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Oral History Interview with Nsenga Knight
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.26
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on August 7, 2018
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali, Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society, and today is Tuesday, August 7, 2018. I am here at Brooklyn Historical Society conducting an oral history with Nsenga Knight, and this is for the Muslims in Brooklyn project. Nsenga, if you can introduce yourself giving your full name and your birth date?

KNIGHT: Okay. My name is Nsenga Akwete Afiya Mawusi Knight. My birthday is [date redacted for privacy], 1981.

ALI: So, I'm going to ask you to spell all of those names for the benefit of our transcriber.

KNIGHT: Mm-hmm. That's Nsenga, N-S-E-N-G-A, Akwete, A-K-W-E-T-E, Mawusi, M-A-W-U-S-I, Afiya, A-F-I-Y-A, Knight, K-N-I-G-H-T.

ALI: Okay. So, Nsenga, you were born in February of 1981. Where were you born?

KNIGHT: I was born in Downstate Hospital in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn.

ALI: And tell me a little about your family background.

KNIGHT: Okay. My mother is from Guyana -- Georgetown, Guyana. That's in South America. And my father is from Trinidad and Tobago.

ALI: And do you have siblings?

KNIGHT: I have five siblings, five sisters.

ALI: Mm-hmm. And where are you in the order?

KNIGHT: I am the second of -- of the six, and I actually have a twin sister.

ALI: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your experiences growing up. Where did you grow up?

KNIGHT: So, I grew up in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. I've always grown up in the same neighborhood, meaning my my parents. I was -- when I was born and we lived with a relative, and that and they -- they lived just two blocks away from where my parents currently still have an apartment in East Flatbush. And -- and then we moved from there when I was two, and we grew up on 35th Street between Tilden and

Snyder. And my parents, they still have it. We still have a place there. They -- they moved to Jersey, but they still have a spot there.

ALI: Where did you go to elementary school?

KNIGHT: I went to P.S. 235, which is located on, wow, Lenox Avenue -- Oh, I don't know what the cross-street is, but Lenox Avenue, yeah.

ALI: And what part of Brooklyn is that?

KNIGHT: East Flatbush.

ALI: East Flatbush.

KNIGHT: Like, it was less than a 10-minute walk away from where we lived.

ALI: Okay. So growing up, tell me about your family's religious background and your religious upbringing.

KNIGHT: Okay. So, my parents converted to Islam in the -- well, my dad in the '70s. I think he converted in 1977. So my parents, they met in high school at Erasmus High School. So, they immigrated to the United States to Brooklyn, and they were, I think, respectively, like, 14 and 15 years old. They went to the same high school. My father was raised Anglican. My mother was raised Catholic. And my father when he was 17, actually, he had to go back to Trinidad because of Green Card issues, stayed there for a few years, maybe two years. And when he was in Trinidad, he converted to Islam and then he came back.

I mean, my mom knew -- oh, I should say my parents were high school sweethearts, so they were together. They -- they were writing letters and stuff like that, so she knew what was happening. And prior to him -- my dad becoming a Muslim, his brother became a Muslim -- his older brother became a Muslim. And I think even prior to him, his aunt became a Muslim. And so, that -- yeah, that's pretty much our -- our religious issue. Oh, and my mom, she actually became a Muslim in the late '80s, I think probably around 1987.

ALI: So, how was that growing up with a -- for the -- at least the early childhood, with a Muslim father, and how would your mother have identified herself during that time?

KNIGHT: So, what's so interesting, I was talking to my mom about this, and she said that she considered herself to be a Muslim. She hadn't taken her shahada, but she considered herself to be a Muslim since she was in high school. But it was when she was -- like, in the late '80s around, I think, 1987 that she actually took shahada. She said they never -- she thought it -- she thinks it became a new practice in mosques for them to ask people who wanted to take shahada. Of course, though she thinks it was a new practice for people to even take shahada in the mosque like that because she was like, people, you just had -- to her, she just thought she was a Muslim. She will go to jummah all the time. We would all go to the mosque, but she had never taken the shahada.

ALI: And what -- what does that mean to take a shahada?

KNIGHT: Oh, to take a shahada is to actually go and find of some witnesses. It could be -- you know, it could be one, like, two witnesses. It could be the community in the mosque or anywhere, but oftentimes, it's in the mosque. And make the testification that there's only one god and that Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, is the last messenger -- like, an official testimony. And so, that's what she did --

ALI: Do you remember --

KNIGHT: -- later on.

ALI: -- her doing this? Do you remember?

KNIGHT: I do not recall her doing this.

ALI: Okay.

KNIGHT: I -- like, I don't recall it. Like, I felt, like, when I was younger, I wasn't sure she was Muslim. Like, I knew my father's a Muslim. I just wasn't sure if she was a Muslim.

ALI: Why were you unsure?

KNIGHT: I think she used to take us to see Santa Claus sometimes and like -- [laughter] And I'm like -- and we used to pray with our hands closed. Like, I -- I just know, but then I could have just been confused because, like, we are, you know, American Muslim kids, so, you know, you see a shooting star. And I remember it could have been television as to why I would kneel on my -- at the bedside with, like, my hands, like, together and pray. You know, like, I don't know. [laughter] So, yeah, I just wasn't --

ALI: Was there --

KNIGHT: -- sure.

ALI: -- was there a point where that stopped?

KNIGHT: I think -- I think so. I -- I can't tell when exactly it stopped that I -- that I knew she was a Muslim, but I'd -- I'm pretty sure there was a point. They probably told us, like, that, you know, "Your Mom, you know, became a Muslim," or something like that. I mean I know my mom, she also -- she also didn't cover, so maybe that might have been the reason why I was -- I wasn't sure, so --

Because even when I look at -- and it's funny because even when I look at younger pictures of us, I think -- I think I could probably say that she -- in the photograph, she probably started covering for sure, like, probably when I was, like, seven, you know? But, like, in all other photos of us then, you know, her hair was out, sleeveless things, you know? She didn't wear really short things, but she didn't "dress" as -- as a Muslim woman, so -- so maybe that.

ALI: What -- what communities do you remember being a part of while you were growing up?

KNIGHT: Yeah, quite a few. I mean, actually, the -- the first one that comes to mind is this one, the Admiral Society. And so, there was a sister, Sister Nur and Shaikh Abdul Latif Abdullah, and they were the -- I just considered them to be, like, the heads of the -- of the mosque, right? They actually had a store, which maybe the name of the store was Admiral Society, and apparently, the -- the jummah and the prayers were in the back of the store. But I really remember them being above it, and very, kind of, Afrocentric kind of folks, and, like, actually the store -- all the things in the store was like African clothing and, like, oils and, like, things like that. And they were always kind of -- if you were out about doing, like, the Afro, you know, Black cultural things, they were always a part of that too. So you will see them in, kind of, a lot of different sectors of, you know, the society and they --

I remember after jummah then then there was food. Like, people would sit around in a circle and we'd have food. I remember, like, tuna fish and crackers, and it was just really nice. I thought of them kind of like grandparents. And I learned that the -- the mosque was actually a break off from the African Islamic Mission, which was Imam Obaba's community, like the green and gold -- and so, you know, the green and gold people, and so -- So, yeah, that was one of our first mosques.

ALI: Where was that located?

KNIGHT: Located on Atlantic and Smith. So, as my father told me, there's -- the corner of Atlantic and Smith -- maybe like three -- three doors in. Three doors in was their spot.

ALI: And this is in the '80s?

KNIGHT: Mm-hmm. In the '80s. Yeah, in the '80s, so that --

ALI: And were they -- were they American or were they --?

KNIGHT: Oh, yeah, they were African American. They're African American. I don't know how exactly I knew the wife had locks, but she had locks, and, like, you know, as well as like a booboo and walked with, like, a staff and just kind of -- and wore, like, one of these kufis that were, like, kind of, a tall kind of kufi? That was, kind of, a little -- pointed a little bit like the Russian-ish style but, kind of, African sort of thing, and they really stood out. Yeah, they kind of stood out. Yeah, so that -- that -- that community. I think they moved to New Jersey at some point.

