different. People were operating differently, and so it went from like yeah, feel free to go down the street or whatever to more so be home before dark, and who are you going to be with and be careful — you know what I mean? There was a shift in the energy of the neighborhood.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know when that started happening for your family?

Taj Shareef: Hmm. I don't know exactly. I want to say probably — sounds like if my mom passed away, I want to say in maybe two or three years of that happening, maybe '96, '97ish it started to seem a little different, and then kind of gradually continued on that path. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Who were the adults in your adolescence, besides your parents, who shaped you?

Taj Shareef: Well, one thing is there were my parents, of course. Auxiliary to that, a heavy, heavy part of that were I think my maternal grandmother and great grandmother who both lived with us in the downstairs part of the house, and they were always home. I don't think I realized how unusual that was for people to have that much family who's on hand. After school every day, there was always somebody there. There was always — my great grandmother was always there, and even growing up before I started school, I think before kindergarten, I would stay with my great grandmother, and she would just kind of take care of me and fix food and watch out for me until everyone started coming home.

Esperanza Santos: Aw, she really took care of you, huh?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah. We had a great time. We'd watch some soap operas, and then she'd make me some food and let me watch TV in the other room until my sister came home. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: What were the schools that you attended?

Taj Shareef: For elementary school, from kindergarten until the sixth grade, I went to Madison Avenue School, which was right down the street from us on Orange Avenue and Madison, and in middle school, I went to Union Avenue Middle School, and then I also for high school, I went to the Chad Science Academy, which was in Newark, which is a private high school.

Esperanza Santos: If any, what were some of the challenges you faced in childhood?

Taj Shareef: I think one of the things that was pretty regularly experienced was, and funnily enough I was just talking to a friend about this, I think it was always — I don't know where this came from or what spurred it, but I think there was always a sense of feeling different from other children there. I don't know why 'cause I didn't feel like we were necessarily different and this is throughout schooling, but I don't know. I think it just came from little things. I think all throughout my early schooling, it was always a perception that oh,

did you just move here? And I'm like, no, I've been here for years. There was just a perception of you are somebody different.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. You are foreign.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, even though I'm just like no, we've lived down the street. We've been in classes for years. We went to the same second grade, and I don't know what exactly was the thing that made that or influenced that perception, but it was pretty consistent I would say throughout, from early on probably to some degree through high school. Yeah. I don't know what it is, though.

Esperanza Santos: You're like *I don't know*. How did you manage feeling different?

Taj Shareef: I think—I mean I don't really think a whole lot of it was — I think because I tend to be pretty internal and passive, I just really kind of just digested and like oh, well, I guess if I don't belong here because I don't belong here. You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Taj Shareef: I mean I think you normalize it because you have to, so you're like all right, well, this is just the reality of the situation. You know what I mean? You'll only be welcomed to a degree, and you just kind of have to be okay with that, but I think I internalized a lot of that as—yeah, I mean nobody likes that. There was a sense of feeling like I was missing out or — and I think part of that helped to influence me to mature a little bit more quickly just because I wasn't a huge — I wasn't a huge reader or anything, but I think I developed language fairly well just because the adults around me spoke to me like I was an adult.

I had that and I was able to I think kind of ponder with a certain accuracy that I don't think you may necessarily have as a child or you don't have necessarily have the language to describe how you feel and I think I maybe had a little bit more access to some of that.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, just based off of the experience with your mom passing away, and then also being talked to as an adult and having that language.

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I don't remember anyone ever — I mean some aunts were very big into talk, but my parents were pretty — I mean they were, again, nurturing, but they weren't like, you know, hey — it wasn't — I don't feel like they dumbed down with me — how they said things to me generally.

Esperanza Santos: If you have questions, ask, and otherwise, I'm going to tell you how it is.

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Always with love and always with caring, but in the same way that they would offer to — when I was like 20. They might not go into the details that might confusing I don't think, but they would be like yeah, this is how this works.

Esperanza Santos: What role, if any, did religion play in your life?

Taj Shareef: Personally, it didn't really dictate a whole lot, but my household was—I don't wanna say very religious, but my dad was pretty — and still is a practicing Muslim, so he was practicing Islam, and so we were, too, by default. My mother partook also sometimes, but it didn't ever really seem like she had converted or anything because I know she was Christian previously, but she was never really, I don't know, really one way or the other, too invested.

She kind of partook as much as it was like, all right, well, we're doing a family thing, so I'm gonna be a part of that. My dad converted to Islam, though, when he was, I think in college, and so it was something where we recognized Ramadan. We would go to the mosque and we would pray and we would fast. Even as children, we would fast and sometimes we would go to the Friday prayer Jumu'ah *[00:18:21]*, but it was something I never personally felt connected to, even though I knew it was important to my father.

Esperanza Santos: Did your father convert in the 80s, 70s, 60s?

Taj Shareef: I guess it would probably be the seventies because I know he was — yeah. 70s? Maybe the late, mid to late 60s, maybe mid to late sixties and early seventies.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know what college he went to?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. He went to Providence College in Rhode Island.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Cool, and so, now is it cool if we switch up to Newark?

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah, sure.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. What is your earliest memory of Newark?

Taj Shareef: I think the earliest would probably just be travelling with my parents. Every so often, we would get to go to work with them or something, so my dad lived in — or my dad worked in New York, so we would travel through Newark a lot. We also had family who lived in Newark, in the Newark and East Orange areas, so we would be back and forth. As far as specifically, I always thought it was — I think as a kid passing through I always thought we were in New York because I was so little, and the buildings were like — looking up, this is huge, until we would get to New York, and I'd be like oh no, this is New York.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. No. This is big.

Taj Shareef: Right, but it's all huge when you're, you know, five. Yeah, mostly I think just moving. I just recall a lot of just walking and going and seeing people. My dad had a lot of friends in Newark, too, and he would sometimes go to the mosque there, so I know we would be there a lot with my brother and sister and myself would always be there. Not always, but would often be there 'cause he would take us if there was an opportunity to.

Esperanza Santos: Since that early memory of being — of thinking Newark was New York and visiting family in and off, how do you think Newark has changed since then?

Taj Shareef: Since then, I mean I think most prominently is just clearly there's the full throttle gentrification that's happening is the biggest thing, especially in the downtown area. Yeah. For the most part, it still looks like the same city, but there's newer businesses, different businesses, the rent has gone up in certain areas where that shift is happening, the faces look different. The makeup of the city is more white people than it was previously, which isn't necessarily a bad thing as long as it's not displacing the people who live there, but it is. It is to a heavy degree. Yeah. I think that's probably one of the biggest differences that I notice.

Esperanza Santos: Gentrifying can be a pretty big concept, and one evidence of that is seeing more white people within Newark. From your perspective, what are ways that you think Newark is being gentrified?

Taj Shareef: Well, I think one of the more prominent things is that you see — there's a sense in just the cost of living, in terms of rents, in particular, even just within neighborhoods and buildings that you've been familiar with, very suddenly. A, because the property value has gone up, a place that was once $900 is now $1,400, and that's well and good if you can afford that, and I think part of that

comes from there is — it's always a double-edged sword when there are big tech businesses that come to a place, especially if they're — even when they're trying to move mindfully, it's difficult because what happens is rather than necessarily sourcing the staffing from people who are already there or for whatever reason, if they're not able to or don't, then they end up bringing or creating incentives for people who they do work with to move there.

Those people often enough in tech are of a certain income bracket, and because of the disparities of income bracket, especially in certain industries, those people who are coming will tend to be of a particular racial background that then — so then those people are all living here.

Again, that causes property values to go up and then the people who are already living in those spaces now have to find other spaces to live over the course of the next one to five years because now the property values are worth more, so they can be charged more for the rent, and there's not a lot of — I don't want to say that, but there are limited places and buildings and units that have affordable housing and kind of compensate for that, and also just in terms of just educational and skill building opportunities.

I think those things aren't necessarily as prominently and readily available without certain resources, so I think that over time causes there to be a shift in the makeup of who is able, who lives there, and who is able to live there, and who's able to work there.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's like there's nothing wrong with bringing in resources, but when you make it so that people who are here either aren't encouraged to participate in the industry or are trained for the new, I guess, employment opportunities or can no longer live there, then it becomes less about sharing the space and more about displacing people for this new set of people with a higher income bracket?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah. It's very much that, and I think even — and it creates a resentment, too, for the people who've been there just because when you see those differences, you see well, now there's an increased police presence, and you know as the person who's been there for the last ten or twenty years, oh, I know this isn't for me. This is for the new people because they've never been here in this way. You know what I mean? People see that. They observe it, and they recognize, well, this is how my city has valued me as oh so secondary.

Esperanza Santos: Like I'm in the way.

Taj Shareef: I'm in the way, you know what I mean? I'm in the way. When you spend a lifetime where you're like — you've grown accustomed to how things work, but when they start working differently, you see why or you see apparently why and how else should you feel besides somewhat jilted by that?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's like wait a minute. I've been here my whole time, and you could have, I don't know, fixed up this building, put in this shop, and all of a sudden, now it's happening.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, 'cause you think almost think all right, well, sure, if you build this new business and have people who work there, then they'll make more money, but businesses don't do that. They wait, typically, they wait and they bring people, and that's fine, but again, it causes — if it's not being done mindfully from a corporate standpoint, then it causes massive displacement over the course of a few years.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. We talked a little bit about how Newark has changed since your earliest memory and kind of like what's happening now with gentrification. Are there ways you think Newark's changed from a perspective that most people aren't aware of?

Taj Shareef: Well, I think one thing is I think people — less so that it's changed and more so that I think people are becoming more aware of the truth of the city because I think growing up and even presently, people are still like, Newark is so dangerous, and I'm like, again, even have describing myself as somebody who feels very conspicuous walking around places, I've never had an issue in Newark. You know what I mean? I've never experienced being robbed in Newark or attacked in Newark or anything. I don't know.

I think people are becoming more aware of pointing out those sort of stereotypes that people were pushing and circulating about the city, and I think there's a lot more of a movement to make people aware. No, the city has always been — it's had its problems, of course. Big cities have problems. Big cities have problems, and I think just also just kind of decoding that those perceptions were heavily based in coded racialized language.

It's like it's not safe there. Don't go there, and I would say this to — as an adult to coworkers who would say those things as we're in Newark, I'm like, but you'll hop on the train and go to Manhattan

as if there's not — as if it's not much bigger and far fuller of crazy people. You know what I mean? I'm just like why is this place safe over the over? I'm like the only difference is I think the perception. The perception of Newark is that it is, at least present-day Newark and the last several decades, is like it is a Black city, a Latino city, and thus, not safe, and that is coming from a very particular lens, whereas, oh, Manhattan's safe. I'm like, why is that safer to you? You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, it's like what?

Taj Shareef: Walk me through it because I've felt far more unsafe in areas of New York, especially just because of it's such a prominent city. That's where I think about people are gonna do things because it's so visible. Mm-hmm, but yeah. I think that—I think the thing that less so a change and more so people from the city kind of taking charge of the narrative that's been pushed about the city for so long.

Esperanza Santos: Wait. Has there been a historic narrative about Newark?

Taj Shareef: Just I think, again, what I've experienced it's just that it's been an unsafe place. It's a place you don't go. You know what I mean? Prior to, I think, the last maybe ten years or so, it's just been associated with crime and danger and poverty, for the most part I think for people who are outside of the city.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, for people who don't know and who get the message from, I don't know, ABC News or XYZ newspaper, this is the perception and this is the narrative people create, but it's different when you're from here and when you know the city.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, and I think part of that too is part of the drive for people to create or bring about the counternarrative to that is that that narrative is also something that drives economics. If people think it's not a safe place, they're not going to bring their businesses here. You know what I mean? And if that presumption is based on a racial lens, then here we have the several prongs of how this is a problem.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and I'm not sure if this is accurate or not, but ultimately, everything is racialized, but what makes Newark special is there's a lot of anti-blackness about the perceptions of Newark, and that totally shifts things.

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah. You know what I mean? It is something even people — anybody who is not from there, but particular white people who experience the city, outside of a — I would say present day, outside of a particular set of streets, there is just a certain anxiety because police aren't here and this isn't where this very prominent place is, and prior to, I think prior to a lot of the new construction and the stadiums and the buildings and the new tech businesses that have been kind of set up shop there, prior to that, people would never, you know what I mean?

These are folks who would never set foot. They'd be like oh no, I'm in a car and I'm moving through it because there's no way I'm gonna walk anywhere here, without realizing unwittingly, you're driving, you're kind of helping to create the circumstances that you're trying to avoid here because the fear is what's dominating that.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's kind of like you have this narrative to have this idea and that makes you have certain choices and those choices have material consequences for the people who are from here.

Taj Shareef: Absolutely, and you think it's nothing 'cause it's just a thought, but I'm like but if you feel that way and a bunch of people do and it's not based in any fact, then it drives action. A perfect example, I had a manager I worked with at a job that I had in Newark, and we had an opportunity to go and sort of talk about a tech business — the tech business we were working at to some kids — some high school kids who were having a fair, and I ended up going and another — a different manager because the one who was supposed to go, she had opted out because she was afraid that there was going to be weapons and danger at the school, you know what I mean? And I had said to her, I'm like, they're kids.

They're children, and they're coming to a job fair. Why — you coming in with the expectation that something dangerous is going to happen and then just opting out, to me I was — I don't want to say I was shocked, but I was hugely disappointed because even though I still got to go and talk to them and another manager came with me, I wonder how many opportunities like that kind of pass people by because of that perception.

You know what I mean? Had that been a different situation, if she had been in charge of that and was just like oh no, we're not going because it's dangerous, then those kids just would not have gotten the information that we had to share, and I wonder how often that happens. You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Like you're — to put it bluntly, your racism is getting in the way of these young people having an opportunity.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, and just like you don't know them. You know what I mean? If we as an organization have decided we're going do a thing, for you to just kind of opt on based on no information, nothing has happened, and we went, and of course nothing happened because they're children at a job fair. Some were interested. Some were bored. Some were kind of jerks, but that's kids.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, they're pretty awesome.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. You know what I mean? They're allowed to feel different ways about different things and the ones who hear you, hear you, and the ones who don't, don't, and that's fine, but to just completely opt out of it just because of an imagined fear of what could happen, I thought was — I was hugely disappointed.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and when and where in the city have you lived in or worked at?

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Well, before moving in, moving to LA, I was actually downtown. I was like right downtown on Broad Street, actually. I lived right off of Broad Street, and I lived there for maybe four, five years, four years. I've had a couple of jobs in Newark. I worked at a cable company doing customer service right out of college, so I moved back.