ALI: And what were some of the other communities for them?

KNIGHT: Oh, there was --

ALI: Because that's pretty far from where you were living State Street from East Flatbush?

KNIGHT: Yes, but then Atlantic?

ALI: Yeah.

KNIGHT: I guess -- I guess so. I mean I -- when I think about it, the mosque that we really, kind of, mostly frequented were in Bed-Stuy or in -- or, like, the -- the one, the Admiral Society on -- on Atlantic. Sometimes, we would go to Nur Al-Islam. Nur Al-Islam was a very Caribbean mosque, like Trinidadian and Guyanese, mostly like Indo-Caribbean.

And that was -- that was, like, around the corner from us, but we -- that wasn't, like, our mosque of choice, you know?

ALI: The mosque of choice was?

KNIGHT: The mosque of choice after Admiral Society closed down -- or we stopped going and they closed down was Masjid at-Taqwa and Masjid Khalifah. Yeah.

ALI: Interchangeably or one more for the other?

KNIGHT: For me, it -- you know what, that's a good question because I know, at one point, it was interchangeable for us. Like we might go to Khalifah and then go to Masjid at-Taqwa to eat or, like, go to Masjid at-Taqwa and still try to catch folks at Khalifah. Sometimes, we'd just go for -- after jummah. Like, honestly sometimes, we would just go to hangout after jummah.

ALI: Which -- which had the best hang?

KNIGHT: Oh, gosh, it depended, but usually Masjid at-Taqwa, kind of, had the best hang, right? Like, kind of both. It depended. It depended.

ALI: And what -- what does that -- for people who would not know, what -- what is a -- what is a hangout like? What was that like? What -- what exactly would you do?

KNIGHT: Oh, yeah. So like I say, if you went to Masjid Khalifah -- Okay, so here's the thing, Masjid -- whose jummah ended earlier? I think -- hmm. I'm trying to think whose jummah ended earlier. I think Masjid Khalifah ended earlier. Okay, so -- Yeah, back in the day, you had like -- So Masjid Khalifah, you had, of course, the jummah upstairs, but then downstairs in the hallway then, there would be food. So they would sell food, where there was a place -- they had, like, fish, chicken, some kind of a drink, salad, cake, stuff like that.

And -- and then there was also a -- what was the name of it actually? There was a restaurant. Actually, where Joloff is now, there was a restaurant. Was it called Naima's or Fareeda's? It was called Fareeda's. She was there for a long time. Honestly, everybody there, you might think they're African American, but they're really Caribbean [laughter] -- like, really honestly. Like you'd think they're African American,

but they're really Caribbean. And so, she might have had some Caribbean background, but she -- she might have been African American. I'm not exactly sure. But she sold, like, fried chicken -- well, she had a really good fried chicken -- kind of more sort of soul food type of stuff. She was there for a pretty long time. And then so we might eat some of that food. I didn't really get into that so much. Sometimes, I'd eat there. There was also -- they used to also have a halal meat store across the street, and you might get some gyros -- we called them gyros, some people call them subs -- there and then --

But kind of the hangout would just be, like, kind of, people, kind of, flood out of the mosque, and they just, kind of, talked to people. You just, kind of, like, talked to people and it might be that -- Like, in the hall of Masjid Khalifah then there's usually a lot of tables out, so people would sit and eat. So, you might get some food from somewhere, go sit and eat, and just -- kind of just talk to folks. I mean there was also, like, just a bunch of different stores. Actually, I think when I think about it, the only store that's still left I think is Ummah Necessities -- [sneezes] excuse me -- Ummah Necessities, which doesn't sell food. So I think pretty much after -- there's Joloff there now, right, but Joloff is relatively new. But kind of for a while, there was a bit of void of, like, food places.

Oh my gosh, there was also a bakery. Let's talk about bakeries -- there was also a bakery. What's the name of it? Wow, that bakery was there forever. There was a bakery there that actually sold, like, pies and, you know, bakery-type stuff. But kind of ones, especially the food void, you know, then you'd be even more inclined to walk over to Masjid at-Taqwa. If you did jummah at Khalifah, you walk over to Masjid at-Taqwa.

And I think probably because people were like teens and, like, in their early twenties, it's kind of people checking each other out actually. [laughter] Really, people were probably checking each other out, and, you know, kind of posting up and, you know, talking. You see your friends there and -- and, you know, and eat. That would be part of

it. But you could -- like, you could hang out for, like, hours, you know? Just hours -- just -- kind of just talking. I don't even know what we were talking about, you know?

[laughter]

ALI: Was there -- was there a lot of socializing across gender, or was it mostly the same gender socializing?

KNIGHT: You know what, I think at Masjid Khalifah, there was more socializing across gender. And I think possibly -- I don't know why. I mean I felt like Masjid Khalifah was a little -- people were a little bit more -- oops. Masjid Khalifah, people were a little bit more open, you know, just kind of -- They were a little more open, and kind of, like, everybody sharing the same space. Everybody can see everybody, so whatever, right? Because you had that open area.

For Masjid -- Masjid at-Taqwa, I think, A, the genders are segregated in physical space, right? Masjid Khalifah, it's not, so it's just, you know, women are towards the back in the prayer space, men are towards the front, but there's no barrier. They'll -- like, you know, you see everybody and then when you're downstairs, you know, everybody is sharing the same spaces, lots of families. But at Masjid at-Taqwa, people -- I felt like people at Masjid at-Taqwa was a bit more, like, strict. And, like, I remember my sister was like -- somebody was telling, "Oh, I saw your daughter, the one who had on the pink nail polish on her toes, she's wearing such and such." And like, "How do you know I had pink nail polish on my toes?" Just -- people were just kind of, like, extra, just extra.

But I think across -- across genders not so much, not so much, like, in -- in those because you were outside socializing, you know? You're outside socializing and -- and then maybe you go into a restaurant, and so -- I don't know. I think it -- it will be a little bit less organic for that to, kind of, happen.

ALI: Now, Masjid at-Taqwa, kind of, started historically when Imam Siraj left from his post at what would become Masjid Khalifah.

KNIGHT: True.

ALI: And you know, there was maybe some feelings between the two. But you as -- as a young person going back and forth, did you sense any kind of, I don't want to say territorial, but barrier? Like if you were here, you shouldn't be over there. If you were there, you shouldn't be over here?

KNIGHT: Yeah, you know, how could I put it? Like, I think people had quite a few assumptions about each community. I think my family just, kind of, moved both communities, and sometimes, you will be surprised. People who you thought were just strict Khalifah people almost like -- was like a gang or something, people who you thought of like just strict Khalifah people, and then you find out, oh, that person's been doing martial arts at Masjid at-Taqwa for the past, like, 15 years, you know? So, I think people -- people are a lot, sort of, like, mobile or fluid between two communities than -- than you might think.

Or -- or you'll find, like, there'll be a family, and you didn't know that, like, this sister, she's a Khalifah person -- you know, a Khalifah person, but, like, her sister is an at-Taqwa person. And these are older sisters, you know? And you almost may -- almost never see the at-Taqwa person actually -- you'll ever hardly ever see the Khalifah person at at-Taqwa, you know? But that -- probably the feelings internally aren't that strong, like, against either one -- there's just kind of, like, the place where they feel more comfortable.

But you will find -- like my sister, this story we had. She tells it -- that this sister, she was -- she was somebody who, kind of, was in the community for that -- that long. I think she was a convert, but she was an at-Taqwa person -- an at-Taqwa sister, right? And she came to -- we were going to Khalifah, right? Like, maybe we had been at at-Taqwa to eat, and we'd go in the Khalifah. And she came in -- I think it was the Eid -- and she went into the women's section, and she just turned around. She was like, "I can't believe this." It's like, "What?" and then she like -- she started -- because she couldn't believe how clean it was. She could not believe how clean Masjid Khalifah's women's section

was. Like it wasn't flooded. There was no, like, foot stank in there and stuff. It was like -- you know? But that -- that's kind of was in general, like, a big difference between Masjid at-Taqwa and Masjid Khalifah.