I went to college in Delaware and then moved back with my family for a very short while and then started working in Newark at a company that's now been rebranded, but it was Cable Vision at the time, doing customer service, which was a whole experience, and then very briefly worked in New York doing research for a legal company, and then came back to Newark to work for Audible downtown, which is where I was until I moved to Los Angeles.

Esperanza Santos: Throughout these three different jobs, did you live on Broad Street? Did you say in the same place?

Taj Shareef: When I was working at the cable company, I was between Irvington — I was in Irvington, then briefly moved to Elizabeth and then back to Newark. Yeah, and then back to Newark for the duration of when I was at Audible.

Esperanza Santos: Are there things about living in Newark that you find appealing or that you like?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. I think it's a city that has a lot of character that people don't really realize. I think that there's just so much to experience on a daily basis. There's not a whole lot of pomp and circumstance around it, but there's beautiful architecture, like the cathedral that was down there, downtown, the Newark Museum, which has beautiful different exhibits and pieces that they display. I think another staple of it is just, again, the museum leading into something else.

During the summer, they have those cool jazz concerts and then another staple of the city is the jazz station, WBGO, which is right there on — I don't remember what street that is, but it's right across from NJPAC, and — but it's right across from NJPAC, and I think that's just been a staple, too, especially for the older people that I know who are — or just music lovers who are like oh, I love jazz. That place has been I think — I don't know.

It's just like a — it's an important place for people who are local to the city and have been in the city for a long while, and honestly, I've never really perceived active danger from the city. I don't know. I think it's a nice city to walk in 'cause I feel like you can walk — you can kind of pick a direction and you'll find something. You can go in one direction and you'll have the museum or you'll go in another direction and you'll have NJPAC or you'll have Newark Symphony Hall or you can go in one direction and then you're a little bit into North Newark, but you'll be seeing the cherry blossoms and stuff.

You know what I mean? You can pick a direction and you're going to run into something. I mean, and not for nothing, but on every corner, there's something really good to eat. You kind of trip over good food, and you can kind of spin around in circles and you'll find something that's engaging to be a part of there.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's like a very — it's rich. It has a lot to offer.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, and I think a lot of folks miss out on that just because they're like I'm not sure about the city, and nobody's looking at you. You know what I mean? They're going wherever they're going, even in the — what is that? Military Park, I think, where I know they have chess boards and stuff set up, and they've started doing — which is one of the good things that I've liked that

they've started doing activities there, and there's like yoga classes that they offer now to people.

I think it's just, yeah, you can kinda just — it's a walkable city, but something to engage you, and I don't think, especially now, being in LA, I realize how rare that is for a city. You're not bound by having to be a car owner to experience something in Newark, and I think that is really invaluable especially for young people, young people and people of a certain income bracket. If you can't afford a car, in LA you're kind of stranded for the most part.

Esperanza Santos: Oh my gosh, yeah. With LA, oof.

Taj Shareef: You have to drive places, and that means — and just the cost of living is higher. If you don't have a car, you can't go to as many places as often. Whether by design or by accident, it ends up being more isolated, whereas in Newark, you're like don't have a car, but I know I can hop on the twenty-five bus. I can hop on the twenty-four and I'll be here, there and everywhere, or I can just walk down the street, and I can find something to do. You know what I mean? You can always find something to do, somewhere to be without be constrained by some things that I think bigger cities and other, more prominent constrain you with.

Esperanza Santos: Are there things about living in Newark that you found difficult or frustrating?

Taj Shareef: I think things — what would be frustrating? I don't think there was anything that felt insurmountably frustrating. I think one thing is that I do — I mean, and this is just less about the city, and more just about the world, but I don't know of too many things that kind of people of multiple generations could experience together and experience the same way. It felt like the things you do — while there is something for everybody to do, they are things that are experienced fairly separately, so I don't know that there would be something that young people and older people would both be at and have fun with and be able to kind of break bread and experience it. It felt like there were—I don't know.

If there was a concert here and certain artists were playing, you knew that was — this is for the forty and up people or if there's a thing over here, it's like, oh, I don't know, a party or some sort of thing. This is more for the kids. There were very few things that I think tried to bridge those gaps, and it is more like a missed opportunity, rather than an issue. I don't really think I've had any huge issues in Newark, though.

Esperanza Santos: I guess the way I'm thinking about it is for the things that do go in Newark, it's less about — it's more dependent on your age for whatever's going on versus things that bring the community together.

Taj Shareef: Right. Right. I think there's something that could have been — there are probably areas where that could have — there's something that could have brought everybody together in one place as opposed to kind of — and it's always unspoken, but you know they're doing a house music festival. The people who are twenty and under probably aren't coming to that. That's for your mom and your aunt and your uncle and whoever who's — it's like — and I guess now me, too, but if you're younger than that, you're probably not interested, and I wonder if there wouldn't be some more of a sense of community if there was *something* that could bring everybody kind of to the table.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. I know that one of the things that we talked about before this was you were born in Rhode Island and then you moved over to Irvington, and your dad came to church and work over here, and you had some family over here. What's your perspective on Newark's connection to nearby places?

Taj Shareef: Nearby places, in terms of?

Esperanza Santos: Places, cities, suburbs.

Taj Shareef: Hmm. I mean I think it depends on how far out you go. I think in terms of people who are in areas in Essex County, Newark is kind of just a matter — it's a staple. It's not considered. I think it's when its perceptions outside of Essex County is where it starts to shift into a more negative thing for people. Yeah. I think when you get out into the — and I don't want to say Union County, but I think when you get into the south of this, far south and far north of Jersey places associate negatively with Newark, despite it being the biggest city.

I think it is perceived as like its a hotbed for crime and poverty and so people who are not from there and don't have to interact with it tend to avoid it whereas I think, again, if you are in the Essex County and Union County areas, because you interact with it just because of proximity, you don't have necessarily as jaded of a feel with it. You know what I mean? I don't know anyone who's in Irvington, East Orange or who lives in Orange who is like oh, Newark is so dangerous.

You work there. You live there. You're fine. You know what I mean? Whereas if you're not from there, even if you're just as oh, I'm in Edison, people who go to Edison and are like oh, you're watching yourself a little more because you're moving through Newark. It's like it's not a minefield. It's just a big city, like any other.

Esperanza Santos: Yes. It sounds like dependent on your location, if you're from South Jersey, then you really absorb the larger narratives about the city, but if you're near here, then you can easily dispel it just by existing.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, and I think it's important to also just kind of consider, again, the racial make up of most suburbs in the area. When you get into the suburb, it's a primarily white community, and if you, consciously or unconsciously, kind of cognate Newark as a Black city and you have a negative association, then there you have it. Yeah. You know what I mean? Its just — it's weird. That's the best way I can sum that up. It's weird.

Esperanza Santos: What places in Newark do you associate with LGBTQ people?

Taj Shareef: There's definitely, I forget the name of the church, but the church downtown, for certain, that Kevin Taylor usually ministers or preaches at.

Esperanza Santos: Do you know the location?

Taj Shareef: I don't. What is the location? Let me see if I can look it up 'cause he — hmm. I bet you I can find it. Give me one second 'cause I have a couple of friends who go there. It is — what is it the Fellowship Church? Where is it? I'm like where is — where is — I don't know. Unity Fellowship Church, here we go. Oh, okay. I think I found it. It is I believe on — as my computer loads, Unity Fellowship Church. It's Branford Place, 23 Branford Place. That's something I think about, I associate with Newark.