Like, we would explain it -- it's just probably -- like, Masjid Khalifah has rules. Like, there's rules over here. Masjid -- even though like I said, Masjid Khalifah people are more -- I feel are more kind of open in a sense in some ways, at Masjid at-Taqwa, like, sometimes, you feel they're lawless, you know? Like there was a point when -- and honestly, there were points when I would not go to Masjid at-Taqwa because, like, people would be fighting. Like there's a point when they actually banned the sisters from going to Masjid at-Taqwa --

ALI: Really?

KNIGHT: -- because people were fighting.

ALI: Wow. Your sisters were fighting?

KNIGHT: Yes, because the sisters were fighting, repeatedly fighting.

ALI: Do you remember the specifics of, like, when this happened or what happened?

KNIGHT: This was definitely, like, late '90s, early 2000s, and, like, just crazy stuff, you know, just crazy stuff. And people -- you know just angry people, you know? Just -- you know?

And, like, you know, I think in a sense, some things were interesting because of even the architecture of both spaces. And you actually had a space at Masjid Khalifah where you could sit down outside of the musalla, eat, socialize. And -- and there's multiple spaces, you know, because there's also the Akbar Hall and then there's -- what is it -- the Elijah Muhammad Enlightenment Center, which is just ballroom, right? And so, you actually have that at Masjid Khalifah.

At Masjid at-Taqwa, you don't have, like, a socializing, eating space. There's a musalla. So, people would try to turn it into everything, you know? I remember a point -- at one point people were, like, doing hair in the musalla. Like, people were, like, doing hair.

People were like -- You'd get your nose pierced [laughter], yeah. People would just drop their kids off there and, like, go wherever they were going, eating, changing diapers, just talking, just whatever, you know? I think sometimes -- sometimes, sisters would just try to get out of their house and just spend the whole day in the mosque. But meanwhile, if you're trying to go there to pray, and you need it to be quiet, this might be a problem.

ALI: So it sounds like Taqwa had the more restrictive maybe cultural practices, but Khalifah had more structured administration. Does that sound fair?

KNIGHT: Exactly.

ALI: Yeah.

KNIGHT: Yeah.

ALI: So, you mentioned martial arts. What kind of other activities were you -- did you do martial arts?

KNIGHT: I did.

ALI: What -- so, tell me about the activities that were available to you as a young Muslim woman growing up.

KNIGHT: Lots. I mean, actually, I did martial arts with the Nation of Islam, actually. They had a space -- no, not part of the mosque, but they had a place called When Worlds Collide, and it was on -- I think that's Nevins. Is that Nevins? It's -- it's behind the Nevins Avenue train stop. I'm pretty sure it's not there anymore. But they taught martial arts. They taught martial arts, but they had capoeira there, they had -- Actually, they had a lot of their stuff there. Like, they had the MGT. They had the -- probably had FOI stuff. They had lots of things.

So when I was in high school then we did martial arts with them. And there were lots of other like -- you know, there were lots of other Muslims, you know, of different stripes who did mus-- who did martial arts there.

ALI: So, why did you choose there? Or what -- what -- you know that there -- for some people, you know, who know the history of the Nation of Islam, some people see a barrier

associating with them if you're not in the community. So what -- tell me how you got -- how did you end up doing martial arts with the NOI?

KNIGHT: Yes. I mean, because I don't think I really thought of them as being in the NOI, honestly -- like, at least not from the beginning. My cousin was doing martial arts. I have an older cousin who's Muslim, and she was doing martial arts there. She told us about it. We went, we checked it out, it looked good. And we did martial arts there. And I think -- But, like, our martial arts teacher, I don't think he was in the Nation of Islam. And now I look at it, he was pretty young. He was, like, late teens, early twenties --

ALI: What was his name, do you remember?

KNIGHT: Sensei José was his name and -- But, you know, the rest of them -- I mean, gradually, I figured out that they were the Nation of Islam, but honestly --

ALI: How -- how did you --

KNIGHT: -- you --

ALI: -- what -- what -- what made you figure it out? What -- how did you figure it out?

KNIGHT: I'm not exactly sure but, like, they have the MGT. Like, the -- I wanted to join the MGT. Like, I was like, "When can I --? I want to join. They have Muslim girls training. This is awesome. I want to do MGT." Another thing in my head was, like, "Oh, I shouldn't be" -- oops, sorry. Nothing in my mind was like, "Oh, I shouldn't be doing MGT because like --"

ALI: Why did you -- what do you -- do you remember why you wanted to join the MGT?

KNIGHT: Because it looked like they were teaching them stuff, like baking and sewing. And it almost seemed like a home economics class or something, you know? And there'd be, like, other Muslim girls there my age, and so -- I mean, we were really good friends with the girls who -- whose -- it was, kind of, like a family that, kind of, ran the place. And we were really good friends with them.

And, huh, now that I think about it, I wonder --? I'm really trying to think at what point did I realize they were Nation. And, like, did I --? Because I remember we would go to their house and just, like, hang out. I'm pretty sure they had, like, a picture of, like, you

know, Elijah Muhammad and Farrakhan and then maybe at that point that I thought, like, “Oh, you know, they’re Nation,” but I don’t think in my mind that was really an issue, you know? Like, yeah, because -- because I -- because I think during that time when we were doing the, you know, martial arts -- and, mind you, we were going there sometimes, like, three times a week, you know, sometimes more, depending. Like, if we had a tournament coming up, we might be going there more.

No. Because even though my -- my father was kind of, like, staunchly -- at some point staunchly, like, anti-Nation of Islam, you know? I think I always -- I -- like, I felt like they had some things off, but they were -- I don’t know -- maybe just some other kind of Muslim, you know? Like --

ALI: So -- so the -- so you had NOI members doing martial arts classes. You’ve mentioned martial arts at Taqwa.

KNIGHT: Mm-hmm.

ALI: You, of course, enrolled in martial arts. Tell me -- tell me why -- what -- what drew you to martial arts? And maybe a bigger question, why do you think this was so prevalent amongst the Muslim community?

KNIGHT: Oh, yeah. Oh, there -- there’s also martial arts in Masjid Khalifah --

ALI: Well, there you go --

KNIGHT: -- too.

ALI: -- so --

KNIGHT: Yeah, okay. [laughter]

ALI: So -- and we could root it in your -- like, what drew you to it?

KNIGHT: Yeah. I mean I think martial arts, it definitely seemed to me like -- growing up, like a Black Muslim thing. Like, if -- like, to not have a martial arts program in a Black Muslim -- I just figured every mosque, every Black Muslim mosque had a martial arts program. I think because Muslims were like -- we’re supposed to be tough, right? Like, I thought we were supposed to be tough, and, like, we definitely -- You’re not supposed to think that you can mess with us. Like, you were not supposed to have anywhere in

your psyche that, like, you can mess with us. So, the brothers are supposed to know how to do martial arts and the sisters too.

I think, you know, honestly, later -- this was a few years ago -- I did an art project called *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts*, and so it was kind of rooted in thinking about kind of like a mixture of, like, a Sister Clara Muhammad School, a martial arts school, all sort of run out of the same space. It was kind of like a prayer space that, at one point could be a dojo, at one point could be a classroom, at one point could be, you know, a lecture space or something, right? And that's how it was.

That's how the communities kind of functioned to me. Like, they were almost, like, these time-sensitive spaces. Like, depending on the time, X, Y, Z could be happening. Because -- because, like, at Masjid at-Taqwa, like, their martial arts classes were the musalla -- like, they were in the mosque, so -- It's just kind of, like, depending on what time of day, you know, X, Y, Z could be happening.

And I -- I think as a community that maybe was vulnerable or could be vulnerable and especially would be vulnerable if they didn't know martial arts, if they didn't know how to -- Like, if we didn't know how to defend ourselves then that was kind of a survival issue. But at the same time, I think, like when I did the art project, I did *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts*, I wanted -- I was thinking about, like, how this sort of mind, body, spirit thing goes together, and, like, if you wanted to -- to -- people to think of themselves as strong, period -- like, strong personally, strong mentally, strong physically.

And growing up, I always thought that Muslims, like, were pretty keen on health -- like, really keen on eating well and, like, you know, definitely keen on eating well. I mean, other things, too, you know, and so the exercise thing as well, and so you kind of had to be that kind of person. And for us, I think maybe coming out of the Muslim community

-- kind of -- Black Muslim community kind of coming out of a dynamic of, like -- I don't want to say civil rights -- but maybe kind of Black power -- maybe you would call it Black empowerment, you know, era. It felt like being a group that, like, would not be targeted or that people would really think twice -- people who are targeting you -- was really important, you know?

And only later, I heard someone say to me and, like, sort of interpret, you know, that there's -- there's this hadith, like -- I think it's a hadith. It's a saying that a -- a strong believer is better than, like, a thousand weak believers, you know? But, like, a weak believer is better than, like, not being a believer at all. And I, growing up, usually thought of that or at least I thought people -- I might have just been the wrong -- with the wrong interpretation that -- I thought it was, like, in your faith. But this person was saying this in regards to your physicality. It's better to be a strong -- a physically strong believer. That was really fascinating to me. I was like, "Oh, wow." Like, "Why didn't -- why didn't I ever think about it that way?" But it's like, "Yeah, to be like a physically strong believer," you know?

And -- and -- and later on, I also learned through my project the *Muhammad School of Language and Martial Arts* that -- so I collaborated with a brother -- an African American Muslim brother in Texas who -- in Houston who had a -- who has a dojo. And actually, he learned his martial arts style from a Chinese Muslim sensei where the Chinese Muslims, they have their own thing. And he was telling me because their thing was this whole thing -- like, being a vulnerable community and being able to defend themselves. And it's a way to build esteem -- like, to build self-esteem in the community. Like, you -- if you walk around and you feel like you can handle yourself out in the world then you feel, you know, that at least that's one thing you don't have to, like, be concerned about or you feel like you can --

In that regard, then you feel like you can dress how you want to dress. You know, if you're a man and you wear the bowtie or you wear the thawb or you wear the kufi, you could dress how you want to dress. If you're a woman, you wear the hijab, you wear, you know, loose, long clothing or whatever, you could dress how you want to dress, and you're not -- And -- and, like, you can walk with strength, like an inner strength that's like fortified from all these different levels.

So I think that -- that's where the martial arts came in, and I also later learned that -- you probably know more than -- about this than me -- but that the Nation of Islam didn't use guns. They didn't believe in guns or weapons, so -- well, guns in particular. So learning martial arts was really important because you are not going to carry a gun. Though in the Sunni Muslim community, they were okay with guns. [laughter]

ALI: So, one of the, I guess, biggest things that certainly young Muslims look forward to or children look forward to, but -- but I think all Muslims look forward to is -- is Eid. So tell me -- tell me what Eid was like for you growing up, or if there was maybe one particularly memorable Eid, but more generally what Eid was like.

KNIGHT: Growing up, Eid was so much fun. Like, Eid was -- first of all, it's in Prospect Park, so I think probably when I was younger, we were just in the summer months, I mean, and, you know, that only lasts for so many years, right? It was in Prospect Park and there was, like, a lot of drumming. This was, like, the early years of hip-hop, so people -- you know, whoever was rapping in the community was, you know, doing their thing. All right. There was food. You know, everybody was having their own picnics and just, sort of, moving from one picnic group to another picnic group and just visiting. You know, adults would give children money, candies, barbequing. It was just, like, so much fun.

And then kids -- you know, as kids, we would go off into some kind of trail or, you know, I guess we -- we probably were considered to be the wildlife or something, you know, [laughter] like where the ponds were, you know, and just -- just have fun. So, it was

definitely a time where you saw people who you hadn't seen for a long time and just saw and met new people -- you know, met new people from different communities because it was all the different Muslim communities from Brooklyn for sure, but there were probably other people coming from other boroughs as well to be in -- in Prospect Park. And you had -- Yeah, there's performances, and there was the communal prayer. You know everybody prayed together. No idea who was giving like the khutbah really -

ALI: Was it organized? You said people from all over Brooklyn, was it multi-ethnic or was it primarily African American?

KNIGHT: Yeah, that's a good question because, honestly, I remember Black people. I don't so much remember other people, but that doesn't mean they weren't there. They were probably there as well. And that's -- that's a good question, because I really wonder how was that, sort of -- how was that, sort of, set up.

But it -- it was also -- I think for me, it was also, like, a nice way how you sort of realized who had certain talents, you know? Like, Brother Idris -- that he drums. Like, you would then be like, "Oh, yeah, that brother who you just see around, like, they drum," you know? Or like, "So-and-so, maybe they sing." Yeah, because -- because there was like a talent show aspect of it. So -- so aside from the, like, the park thing, once we were more so indoors, they had certain acts, you know, in the community. Like there was a brother Salim who was like the calypsonian, you know? And so, there was -- I forget the name of the brother. There's a -- another brother who always drums.

And, like, you know, as we got older, there are certain sisters -- like, older sisters. You also felt that was a time where, like, older sisters, they could dance, right? Like, a younger sister couldn't dance so much, but, like, the older sisters, you had some, like, Tina Turner acts, you know? Like -- because you're, like, "Oh, she's older, don't nobody care, she could --" There's, like, a veiled older sister who would do a Tina Turner and the kicks and everything, you know? [laughter] Like, so much fun. I mean, Masjid

Khalifah definitely for the indoor Eid, they -- that -- that mosque had it down for, like, the indoor Eid, you know, once we started moving indoors.

You know, but the outdoor Eid was so much fun, and I think it's something that -- it feels like people just never really -- even though we've had summer months, it doesn't feel like people ever really got that back, you know? But in a sense, that was like our generation when -- when we were little, when I was little, you know, younger than 10 and my parents were like in their thirties, you know? And so now, it would be, like -- like my -- you know, my generation and our kids, we would be the ones to do that. I mean, I've seen some things on Facebook about Prospect Park Eid, but I'm not sure. Like, my dad said he hasn't, you know, seen one or been to one, like, since, you know? But the Eid is definitely a big deal.

And I think because of the seasons -- once it moved inside in -- I don't know. I remember for a while kind of being at a loss. We're like, "What are you going to do with the Eid?" Like, you know, it just didn't -- it didn't -- you -- it kind of felt like you had to know what was going on, you know?

I mean, aside from if you go to Masjid Khalifah for the Eid -- so then it became like, "Oh, it's the Eid," and it's -- my family would do brunches, so, like, we would -- you know, after a while, we started to invite people for Eid brunch and -- Because, like, Khalifah would have, like, a little breakfast after the prayer and then there was brunch, and then you would have to come back later. Because the Eid celebrations are really in the evening, you know? So, you kind of had a lot of time to fill up to figure out what to do, you know, and to have some of these -- some stuff to do.

So then it's kind of, like, oh, you know, you're going to do something, you're invited to do something, go to a restaurant, you know, Khalifah -- and then not everybody feels comfortable going -- not everybody goes to Khalifah, not everybody feels comfortable

going to Khalifah, so it's not that same kind of experience of, like, just seeing loads of people. It's kind of like seeing -- the people who go to the mosque go to that mosque, and maybe some people who aren't -- who you don't see so often but who probably still go to that mosque, you know?

ALI: Okay. So let's move into your young adult life. Tell me about your educational experiences, high school, college.

KNIGHT: Yeah. So, yeah. So, of course, I went -- all my, sort of, schooling up until the end of high school was in Brooklyn right? So, junior high school was Meyer Levin. That was kind of a performing arts high school, and then I went to Brooklyn Technical High School, which is downtown, like Fort Greene, Brooklyn. And --

ALI: And this is a school you have to test into?

KNIGHT: Yes, this is a school you have to test into. We called it the specialized high schools. Back then, there were only four. Now, there's a lot more of them. But this was the one specialized high school in Brooklyn. And so, my older sister who's two years older than me, Makeda, she -- she went there, and I went there, my twin sister went there, so we all went there pretty much at the same time. Two -- two years apart, my -- you know, my older sister graduated before us, and there was a good deal of Muslims at the high school. There was an MSA in the high school. Most of them were like Indo -- Indo-Pac type of folks, and, yeah, it was a good high school. It was a fun high school.