I know there were two organizations, too, downtown. I know there's a place. I don't remember what it's called, but it was just off of Halsey Street. I know they always had — it looked like they had sort of a like a pop-up mini-forum there because there was a storefront with the rainbow flag out there, but I don't know the location specifically, but I know it was off of Halsey Street. I think off Halsey and Main Street, I think?

No, Halsey and Central Avenue. I know there was a place there that I associate with or I've never really — I think I've popped in once. There's that, and I'm more aware of organizations than specific places outside of my friend groups. Yeah, but downtown to me, I'm like the whole downtown Newark is queer people because that's who's there.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. What do you think it is about downtown that attracts queer people?

Taj Shareef: I think it is equal parts familiar, just in terms of upbringing and it's also somewhat metropolitan in that there's enough going on and enough to get involved with so that it kind of caters to the varied interests that I think queer people sort of gravitate towards. It's a hub of creativity, so there's so many artists and entrepreneurs and just people associated with entertainment and the arts downtown, and I think there's just more safe spaces to experience those things, so that probably just kind of creates a pull for people who may have interest in things that don't necessarily get associated with their gender roles as prescribed by society.

I can be a little gay boy and be into dance, so I'm going to be downtown because that's where Symphony Hall is and that's where NJPAC is and that's where classes are and that's where the center is. I can be interested in yoga and holistic healing and breathwork and be down here, and I can express a little more openly, not everywhere, but I can express a little more openly down here because they do have an LGBT center.

I know of a number of independent housing places for displaced queer people that try and work with them, and I know there's a couple of organizations that specifically work with queer youth, and so downtown already being sort of a hub of activity for younger people because of the stores and the access, and again, it's a bus hub, so if I'm going to the mall or anywhere I've got to go downtown first probably.

You already have a buzz of younger queer people and then there's all of these organizations that kind of tend to that, to those groups in terms of providing information in some places, have safe spaces for them to just be, and also just sexual health without having to worry about insurance and stuff. You can get tested and all of that kind of stuff. I think those things all together sort of create, really again, a hub of you have access to the things that are important to you as a queer person, a queer Black person, especially, and so why wouldn't you want to be near it?

Esperanza Santos: Absolutely. You're like, hello.

Taj Shareef: Right. Everything I need is here. All of the things that I do to enrich myself, whether it's creatively or spiritually or even just in terms of just community is here, so this is where I'm going to be.

Esperanza Santos: *Gorgeous*. Did you — because I know you were — you said that you went to the private high school in Newark. That must have been I'm assuming somewhere between 2000 and 2004.

Taj Shareef: Yep, that's exactly right. Yeah, that was the Chad Science Academy, and that was on 370 South 7th Street in Newark. Yeah, it was like — what theater was that now? I don't know the name of it. But it was maybe a few blocks, several blocks up from the theater, I think, but yeah, so that was between 2000 and 2004, which is when I graduated. It was a private, I think to my knowledge, it was the only Black-run and owned private high school at the time, and they had a focus on the sciences in particular, so I know that was a big thing for them and very small class sizes. The entire school, which went from seventh grade to the twelfth grade I think had a total of 130 students.

Esperanza Santos: Oh my gosh.

Taj Shareef: It was tiny, very tiny.

Esperanza Santos: Based off of I'm assuming that in elementary and middle school, you went to a public school and then switched to a private? How was that shift for you?

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. I think it was welcome. I think as I got older, I was kind of inclined to want to go to a private school. Again, I think it's one of those things where, and this is not me tooting my own horn, but I think I don't know that I was more intelligent than anyone else, but I think I had developed a perception of internal introspection, and so I think it was all just too heavy. I think by the time I got to middle school, I knew, oh no, I'm far too sensitive to exist in this space any longer. I'm not happy.

Esperanza Santos: Oh no.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, I think it was just — I think public schools, and this is again no knock to really most of the teachers I had, but it really was I think — it's an odd position to be an eleven or twelve-year-old, and you're like oh, these classes are really crowded. You

know what I mean? Thirty-six children in a room is too many, especially in the midst of everybody going through their wild hormonal changes and just individual personalities, you know what I mean?

The system was just overwhelmed, so — and then not for nothing, you have just sort of, again, the mostly Black and Latino students, and not all, but many of the teachers are white people, so you're kind of contending with perceptions that you're not even fully aware of at the moment and almost you don't realize even until in retrospect, in some cases, and so it's just — there's a lot going on.

I know when I was in — I think when I was in middle school, there was this huge, weird sexual maturity that had, I don't want to say maturity — sexual interest that had been sort of spiked in everybody, but I was like, oh I'm not here yet. I'm still playing with my Pokémon cards and stuff. I'm not there yet, but you sort of experienced this you are still in the midst of it.

I remember I think in middle school I remember seventh or eighth grade, there was another child in my class who pretty much just sexually harassed me every day, and you don't realize that that's what it is until you're older. You're like, oh, he was harassing me. That was a problem.

Esperanza Santos: Wait, what age was this?

Taj Shareef: That was probably—eighth grade you're what, twelve?

Esperanza Santos: Thirteen, yeah.

Taj Shareef: Thirteen, yeah, so twelve, thirteen. You know what I mean? You know how you're in school and you get broken up into little groups, and you're like all right, we're going to read this passage and while that's happening, and there's another young man who's constantly whispering really explicit things to you while you're just trying to read, and you're like, please stop, and it just doesn't stop. You know what I mean? That's a thing. That's a thing you contend with as a child, and not for nothing, but again, there's also a lot of — I wouldn't say a lot of violence, but the school had issues with discipline.

There were issues where people were getting beat up and jumped and mugged in some cases, and there's just a lot of mature things happening around you. People are missing some class now and you find out what happened is that they got pregnant, so they had to

drop out of school, and you're like, oh wow, we're thirteen. You know what I mean? And so, again, that was — you sort of go inward. I know I did 'cause I'm like I already know there's something different about how I'm experiencing my own identity and I'm not ready to share that or even explore that, so I'm just gonna start reading a lot, which is what happened.

Esperanza Santos: I know — it sounds like in this example, at thirteen-years-old, people are potentially getting in fights, getting pregnant. It's overcrowded, what you would perceive to be sexual harassment you're also experiencing, so you go into yourself and start reading, and so at what point did you — were you able to describe to yourself your sexual orientation or gender identity?

Taj Shareef: I think that language didn't really develop for me until some years later when I was in high school. Yeah, I think at the time with all that was going on and just my general dissatisfaction, I was hugely depressed in that instance, and then just became very insular. I barely spoke for a couple of years.

I talked to my family, but it was — shared few details, but I think maybe in high school around age fifteen, sixteen because then in high school, I actually had the opportunity to go and do a semester study in Costa Rica where I was for three months, and I think there was something about being away from everyone and everything that was familiar that kind of gave me some room to breathe, and I didn't have any experiences, but I think it was just the idea that I could just — there was nobody I knew who knew me, so I could kind of decide who I was at that point.

Esperanza Santos: When did you — at this point in your life right now, how would you describe your sexual orientation and gender identity?

Taj Shareef: Present day?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah.

Taj Shareef: Oh, okay. Yeah, I'm a cis-gender male. I was born male and I identify as a man and a gay man. Yeah. That's me.

Esperanza Santos: How did you first become aware of this aspect of yourself?