It was -- I mean, that was a time when I really got to explore, like, Brooklyn and the city a lot more. You know, just being more independent, taking the train. You know, we took the 2 and 5 trains from Flatbush, and it's like 45 minutes to get to high school. And, I think, my parents, they were kind of -- let us be pretty independent. Like, you know, we could hang out with our friends and, you know, just be all about the city and stuff, so -- Yeah, so that was pretty much high school and -- oh, and it's a very diverse high school. I say that -- a very, very diverse high school. Like, maybe 30 percent Black, 30 percent Asian, 15 percent Latino, probably another 15 or so, you know, white, and then others, you know?

ALI: How -- tell me about your academic interests. Was art becoming -- coming into focus yet as something that you, kind of, wanted to pursue?

KNIGHT: Not really, honestly. Like maybe -- maybe performing and stuff was interesting for me. I -- you know what, actually, I did -- yeah. Because when you asked about martial arts, I was also thinking other things that I did. Like, me and my sisters, we were involved in dance since we were really young, since, like, probably five or six years old. Like, there was this dance school called Miss Ricky's and, like -- I felt like any girl who was, like, from Brooklyn and from, like, a Caribbean background, like, went to Miss Ricky's dance school, like, probably even younger like for ballet or you know? So, I had for the longest used, like, ballet bags, you know, where you put your ballet slippers in one part and then your, you know, tutu in another part, and so we did that.

And then when I was in high school, I had -- I mean elementary school, one of the really important things for me from elementary school was I had a teacher named Barbara Gathers who was very kind of -- I guess you would call it kind of Afrocentric sort of thing. And she led a rites of passage group, and so I did a rites of passage with her. I'm still in touch with her. I still call her Auntie Barbara. And so I did dance again through that and then I continued, like, doing dance actually on my own probably -- probably really until, like, my early twenties. So that was a part of my life a lot -- like, doing that. But I -- I think once -- Yeah, when I was in late -- probably my senior year, it was probably, like, my last dance recital. I was, like --

ALI: And -- and what kind of dance, ballet?

KNIGHT: Oh, modern.

ALI: Modern?

KNIGHT: Yeah. Modern dance, which is, you know, kind of a spinoff of ballet but -- excuse me [coughs] -- but yeah, so -- What was I going to say? So, we went to -- into high school. Oh, yeah, so when I was in high school, oh, so there's a place called Ifetayo, which was like a -- in Flatbush that taught dance and lots of other things. So that's where I did -- did dance, so --

But when I was in high school then, yeah, I did dance, but I also -- my studies were more like science. I did, like, environmental science and I did environmental AP and chemistry AP and all of that kind of stuff. And I think, for a minute, I wanted to do environmental science, environmental engineering and -- I mean I -- I think in -- somewhere inside me, I always wanted to do something cultural, and so, like, when I applied for colleges, I applied for, I think, mostly science programs actually, science and business stuff.

I think maybe I didn't even realize that you could study, like, television or film or art. I didn't really realize that was a thing and -- until I was -- went to Howard. And I had some -- some of the other women who were on my floor at my dorm were studying radio, television, and film, and I was in the business program. Like, I got into Howard through, like, a summer program. Like, when I was in high school, I did a summer program before my senior year in actually -- what, you know -- actuarial science and just, like, the science of risk management. And anyway, so I got into Howard through that program, and then I -- Within two months, I realized that was not what I wanted to do. I had to wear a suit to class every week. It is not my life. This is not, actually, my life for very much longer. Got out of that.

And then I just worked on my first film set my first semester. And I was hooked from there into, like, you know, just that whole aspect of, like, creativity, and then I moved into fine arts, and yeah.

ALI: What -- do you remember what the film was?

KNIGHT: Gosh, you know, I know. It was a student film.

ALI: Oh, okay.

KNIGHT: It was from another undergrad. But actually, the film -- the director was Muslim and the cinematographer was Muslim too. And the -- Hmm, that's funny the -- one of the guys who -- I'm just trying to think. I don't know. Maybe he was assistant

cinematographer, because the cinematographer was actually -- I'm pretty sure it was actually this guy Brad, Bradford Young, if you're familiar -- he does a lot of Ava DuVernay's films. I think he did *Selma*.

ALI: Wow.

KNIGHT: He did, like, lots of this stuff, right? So he was, like, you know, one of the first filmmakers I ever worked with, you know? And he's amazing to work with. He's just so much fun, so yeah.

ALI: So you graduated in 2003.

KNIGHT: From college, yeah.

ALI: From college. And so, let's talk about the work that you began doing to become a practicing artist, a career or a professional -- what is it? I don't know what the appropriate -- but a full-fledged, fulltime artist.

KNIGHT: Yeah.

ALI: Tell me how you -- how that -- that -- how did that happen.

KNIGHT: Yeah. So, hmm, okay. So after undergrad then I spent five years between like undergrad and grad school and then I, kind of, got more into -- like I did the *As the Veil Turns* project, which was a photography, video oral history project about Black women who converted to Islam prior to 1975. And I think through doing that project, that I -- it kind of allowed me to kind of merge some of my older interests with some of my newer interests, which was that I studied film, and so I had -- I had an interest in documentary filmmaking, I had some experience in that, and then I was also kind of moving into, like, photography and just other mediums. So that was something I had gotten, like, a good amount of support doing from just, you know, the different sort of funding sources -- not so much the film funding sources, but more so the fine arts funding sources. Because I guess, I -- I figured it -- maybe the fine art funding sources were a little bit more open to seeing things that were, like, more experimental and more kind of like merging mediums.

And then from there, I went to grad school at UPenn.

ALI: Before I -- before we get to grad school, I want you to talk a little bit about the She Shootin' Photography Collective, which came before. It was 2006.

KNIGHT: That's true.

ALI: Tell me -- tell me about that. What was the She Shootin' Photography Collective?

KNIGHT: [laughter] She Shootin' Photography Collective was a short-lived collective of myself and maybe three or four other -- other photographers, Layla Amatullah Barrayn, Delphina -- Delphine Fawundu-Buford, and two other women. And I think around that time -- well, we -- we had found out about, you know, some opportunities to, like, exhibit. One of them -- actually, maybe the first one we did together was at the Brooklyn Historical Society, something called *A Drum Beats in Brooklyn*. And so we started working together, working together to, like, get funding, working together to just exhibit.

And that was something that I think -- you know, and I think probably at the time, the thing of artists' collectives was starting to become more of like a thing in the art world. Maybe like artists were starting to realize that there were some opportunities that would be maybe a bit easier to garner if you worked collectively, and -- And then also, I think, just even the workload is -- you know, it's -- it's kind of a nice -- a nice way to work sometimes. And so, we did -- Actually, we did an exhibition called *She Shootin'*, and I think that's when we came up with this name She Shootin' Photography Collaborative. And we actually some, like, you know, write-ups in magazines and stuff like that.

And then I think probably, you know, once -- folks were doing different things -- like, whether -- I mean, I went away to grad school in 2008 -- and, you know, just different things. We just -- we never really said, "We're not working together." We just didn't, you know?

ALI: You know, I think the -- there was a store on Flatbush, Harriet's or something?

KNIGHT: Harriet's Alter Ego.

ALI: Yes, that, I think, is the first exhibition or showing I ever attended in Brooklyn --
because I lived in Harlem and I would never come to Brooklyn, but I remember --

KNIGHT: Right.

ALI: -- coming to that. And that's, I think, when I started meeting this, you know -- kind of all
these Muslims doing interesting things, so --

KNIGHT: Yes, that's right.

ALI: That -- because you were there. Of course Laylah was there, I think, Nisaa, Kauthar,
Omar Mullick came to that.

KNIGHT: Yes.

ALI: I think Musa Syeed. He was just like a --

KNIGHT: So that must have been my show -- *As the Veil Turns* show? Or was it --

ALI: No, no, no.

KNIGHT: -- the *She Shootin'* show?

ALI: It was *She Shootin'*. It was at Harriet's. And --

KNIGHT: Okay.