Taj Shareef: Again, this is something that I think in retrospect, you kind of always know, which is something that I wish more people would talk to their children about earlier on in terms of just like their sex and sexuality and sexual identities just because as I think back, I

think back to just watching certain movies that might have had what I would now know as oh, this is an attractive man, but as a kid, I'm just like oh my ears are hot. I don't know why.

Esperanza Santos: Oh, that's so cute.

Taj Shareef: Like, I like this movie, but you don't know what you mean by that, but then you get older and you're like oh, no, no he was — you thought he was hot. That's what happened.

Esperanza Santos: You're like, oh, okay.

Taj Shareef: But you don't have the language to describe it, and you don't have anything to reference to say, oh, I just like the way this person looks, but I think actively, I had the language probably around closer to age sixteen, seventeen. When I was sixteen, I was just like, oh, I must eb bisexual 'cause obviously you can't just be gay, but that was more out of obligatory, hmm, you know you like women, right? Of course you do. I'm like, mm, not so much.

Esperanza Santos: You're like, no, wait a minute.

Taj Shareef: It's really funny. I always tell this story 'cause I went on a date with a young woman who was really nice, a friend of mine. We've since lost touch, but we went on a date, a high school date, which is just walking around wherever you live and getting a piece of pizza, but — and I remember it was a beautiful day. It had snowed. It had snowed. There was almost nobody out. The snow hadn't been touched. It was perfect.

We walked through a park, and I was just like — and we were just standing together and I had the feeling like, oh, this is a moment when you would kiss her, and my brain was like, *no*, and I was like, oh, gay. Got it. I was like, ah, no, no, no. You are a fully gay man, and I was like, hmm, and so I walked her home and was like huh. Now I have to live in this reality.

Esperanza Santos: How old were you when you went on that date?

Taj Shareef: Sixteen. Yeah, sixteen.

Esperanza Santos: It sounds like at sixteen, I want to say, what 2002?

Taj Shareef: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: You were like oh, I went on this date, and I thought I was bi, but now I'm definitely gay, and so this is kind of becoming aware of yourself, and how did you learn about the existence of other LGBTQ people?

Taj Shareef: Well, funny enough, it's — it was something where I had — that same friend who I had gone on the date with, I think — and she was pretty understanding 'cause she was just like, oh, you're gay, okay, cool, and so she had put me in touch with — and this is dating myself via AOL instant messenger.

She put me in touch with somebody who went to our middle school, too, so we were all sixteen, seventeen, another young man who I kind of knew, and he and I kind of got to talking, and then we connected and then he and I started exploring sexual experiences together, and he was like, oh, you should do — if you want to meet other people 'cause I had no idea where to meet people because I wasn't on any scene, and so he introduced me to at the time they had a phone chat line where you could create a message describing yourself and then other people would listen, and then you would exchange messages, and if you synced up — and you could talk on the phone together via the system, and then from there, obviously make plans to meet up or whatever, which is, again, in retrospect *hugely* dangerous, you know what I mean?

As a sixteen-year-old who's just talking to whoever on the phone, but yeah, that was my introduction 'cause then I started meeting people via these phone systems for most of the time, honestly, just for like sexual experiences, and some of those then sort of pivoted away from that and into just platonic relationships that I then sort of — developed a branching group of somewhat friendships with. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Cool.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Right?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's kind of like semi-dangerous, but semi-exciting as a seventeen-year-old exploring this.

Taj Shareef: Right, of course. You're like I'm goofy. I don't have enough ideas about — I mean and I think something that informed that, too, is I know, at least for me, there was sort of a sense of this is who you are. You've just got to do it. There was a presumption that my family would not accept this, and so I was just kind of like, go have your fun before you get thrown out. You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: *Ah*. What about your family made you think that they wouldn't be accepting?

Taj Shareef: I think a lot of queer people experience this is that — I didn't have anybody who ever went on any long tirades about — negatively about queer people, but I think even that might even be a little bit worse. It's that thing where you're a fly on the wall. When nobody knows somebody is in the room, how they're talking about them and how they experience them reveals a lot. You know what I mean?

Even though no one in my family, none of my siblings or my dad or my grandparents or anybody was actively disparaging queer people, you could hear the disapproval of my father who is a great person and wonderful today and even then, but he so heavily identified with himself via his, excuse me, via his faith and the disapproval he would voice sometimes about people who he would see who are queer on TV or in public, and again, it would never be anything that was mean spirited, but it was sort of connected to I'm afraid for them 'cause they're on the wrong path.

Clearly, there's something. Something's gone wrong here and in the whole while, you're listening as a teenager, and you're like, oh wow, he thinks there's something wrong with them, so there must be something wrong with me or even if I don't feel like that, he's gonna think there is.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. If this is how unfiltered — this is how my dad perceives gay people through his faith, then what is he gonna say about me when he has to talk to me about it?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, exactly, and so that's a scary prospect, and I think you hear and see — the more you experience people's stories and see those stories and see — you don't know how it's gonna go. Some people's parents are perfectly accepting and some throw them out, and they never see them again, and you're like — and you don't know, and once I sort of opened this box, there's no putting it back in. There's no — we can't pretend this didn't happen.

We'll both know, even if we never talk about it again. Yeah. That I think also informed part of the recklessness that I experienced just because up until I was very cautious. I was just like oh no, I'm a cautious person. I want to do — I was just like, you know what? Let me go have my fun because I need to do this right now.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and so it sounds like you came out to that one friend, and then other — I'm assuming other men became aware of your identity through these chat lines, and how did other people, other family or friends or people you associate yourself with, how did they become aware of this part of yourself?

Taj Shareef: I think it happened sort of gradually. I think something that happens, too, is that when you're in high school and you don't act a certain way, it starts to become — I think some people just have a more attuned perception so that they start listening to the things you're not saying. If nine out of ten of these boys are all talking about this girl and that girl, and you're not talking about anyone, it starts to kind of — that kind of goes off on a radar of hmm.

Are you just private or are you not interested in women? You know what I mean? I think that that perception starts to develop. I mean, and also just people like hey, you've got a girlfriend? You know what I mean? When you reach that age of sexual maturity, people in your family start asking, you got a girlfriend yet? You dating? It's like, yeah, no, that awkward, I'm just focused on school.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, I'm reading books.

Taj Shareef: I'm reading books. I'm reading books, but I think before my dad — I don't remember if this was before my dad or after. My sister, who I was and still am very close to, I think she asked me if I was gay at some point because I think just people started to perceive me that way even though I wasn't doing anything different than I had been, but just her friends and people who we mutually knew were just kind of like hey, is your brother gay? And she's like, what are you talking about? You know what I mean?

I think that precedes — and it was based on nothing 'cause it wasn't like I was dating at school or anything. It was just I think a developing noticing that started to happen and then so she asked me, and even though, again, it wasn't a violently negative reaction, she did express a disapproval. She's two years older than me, so she was a child, too. You can't expect too much, but you know what I mean?

That was a disappointment that I experienced because she was just like oh, it wasn't like I disown you or we're never going to talk again, but she was just like yeah. I'm not happy about it, and even that is kind of like — it's minor in the long run, but you — it's always disappointing and a little hurtful when somebody who you

care about expresses disapproval of what you feel is a crucial aspect of who you are. You know what I mean?

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. You're like hey, I was kind of depending on love.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. You know what I mean? And I think, and again, fully understanding where everyone was at the time, but you even at that age start to go through all the possibilities of like — you know what I mean? I can't share who I'm dating with you 'cause you're not gonna — 'cause you don't approve. You start thinking about things like oh, well, if I get married, then you're not going to approve or I can't talk to you about it if somebody hurts my feelings because you don't approve of this, so I'm not going to include you on this whole aspect of my life that I just simply don't feel comfortable talking to you about, whereas I would have had access to you before if I was heterosexual. Yeah. That's something hard to digest, I think, at a young age as well.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and so did your sister go to the same high school as you?

Taj Shareef: She did, yeah. She was two years ahead of me, so we were in the same high school. My brother went to the same high school, too, but he was — he's five years older, so he and I weren't there together.

Esperanza Santos: How did your family come to know this part about you?

Taj Shareef: Honestly, it was something that started to gradually happen. Funny enough, when I was sixteen, I came out to my dad. I had written him a long letter or I think it was an email or something, and I was just like, "hey blah, blah, blah," and I went through the whole thing of I'm pretty sure this is just part of who I am, and I just wanted to let you know, and I hope we can still be a family, and it was all of these things. I kind of just poured my guts out, and again, it's just not my family's style to have violent reactions to things.

I wasn't in danger of being thrown out, which was I was also partially afraid of, but he was just like, I'm really disappointed, and then there was a little bit of that religious fire and brimstone stuff that came up of it's not Islamic, and such and such will happen, and then I think it just became sort of a litany of all the things that he was afraid of being projected at me. I'm afraid that you're not gonna go to paradise, and I'm afraid that you're going to contract HIV, and I'm afraid that — all of these things, and all the people are going to come after you and they're going to want to come after you more. You know what I mean?

These are all things that as an adult, I can sort of parse through and go I understand that these were concerns of his based on his point of reference, but as a child, you know what I mean, as a teenager, you're like, oh wow. You're coming in hot with a lot right at me, and it's also disapproving that it's just like all right. Well, now I can't tell you anything else that's going on with me, and I think a lot of — I think a lot of parents don't understand what that does 'cause then every subsequent experience that happens is just something that you don't end up sharing, and it really cuts off communication at the knees.

Yeah. I think that's — so that's how my dad and my sister found out. The older people in my family, it really was just kind of like very subtly kind of slipped in there as I started dating. They'd be like who's this? And I'm just like, oh my friend, and they would just kind of observe the body language and kind of understand oh, this is more than your friend. This is your boyfriend, but there was never really much discussed with the extended family. Nobody ever really said anything to me outside of that. I mean and not for nothing, but there was very limited exposure with anybody who I was interested in romantically at the time.

Esperanza Santos: I know we've talked a little bit about how you come from an Islamic home, and just kind of the projection of faith into judging you and being like are you going to go to paradise? How's God going to see you? How do you think your racial identity affected your LGBTQ identity?

Taj Shareef: Well, I think as far as that, I think — let's see. It impacted it in that I think it certainly informed how I sort of navigate, I think, the world just because — and I think this sort of came to me later too is that I think as a younger person, I'm just like oh, as a Black person and a gay person, people who are gay will probably understand you. As a young adult, I learned that's not necessarily true, especially if you were a white gay person, you are still here.

You just have this other thing that we have sort of a common experience through, but I think there is an expectation, an unspoken expectation sometimes that I've experienced as a Black man and a Black male where if you are gay or queer, then there is almost a — in some circles, a perceived betrayal of like — you know what I mean? And I'm sure you've heard or seen it. You experience people have this vitriolic reaction to you as if you now — because you're gay, you're cutting off the population at the knees.

You're not going to maybe, it isn't like I'm not sterile. I just don't like women, and I think that informs a lot of it. There is a sense of projected duty of procreation that gets pushed specifically when you are a gay — when you are Black and a queer person I'll say, and I think when you are that, there's again, this really polarized reaction that you experience from some people.

Esperanza Santos: What were some pretty common reactions you would get?

Taj Shareef: I had a friend in high school and he didn't disassociate, but I recall when I kinda started to be a little bit more open about that, he had friends who we went to school with, who we also went to church with him who were urging him to not spend time with me anymore because they're like, oh, no, no. He's gay. Don't talk to him. You know what I mean? And I never experienced anything to the point of like being bullied or anything, but I think there was a — that once that became more open for me, other young men started to be a little different around me.

They started being weird about changing in front of me and that kind of thing. Yeah. I think that was probably the most — again, it's a small thing. It's subtle, but those are things that I experienced and just outside of external school relationships I think. Yeah. There were moments of like — again, these are even moments where it's — my sexuality is perceived. I'm not even doing anything.

Some aggression that I've experienced from people just traveling, walking or just on the bus as people — again, nothing that has ever led to violence, but it's just been taunting and jeering and saying disparaging things about me being gay as far as they've perceived. Yeah, that's something that happened I won't say regularly, but has happened on and off as — through adolescence.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. On one end, there's — what I'm hearing, on one end, as a Black, LGBTQ person, you have this responsibility to the community to procreate and on the other side of it, it's kind of like for, we're just going to say, other males that are kind of distancing you because they're trying to protect themselves, and so it's this combination of having a responsibility, too, but then also being pushed away?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

Esperanza Santos: How do you think being LGBTQ has made your life different from a way that it would have been if you didn't have this identity? Let's assume in this universe there is a gay Taj and in another universe there's a straight Taj. How do you think this has affected your life?

Taj Shareef: I think honestly, it's something that I think my identity as a queer person has — I think because a little bit because of that sort of barrier from mainstream perceptions, it's allowed me to think a bit more for myself, which I think has been really great. I think it's just something that has allowed me to want to do things that are not the norm necessarily, and I think I'm a pretty structured and by the book person, but I think — because I have this identity that is just for me my every day, but considered outside of the norm for normal people, I have more of an inclination to — I think much of it has to do with the chances I'm willing to take for a different kind of life.

I think the person I am in terms of I want to travel more and see more things and try these things are heavily influenced by the fact that I am a gay person because what I'm doing — because I already know this crucial part of who I am is already perceived as not normal, so I don't have to be bound by the things that are expected of me, and I think that whereas as a younger person, I may have felt some loneliness in that I think has really offered some empowerment as a young adult and into adulthood because you realize you really — you always have the ability to formulate your identity, but when you're already outside and when you're already outside of the building, nobody's looking at you like that.

Nobody's looking at you to be an example, so you don't have to form who you are based on external expectations any longer. You can have the jobs you want to have. You can go the places you want to go. You can have the relationships you want to have and not really be thinking too much about it in terms of what people think because they already think you're a freak for the most part, for lack of a better summation, so you can kind of do what you want, and I've found that incredibly freeing, I think.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. Assuming for most heterosexual, cis-gender people, they're offered this script of have a girlfriend or get married or have kids, and when you fall outside of that, then you can kind of create this sense of your life for yourself outside of those expectations. In that, it sounds like it's pretty freeing.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, absolutely. It's really just in that — right in that example of if you're a heterosexual person, they're like all right, you're seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. You're going to college. You've got a girlfriend. You get married yet? You guys gonna have kids? Are you living together? I'm like if you have a boyfriend and people don't approve of that, they're not really looking for you to do any of it, so it doesn't matter if you do it or not or if you do do it, it's 'cause you felt like it and not because anyone wanted you to.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. From that moment when you went on this date to being like, oh my gosh, I'm definitely not bi and I'm definitely gay to at this point in your life, how has your perception of your identity changed over time?