ALI: -- then I remember we went across the street -- a few of us went across the street and
had a meal at, like --

KNIGHT: Yes.

ALI: -- I don't know if it was like a Chinese restaurant or something.

KNIGHT: Right. It was like a Chinese vegetarian restaurant.

ALI: Yes, yes.

KNIGHT: Right?

ALI: Yes, yes.

KNIGHT: That's right.

ALI: That's -- that's back in 2006.

KNIGHT: That's right. Yes, it is. So, yes, so --

ALI: We don't even have a question here about Muslim AI, but we should. [laughter]

KNIGHT: Yes. We'll just insert it, okay.

ALI: So -- so -- you know, it's --

KNIGHT: I'll add that in because I was --

ALI: So talking about collectives and collaboratives, so let me just start this way. Were you still -- where were you living at this point?

KNIGHT: Okay. So at that point I think -- okay, so when I was doing the She Shootin' stuff in 2006, I was living in Flatbush with my parents. And in 2007, early 2000-- is that even right? No. I'm trying to figure this out. Or yes, early 2007 is when I moved to Dean Street, which is in Crown Heights, and this is Dean Street between Brooklyn and New York. It's so funny just to even think about the address, Dean Street. I don't think it ever even dawned on my mind so much at the time that it was Dean, right? You know, the "[Arabic?]" [laughter] -- and between Brooklyn and New York, right?

And so, I moved there. For a while, I knew the house and had friends who lived in that house. It's kind of, like, a house that, like, a series of Howard University, mostly creative folks -- you know, Howard University grad -- you know, alum had lived there -- there --

ALI: What was the street number? Do you remember the house number?

KNIGHT: Three-four-seven -- 367 Dean Street or something like that?

ALI: Okay. Okay.

KNIGHT: It's a brownstone, like, a big brownstone with a couple of floors. Like, me and my friends had the top two floors. There were four bedrooms, big bedrooms up there, and like a -- a communal sort of eating space, kitchen, bathroom type of thing.

And so, when I moved there early 2007, I was actually working in New Jersey -- ugh! -- working in New Jersey as a TV producer/assistant director for a Turkish television station called Ebru. And so, I was, like -- you know, I was commuting back and forth, but being that I was young and energetic, [laughter] I was also doing the *As the Veil Turns* project -- like, moonlighting doing the *As the Veil Turns* project. And mind you, I worked six days a week working for this TV station. But that was really great. It was.

When I think about it, it was -- you know, just kind of these specific times in your life, because I just met up with Musa -- Musa Syeed and his wife. But Musa, you know, in particular, he -- I met Musa back in -- I didn't even realize. I don't know if I even realized this at that time, but I guess I met him in 2007. He had -- just came back from Egypt, you know, and he was -- you know, he had studied film, and so he was doing -- just starting doing his stuff, right? And I think -- what was it -- his name -- Bassam Tariq -- Tariq, who's -- who we met. I'm trying to think how we even met Bassam. Maybe through Musa, I'm not sure. Well, him and Musa were house -- roommates at one point. So, Bassam was still working in advertising -- just kind of [laughter] working in advertising, trying to make these little videos on the side somewhere, you know?

And Umar Malik, he was still working for, like, for National Geographic, making -- doing photography actually. And I know in 2007, I remember meeting Umar when I had my -- the opening for that show, for my *As the Veil Turns* project show. And, of course, Musa came. I had already known Musa at that point. And, you know, of course, several other people -- of course, you came -- and so several other people, you know, came. And I think we then just started to go to a lot of different, you know, cultural things. Like, if Musa was doing something, we'd go to that. And, like, you know, if I was doing something or, you know, whoever was -- was doing something then we'd go to that and then we just started to get together as, like -- we called ourselves, like, artists and intellectuals.

ALI: Yeah. Because I wasn't an artist but we had --

KNIGHT: Right.

ALI: -- and we had other kind of scholarly inclined people like Hisham --

KNIGHT: Hisham --

ALI: -- Aidi and --

KNIGHT: -- for sure. Ibrahim.

ALI: Ibrahim Abdul Matin, Suad, which bridged the arts and the intellectuals in the same thing. And -- and so, this was -- And so -- and we -- we started having --

KNIGHT: And Leslie Hewitt --

ALI: And Leslie Hewitt --

KNIGHT: -- she would come too, yes.

ALI: Yeah, it was -- that was a good bunch of -- and these were all -- all Muslims.

KNIGHT: Yup.

ALI: And we would gather at each other's homes for -- for food and sharing.

KNIGHT: Yeah, show and tell. [laughter]

ALI: Yeah, yeah.

KNIGHT: It's was like show and tell. [laughter] However had something just shared what they had and, like --

ALI: Right, right.

KNIGHT: And -- and I think it was -- And then also -- because I remember, there was one point when we -- we had this group. It was, like, an unnamed group. Like there were all these iftars that we were having, too -- I remember there this sister -- see, because there were all these different branches of it. Because there was also just some of us who just kind of socialized and wasn't part of, like, the show-and-tell thing. I remember there was this sister Sophia -- maybe you remember Sophia Kizilbash and there was -- was it Akil Fahd? It was -- was that his name, Akil F--?

ALI: I'm not -- I don't remember.

KNIGHT: He was, like, Pakistani background -- he was Shi'a. Remember there were, like, two Shi'as who would come. Because I remember once we had this, sort of, Muharram celebration type of thing, right? And we had it at Dean Street, because people liked to have it at our -- at my place -- like, Dean Street, right? Because it was called Dean Street, you know? But just kind of getting together a lot and -- which was really, really cool.

You know, I would say definitely for my -- for me, like, in my twenties, was, like, all about my friends -- like [laughter] -- and, like.. Yeah, and there was always just something -- always something going on. And I think it was -- it was a nice time to just -

- many of us just starting out with whatever it is that we were doing. But to get that feedback from other friends who were smart, and who were creative, and who were, you know, just kind of invested in these different things, and just to see people move from, like, you know, whatever it is that they were doing back then, whether -- you know, Bassam, he's not in advertising anymore -- I'm pretty sure he's not in advertising anymore -- and make films and make, you know, different art projects and -- oh, Laylah -- Laylah was part of it, too -- and just sort of move into different facets of their careers, and just kind of exploring their interests -- It's just -- yeah, it's just really amazing.

And I think you realize it was almost kind of like a time capsule in a sense, you know? Like, a lot of -- I don't even live in New York anymore, unfortunately -- you know, whatever. But, you know, a lot of us don't even live in New York anymore and -- Or -- you know, or -- or just kind of maybe more embedded in whatever it is that you were starting out and then are now, you know, doing. I remember you were just -- like, that timeline, you know, that you --

ALI: Yeah, yeah.

KNIGHT: -- you did. Like, you were just starting then. Like, it wasn't even a full-fledged thing yet.

ALI: Right. The -- the hip-hop and Islam timeline. And now everybody is talking about -- yeah, yeah, yeah.

KNIGHT: Yeah, it was just crazy.

ALI: It was a -- it was a -- it was, like, a good incubating group, you know?

KNIGHT: For sure.

ALI: It was our version of -- of an incubation for the different projects that people were doing or observing or giving feedback on.

KNIGHT: Yeah.

ALI: So that was -- that was a pretty cool thing. So, let me not slip into my oral history with you --

KNIGHT: I already know --

ALI: -- because this is your oral history.

KNIGHT: -- all this stuff, so yeah.

ALI: But it's still -- it's still an important part of the story.

KNIGHT: Definitely.

ALI: So -- so tell me about your experience at -- in graduate school at University of Pennsylvania, and -- and how that --

KNIGHT: Oh yeah.

ALI: -- impacted your work as an artist, and as a Muslim artist, as a Muslim woman artist?

KNIGHT: Yeah. So, I mean, I went to UPenn from -- I started there in 2008, and it was really -
- It was interesting, because I went there kind of specifically because there was a professor there named Terry Adkins who I was told about from another artist -- African American male artist who was -- Demetrius Oliver, who was doing an artist residency at the Studio Museum of Harlem, and he had gone to Penn. So he told me he had this professor who was just so -- he just sounded so, like, dynamic and interesting from what he said. He was African American. And he said that there was -- they had scholarships there for -- to pay tuition for, like, maybe two of them. And so, I was like, "Oh, okay," you know?