Taj Shareef: I think initially as a young person and sort of still exploring, there was still sort of a longing for "normalcy", and that — in that — there's still a longing for normalcy in that you're still — even though, you're like all right I'm gay, I recognize that you still do think of things in terms of oh, but I was normal. I know for a long time, even when I was younger, and I was like all right, I guess I'm gay, I would ask myself often enough, if you could take a pill that would make you straight, would you?

And at the time, I would be like, yeah, absolutely because then everybody would like me more, and — whereas I think I've definitely for many years since then grown out of that of just like well, they should just like you. You know what I mean? They should just like you. That's not your issue and it's not that you feel anything that you feel is wrong. It's not something inherently wrong with who I am. It's more so that you were just trying to avoid the negative response from people. Yeah, and I think wrapping my mind around that has been hugely important.

Esperanza Santos: What do you love best about being a gay cisgender man?

Taj Shareef: I think some things that I'm aware of are that for one aware of, especially being cisgender that there are still places and things that I have access to and making sure to utilize the access I have to those spaces just to advocate for people who maybe don't even have that level of access, but for some reason I lost my train of thought.

Esperanza Santos: No, it's okay. Yeah. Just like what you like about being who you are.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. I think I like it because I don't really have any constraints now. I'm constantly — because there is no script to follow, I'm constantly allowed to reinvent and redo without expectations, and as I've matured, I've been able to kind of even shirk the expectations I have of myself. I'm still working on that, but for the most part, I get to kind of be whoever I want to be on a daily basis in my roles as, once again, a "man" and a husband or a boyfriend or whoever.

These things don't have the same connotations that they would I think if I were heterosexual and in a standard — what people consider a standard structure, and so I just have freedom to evolve and change and be different without too much expectation. Again, I think it just plays into the fact of personal freedom because nobody's really looking out here.

I don't have to do anything anyone wants to do. It means there's no roadmap in terms of building a life because you can't really build which you've not seen, but again, that's sort of the fun of it. It's just building a life that I want and I really like that, especially for me who I think grew up with certain anxieties around, again, going back to having anxiety around safety and protection and keeping things in their place. Exploring an identity of freedom is I think a necessary lesson for someone like myself so that I can just live a life that I want, and I think that's something that being a gay or queer or LGBT person allows for if you let it, that is.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and what do you find most challenging about being a gay cisgender man?

Taj Shareef: I think the most challenging thing is that cisgendered heterosexual men don't often listen to you necessarily because — not all the time, of course, but I think often enough if you are dealing with people who prescribe to a very patriarchal sense of how things work because you are perceived — because you are same-gender loving person, you're perceived of feminine and thus not worth listening to. I think that can be something that I've encountered where you are filed in the woman column, and because they already aren't listening to women, then you end up not being heard, and I think that can be challenging.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. You have a voice, but because it's not like theirs, it doesn't matter or it matters less.

Taj Shareef: Or it matters less, yeah, and I think that's the thing, too, and honestly, I think it just comes from a resentment of freedom of

expression. You know what I mean? I wouldn't characterize myself as somebody who is necessarily feminine presenting, but in the moments that I do have that, I don't have to think about it in the way that maybe they do. You know what I mean? It's a huge joke that even many straight men are just like oh no, I would never eat a banana in public because that looks like — and I'm just like, that's ridiculous.

Esperanza Santos: You're like, wow, your life sounds so small.

Taj Shareef: Yeah. You know what I mean? Even as a joke in the tiny ways that you're having to police yourself, I'm just like I don't have to do any of that. I remember I did — when I was in college, I did a semester in China, and I had a roommate and he was a straight man.

At the time, I didn't disclose my sexual orientation to him, because why should I? But I remember he and I talking a lot, and I think, again, this is that thing of just being away from the normal stuff, like everybody you know, and he was just kind of pouring his heart out about this woman who he was in love with at the time who went to our school and how he — but they broke up before the trip, and we were just talking about his feelings, and I was just like who do you talk to about — I was like, well, did you tell her about these — what you were thinking and how you think about her?

He was like, no, of course not. I was like, who do you talk to? I was like, do you talk to your friends at least? He was like, no. And I was just like, wow, you have lifelong friends who you grew up with and are now in college with and this woman who you have all these feelings for, and you don't tell any of them about it, and that is the life — to me, that was just a summation of that's what straight men experience because of all the constraints they put on themselves. I'm like, you have no one, and I'm like, oh wow, I don't have to experience that.

I don't have to hide my feelings or micromanage my emotions in that way because I don't have — nobody expects that of me because they're like you're a gay man. You're already out of the house, but I just was like. I think that was one of the first times I've felt empathy for the constraints that they put on themselves because that sounds maddening. Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Wow. Your rulebook is so big and I'm happy that I was disqualified from that earlier on.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, seriously. It's like they whip out this 1,000-page book, and they're like all right, memorize everything in here, and I just take it and go no, and throw it out the window.

Esperanza Santos: You're like, no thanks. I'm good.

Taj Shareef: No, thank you.

Esperanza Santos: If I want to wear tight jeans, I don't have to worry about anything.

Taj Shareef: Right. I can throw them on. I can put on an eyelash if I feel like it one day, and it is what it is. People are going to look at me anyway, so it doesn't matter.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. So we talked a little bit about you and Newark and with other people. When you were in Newark, how have you — have you found community or support from other people in Newark or elsewhere?

Taj Shareef: Oh, absolutely. I think via the people who I've interacted with, even Omar who you spoke with, I've made a lot of friends, well him and through him, and it's been great, especially as an adult, to experience these developing adult relationships that have just come about. I know for a long while, for some years, I know another friend of ours named Larry, Larry Lyons, he had a gathering where different — he was — and it wouldn't even exclusively be queer people, but it would mostly be queer people he knew who would all get together.

It was called Passion, and people would just share what they were interested in or working on and have a safe, supportive space to share things that they were doing, so people of different trades and different fields and just different hobbies, primarily queer, primarily queer and primarily Black, would all get together and somebody would do a thing on like, oh, I'm working on this script and I want to get feedback, and I want people to read it or some people would be like, I'm getting into hat making and I want to talk a little bit about that, and so people would do presentations.

Somebody did a presentation on lighting and somebody else was talking about project management and the process of buying an island and what that looks like to build an island, you know what I mean? Through that and just other interactions with that group of people willing to share space with one another grew many, many really substantial friendships with queer community in the city, especially, that are still pretty — even thousands of miles away,

still running fairly strong. There's just so many people I can still just reach out to and talk to, and I think that has been I think the best part of adult relationships with other LGBT people in Newark.

Esperanza Santos: Aw, that's so beautiful.

Taj Shareef: Yeah, it's great.

Esperanza Santos: I'm pretty much done with the set of questions, and so these — the next questions are just kind of things I thought of in your interview that I wanted to make sure I asked you about, but that you may or may not know too much or that I don't know a lot about, and so is it okay if I ask you them?

Taj Shareef: Yeah.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. I know that you were in high school between 2000 and 2004, and in 2003, Sakia Gunn was murdered on the street. Do you recall seeing her in the media or having friends talk about this?

Taj Shareef: At the time, no. I didn't know a thing about it, honestly. I honestly didn't even really become aware of that until some years later, and I was like oh, wow. I didn't know that that happened, but at the time, I had no idea.

Esperanza Santos: When you were talking about Passions, do you — with what's his name again?

Taj Shareef: Whats—who's name?

Esperanza Santos: Lyon?

Taj Shareef: Oh, Larry, Larry Lyons.

Esperanza Santos: What inspired this group to get together?

Taj Shareef: I honestly don't know because I came into it a little bit— they had already been doing it for quite some while, but I think it was just from what I understand, it just seemed like he was encountering a lot of people who had these very diverse interests, these other queer Black people who had these diverse interests, and he was just like somebody else might want to know about this or people who wanted feedback, but didn't know where to go, and so it was just like you know what? I'm going to host this.

I'm going to create a space and just invite people and see if anyone wants to present anything and just designate — and just sort of plan it out. It grew into a thing where all right, if you want to work on this or get feedback on this project, put together a thing, and I'll invite some people over and we can give you some critiques and some support and tell you about it, and it just became — I think it was —for a while, it was weekly, and then it was biweekly and then I think it was monthly, and then it went back to biweekly, and then —but yeah, it was just a place where people could come, and I think it was just you encountering people who all wanted some kind of community and support in the things that they were doing, but didn't necessarily know how to find that or access it in a substantial way.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah, and it was like a space to be nurtured for your interest and for your art or for your — whatever you were giving to be an entrepreneur in.

Taj Shareef: Exactly, exactly, and I think that was the best part is that it wasn't just hey, actors come to this space or hey, writers come to this space. It was like whatever you do, whatever you like, if you'd like to share that, you can. You know what I mean? If you were just really passionate about project management, you could come and do a thing about that. If you were really passionate about web design or app building or I don't know, macrame, you could come and do a thing on that, and it's welcome to the space. Nobody's gonna be like no, we don't want to hear that.

Esperanza Santos: They're like, no get out. No, it's like, no come on over.

Taj Shareef: Right. Paper-mache, boo, get out. It was just, no, whatever you like, whatever you're interested in. There was an invitation to share a little bit about that, and there was always a portion where people would share who they were and what they did and why they wanted to come and just be in the space, very brief, introductions so that everyone could kind of get to know each other. It was great.

Esperanza Santos: I know that if I'm — if I remember correctly, you were living in Newark and working in Newark, but now you're in LA as an actor?

Taj Shareef: Writer. Writer and I do voiceover work as well, voiceover acting.

Esperanza Santos: Hey, work!

Taj Shareef: Yes! Yeah. I was working in Newark. I was working at Audible.com and I was working in their customer service department and then got started working as a client services specialist where they had a website where independent authors and narrators could find each other in a Match.com sort of way, and I just helped to facilitate those connections and helped people to kind of navigate and prepare for recording their own and producing their own audio books, which is partly how I kind of got interested in doing it myself. I was doing that, but I had been freelancing writing as well since 2009 up until that point on and off. Yeah, just had an interest in film and TV and wanted to come out here and try and break into that a little bit more substantially.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. It's like what better place to go to than Hollywood?

Taj Shareef: Exactly.

Esperanza Santos: What would — of the materials that you write or — I'm sorry, not materials, stories. What are some stories that you can give us some sneak peek into what you do?

Taj Shareef: Well, that's a layered question. I tend to like fiction, fantasy and sci-fi stuff, but those aren't the only things that I kind of stick to. Right now, I'm working with a production company called BigFooters, LLC *[01:39:19]* out here, and we are working on a couple of projects, an animated series, an animated action comedy series called Wish Four *[01:39:31]* that's about four kids who get a genie lamp and wish for powers from their favorite TV shows, but the genie switches the powers by accident, so now they have to figure out how to use their powers to fight a demon.

Esperanza Santos: How cool is that?

Taj Shareef: Yeah. That's something that we have upcoming. We're also doing a sci-fi series that I wrote — I was a script supervisor on the first short film and then I've actually written the screen play for the second short film that we're getting ready to film. The sci-fi series is called Tech *[01:40:02]* and it follows a pharmaceutical company that's secretly experimenting on this community of people of color and kind of watching, surveilling the people as they develop super powers and what they do with them.

Then there's also something that they've had in production or we've had in production, an adult puppet show called Ratchet Rachel *[01:40:23]* following a — that follows a popular children's TV show puppet who had a meltdown and is now trying to make

her big comeback, but be more authentic to herself, which is this foul mouth, chain smoking, drinking, lunatic.

Esperanza Santos: Heyyy.

Taj Shareef: So good, and so those are some things I've had the opportunity to work on out here, and I've also worked on — there's a streaming service in a production company called SLAY TV based in New York, and they focus on Black queer narratives in particular, narratives of queer people of color, and so I got to work with the co-creator, the co-creators and co-founders of that, Shuan and Terry Torrington on one of their popular series, Love @ First Night *[01:41:17]*, which is just following these two guys who hook up at a party and decide to see if they can pivot this into a substantial relationship and all of the ridiculous traffic that come with that, trying to get to know somebody after being so intimate, and so that series actually had three seasons and actually just concluded a few months ago, but I got to co-write the third season of that with the creator of the show, which was really cool. What else?

Esperanza Santos: You're doing a lot.

Taj Shareef: What else? I recently, luckily, was in — yeah, a lot of cool stuff popped up. I got to do some writing for the digital branch of there's a network called TV 1 and they have a digital branch called IOne Digital *[01:42:01]*, and they have a digital comedy how-to series called Grown Man Shit, so I got to write a couple of the episodes for that that haven't yet filmed, but that's upcoming, and then recently, I started doing some writing, some freelance writing and production work for the — a Black media outlet called The Griot *[01:42:20]*, so I was doing that recently, and yeah, just — and I recorded my voiceover demo a couple months ago, and now I'm just hawking that to people to see if anyone wants to hire me to do some stuff.

Esperanza Santos: Hey, yeah!

Taj Shareef: That's all I'm up to.

Esperanza Santos: You know, just no big deal.

Taj Shareef: Just no big deal, right.

Esperanza Santos: Well, congratulations on your success thus far. It sounds like you're really making the most out of your time in LA.

Taj Shareef: Oh, I'm trying. Thank you, though. I appreciate it.

Esperanza Santos: Yeah. I don't think I have any more questions. Is there anything else that I missed out on asking you or something that you wanted to make sure you got across during the interview?

Taj Shareef: No, I don't think so. Any other little details are really just filler. I went to college. That was fine. No. Otherwise, thank you for taking the time and letting me take part in the project that — it sounds really cool and interesting. I'm sorry it took so long to finally get around to it, but yeah. I hope my story is substantial or enjoyed by somebody. I don't know.

Esperanza Santos: Yes, of course! Okay. I'm going to close now, okay?

Taj Shareef: Okay.

Esperanza Santos: Okay. Today's date is February 22, 2020. My name is Esperanza Santos, and I interviewed Taj Shareef over the phone in the Queer Newark office while they're in LA for the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Thank you.

Taj Shareef: All right.

[End of Audio]

Notes

p. 1 Was originally listed as inaudible, but I believe that Taj said that the name of his father was Saleem Shareef

p. 2 Was originally a comma, but I changed it to an em dash because I believe that Taj was correcting himself when he went from “great grandmother” to “maternal great grandmother.”

p. 8 Was originally listed as inaudible, but I believe that Taj said “Jumu’ah.” I found this out by researching “Friday Muslim prayer.”

p. 18 Was originally listed as inaudible, but I believe that Taj said “cognitively think of.” I am very unsure of this one.

p. 37 – p.38 Taj lists a number of names and places, I tried to fix the spelling of many of them through research, but I am still unsure.