And he had introduced me to a student who was there at the time who -- at the time, I didn't know this student was Muslim as well -- an artist named Jamal Cyrus, who -- at the time, he was in his -- let me think -- I think Jamal must have been in his second year? So I applied there for those reasons and -- and -- and I didn't get in the first year, but I got in the second year, and I got in with a full scholarship.

And the second year then there was also suppose -- supposed to be -- supposed to be this artist -- Carrie Mae Weems was supposed to be there. So I was all about that life, and she was not there. [laughter] Then her -- her career started to take off -- like, just way bigger, better than it had ever been before, you know? She had, like, her first solo show in New York since, like, you know, the past maybe 15 or so years and just, like --

You know, she had a good career before, but it -- it really, you know, turned into this whole other mega, super thing. So, she hadn't talked to us, and she had no time, so she was -- she was not there.

But anyway, I went to Penn. It's in Philadelphia. And it was difficult for me to actually leave New York. I didn't want to leave Brooklyn. I loved just kind of the whole thing of, like, you know, a community of friends and just -- I liked being in New York. I wanted to figure out a way how I could still live in New York and go to grad school at UPenn, but lo and behold, that didn't make sense. And so I packed my things and I went to Philadelphia.

And at UPenn, I think I tried to go there without sort of preconceived notions of, like, what I would do, you know? That was the advice -- some advice that I got from Jamal. Jamal -- when I had gone to visit UPenn, the first time I got to meet him and meet Terry -- and Terry from, from jump, he was like -- Terry passed away a couple of years ago -- 2014 -- but he was like -- he's like a relic. He was just, like, from a time past, you know? He was, like, that old, raspy voice, jazz man -- artist from, like -- He's from D.C. or he has a voice -- like, people don't really even talk like that anymore. You don't grow up just speaking like the way -- how he spoke, you know?

Carrie Mae Weems was kind of like that, too, if you ever hear her speaking. They're -- they're, like, from a time period, and people just don't speak like that anymore, but -- I remember that first time I went to Penn to visit, like, Harry Belafonte was visiting -- was -- was giving a -- you know, a talk, and debuting whatever it was he was debuting. And, like, Terry gave me and Jamal, like, tickets to go see the Harry Belafonte talk and to go to the -- you know, to like, the VIP thing, and I was like, "Oh, my goodness, he is going to be my professor. That's amazing," and -- you know.

And so, when I went to Penn, tried to, let go of preconceived notions. And Terry had advised me to do perform -- performance art. And I had already heard about performance art before we started. Like, I thought of, like, this artist William Pope.L, who would do this crazy stuff -- like, crawling in the streets and -- just crazy stuff. People getting naked doing crazy stuff, right? I was, like, "Y'all ain't going to have me out of -- in these streets doing the crazy, crazy stuff," you know? [laughter] And so I took the class nonetheless. I didn't do any of that stuff, but it really did sort of break me out of a lot of -- It just kind of really opened me up to kind of be more aware of, like, myself in spaces, and more kind of, like, aware of, like, how -- using materials and just really sparing -- like, breaking these down to kind of, like, their essence or, like, their necessities, and not being like -- Not using things that don't need to be used, like, in my artwork. And really, like, getting to the core of what it was -- I was trying to say in my work.

And -- and I was fortunate in -- also, the professor for performance art was an African American man who was also from D.C., and so -- So I felt definitely in my first year, I had that kind of support, in a sense. But I also got in trouble in my first year, also, because of a performance that I did that was just kind of like -- I had done a performance -- yeah, it did involve crawling, but it was -- I did a performance for what we would call our senior -- our -- I guess called it like, our final crit. Like every semester, you have a crit, which is where you have to present your work in front of all of your faculty, students -- anybody could come. About -- it's about 30 minutes each, maybe less -- 30 minutes, that's it -- and you get critiqued. Like, at UPenn, you get heavily critiqued. Like, there -- sometimes, there's crying. You know, just kind of, like, really, really going in, in, in about -- asking you everything about your work and, like, you know, the way you work and stuff like that.

And I had done a performance, and it was what you call a happening, where, like, the person -- they're not sort of expecting -- you don't announce that you're going to do a

performance. But I had done this performance where everybody walked over this white sheet of paper, and then I started erasing people's footprints from off of the paper. It's called *Eraser Piece*.

And so my faculty, because they had not been -- partially because they had not been expecting this -- some of them felt very offended by me doing this. Some people felt like I was erasing them. Like, it was so crazy. People were so -- you know? But I -- and for me, it was really fascinating just to kind of -- just to kind of, I guess, turn upside down this kind of idea of, like, who was in control in that space. Like, me doing something that was un-- unannounced -- that I didn't ask anybody to -- you know, for me to do sort of changed, like, this dynamic. And then it also -- because in a sense -- I don't know. This idea of me erasing people's footprints -- some people, they felt like it was almost like an attack or something. It was -- it was fascinating.

But, you know, it did get me in trouble with my faculty, and I was put on probation. And then I had to, like, create a whole lot of new work. Yeah, I had to create a whole lot of new work over, like, a winter break, and then I created an even crazier performance. [laughter] I don't even want to think about it now. It's just kind of like -- They must have been like, "You know what, how about we don't F with Nsenga ever, ever, ever, ever?" I created a new performance where I went -- I literally went to the butcher, got a couple of sheep heads, okay, and did a performance -- a video performance with sheep heads where I was cutting the eyes of these sheep heads, and -- But -- but I was, like, doing this thing that, like, girls in Brooklyn used to do -- like, tough girls in Brooklyn -- where they would carry blades in their mouth. Did you know about this? Girls would carry blades in their mouth. So I was -- in this video, I was spitting blades out of my mouth and then cutting the lids of a sheep like they were feasting. I was on a table, so it was kind of like I was being feasted on, and I was, like --

And looking back at it, they probably thought that this was about them. And looking back at it, it probably was. [laughter] Oh, because I was mad. [laughter] And so -- and I had done some other stuff. I had done some --

ALI: What was the --

KNIGHT: -- [inaudible] --

ALI: -- response to that?

KNIGHT: Like, looking back at it, I think they were, kind of, like, "Okay," and then, you know, like -- And it was crazy because, like, my professor -- the Black one -- even though he dug into me so bad that I had done that pervious performance, even though he had assisted in it, he didn't even come to the re-crit. Because I think honestly, I think he was kind of protesting it. He didn't say he was protesting it, but I think he kind of was, you know? I think he kind of knew it was, like, kind of, ridiculous that they would make me create new work in that short period of time to re-crit me to just kind of like -- It's almost like a punishment, you know? And like -- and that I killed that critique.

Like, actually, the work that I -- It was a blessing in disguise, because, like, the work that I created for that critique became some of, like, the work that carried, like, my career as an artist for a while, you know? Like, because when I did that performance, I had started doing something with the gaffer's tape because I felt so wounded, and I had -- like, damaged my clothes and, like, I had put a hole in, like, my pants in, like, the knee part, and then I had created this sort of photo series off of that. And then it kind of opened up this new kind of direction for my work.

And -- and I think that that performance I did -- even though it was kind of a crazy performance, but [laughter] it -- you know, it -- it was thinking about, like -- certain experimental filmmakers that I was interested in at that time. Like Luis Buñuel, he has this film, *Un Chien Andalou*, which -- in the film, that's literally what he does. It's supposed to, like, be a stand-in -- actually, the eye is in that film supposed to be a stand-in for a person's eye. You don't know in the film that it's actually an animal's eye, but

that's what he used, you know, and -- But I just kind of used it more directly. And then this woman Maya Deren, *Meshes of the Afternoon*. And she does this thing where -- with, like, the blades, too. And so -- It was -- it was -- it was good for me. I mean, you know, I count any time you're making art, it's a good thing. [laughter]

ALI: So coming out of -- of graduate school, talk about some of the works that you did -- or I know that you did a few workshops -- do you -- I have it here if you want to, like, talk about any of these that you think help illustrate your development or evolution as -- as an artist, or as a Muslim artist, or as an artist dealing with, you know, any of these kinds of issues.

KNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, it was kind of tough actually thinking about -- I don't know. I feel like -- since grad school, then residencies have also always been, like, a really good thing for me. So whether it was, like -- about a year grad school, I went to Galveston, Texas and did a yearlong residency there. And that, kind of, got me into, like, drawing and doing -- I mean, working in photography as well, but I -- I hadn't at that time -- so when I was in grad school, I started this photography series called *Periodic Table/ Drowning*. First, I was calling it *Drowning*. And it was this series of photographs that are made with, like, this tape material -- which kind of somewhat came out of that performance I mentioned -- and sort of re-photographing this sort of drawing on a photograph -- and you're just kind of thinking about the medium of photography and representation.

Because honestly, I think, in grad school, it was kind of something I was grappling with. Even though, like, I came into grad school doing, you know, this sort of oral history project and the -- you know, sort of portrait photography, documentary photography -- but then I felt this sort of thing in grad school where I was, like, "Man, you know --" Almost like -- there were these sort of assumptions of what I would be or should be doing as, like, a Muslim artist -- like, as a Black Muslim artist. And I think in some regards, I kind of didn't want -- maybe it was somewhat of a protest in there. I kind of didn't want to give it to them. Like, I didn't want to allow someone to be able to talk about me like they thought they knew me.

ALI: What were the assumptions?

KNIGHT: Those assumptions that's, like, whether -- I mean, it's like this thing where -- I find a lot of, like -- particularly, like, Muslim female artists -- like, this thing -- like, if you're trapped in this thing of being, like, a Muslim woman artist and you're kind of, like, critiquing that. It's like, critiquing the -- the hijab; critiquing -- what they call the veiling; critiquing, you know, sort of -- patriarchy; critiquing whatever. I mean, a lot of it will probably wind up with the woman showing some skin somewhere along the line, you know, in her critique -- so cliché, so cliché. And just some -- some kind of -- Almost I feel from, like, a -- [coughs] excuse me -- almost from, like, a white Western woman's, like, gaze. Like, you take on her -- this other, you know, sort of philosophy about, like, what you should be doing, and then you're almost like this insider -- critique it, you know?

And I never felt -- I didn't feel like that was something I was interested in doing. I didn't feel like it was something that I wanted to -- I just -- it's -- oh, in a strange way -- how can I put this? I didn't want to use my art for teaching. Like, I didn't want to use it -- I didn't want to use my art as a way to teach white people about Muslims or about me as a Black person, about me as a Black Muslim woman. I felt like -- Because, I mean -- almost -- maybe, perhaps, I felt like there was -- I felt -- and even from the point of, like, when I was doing more documentary photography and, you know, oral history -- and I totally see myself as still being someone who does participate in, like, sort of investigating, like, who we are as a community. I didn't want to do this for the purpose of someone else -- of someone who's outside of the community, you know? Like, that they could come across it and, like, could -- could -- could -- could sort of benefit from it, too.

But that first and foremost, I felt it was important for us to understand who we are, you know? So, like, my, like, interest in -- you know, like, for example, when I -- when I did, like, the *X Speaks* project, my interest was always first and foremost to have, like, this

internal conversation. Like, you know -- and -- and -- and interestingly, I felt like, for myself, my projects -- when I do, like, these collaborative projects, like -- especially that are dealing with a specific topic about -- I guess it could be considered identity. It's like -- there's usually, like, these multiple audiences, but, like, I always generally have, like, a very small audience in mind first. So, like -- *X Speaks*, like, the first audience is the participants -- are the collaborators, you know? That project was called *X Speaks*, Nsenga Knight and X Collaborators. And so the X is a stand-in for whoever participates in the project as a person who's giving one of Malcolm X's speeches.

And so -- and I've created and done other projects similarly. Like, a project I did called *Make Safe, Make Space* in North Carolina. And the collaborators are, like, the -- almost like, if nobody else sees the project, it would be fine -- like, the project would still be successful because of the collaboration, right? So that's, like, my primary audience and then anybody else is, like, anybody else -- almost like people who walk by on the street, you know? Like --

So in that regard, like I say, for the *X Speaks* project, I really wanted to see, how do we as a community of Muslims -- Black Muslims -- relate to Malcolm X's speeches 50 years later? Like, what do we think these speeches have to do with us? How does this motivate us? Or how do we feel -- do we feel like -- because a lot of us, we say that we're, like, "We're in the legacy of Malcolm X," and we're, like, you know -- But do we actually really know what he said? Like, not just sound bites, but, like, what were his speeches like? And are really aligned with this? And it's okay to say no, but, like, actually really know what we're talking about. And then I think within our community, you know, I think some of us maybe would internally critique ourselves to say that we're not doing enough in the larger Black community. So then maybe is there something that we could --? Is -- are there some sort of relevant words that would help us think through, process, motivate, whatever, with what we would like to be doing or what we should be doing? So that's -- that's kind of --

So -- so, I guess, in -- in thinking about that and thinking about my time as a grad student, I was -- Maybe because I -- Oh, that's interesting now that I think about it. Maybe because I didn't feel like I was in community -- that I didn't want to do a project that so directly spoke about, like, Muslims -- because I didn't feel like I was in community to be working with Muslims. Like, I wasn't -- so I -- I never wanted to be like a type of artist that, like, talks about our community and just talks about us to other people, as opposed to, like, talking with my community. Because you know, I've -- I -- I mean, alhamdulillah, I've always been part of a community, you know? I grew up in community, and I'm fortunate that I, you know, still am.

And -- and -- honestly, I think a lot of times, Muslim -- there are many Muslim artists who are, you know, out there doing whatever, who really are very detached from community -- even though they might make art about identity, are very detached from community. So for them to speak about -- so -- so maybe it is always that I'm talking -- like, as an outsider, and I just don't -- I just -- I'm not down with that program. And so --

So when I was in grad school, then -- I guess I did do some projects -- some works that had to do with some historical figures, like Ibrahim Ibn Sori. I did -- I did, like, a wall drawing that kind of abstracted some text from his -- from his memoirs. And I did a lot of abstract photography. And I did some -- quite a bit of performance art. So, there's -- so there's -- there's the arts and things from -- from my time in grad school that I still, you know, carry -- carry over.

And then, you know, since then, then I think a lot of my work has been -- between, like, the documentary photography and lots of collaborative projects. Probably every year, I feel like I probably do a collaborative project. Because I like this sort of -- maybe it's some of that filmmaker background in me -- like, I like just sort of, like, being able to retreat in my studio and do some things that are more so just about, like, me and my --

my thoughts and me processing some ideas aesthetically. And then I like to be able to, like, be in the world, like with community and do some things that are -- that help me sort of process these ideas with people I know, you know?

And -- and as an artist, one of the things I love about being an artist is that -- I mean, we say artist, but, like, artist is, like, a weird job description, I think. [laughter] It's like, when you say you're an artist, like, nobody really knows what that means, you know? Like, nobody can really -- really knows. Like, does that mean you paint, does that mean you draw, you perform, you rap, you dance, you -- you know, whatever? Do you make photographs and, like -- you know? Or -- it's whatever you make it. It's kind of like, whatever you're kind of making it to be at that time.

And then I think working in community, like -- it -- like, in the *X Speaks* project, for instance, it puts you in a weird sort of -- sort of role where you could be a leader, or you could be somebody who just, you know, falls back and whatever. But you have all these sort of potentials that can be somewhat like nonthreatening, because we're just making art. It's fun. We're making art, you know? Like -- or -- or nobody really knows what -- what that means, so -- because it creates this sort of open space where there's so many possibilities for people, that a lot of people feel like they can participate.

ALI: So, would you call yourself an artist? Would you use that term for you?

KNIGHT: Yeah.

ALI: And -- and when you use it for yourself, what do you mean?

KNIGHT: It depends. I mean, you know, it means that I make things. It means I create things. Yeah. I guess that will be it. It means I create things.

ALI: Would you -- would you call yourself a Muslim artist?

KNIGHT: Oh, yeah, sure. I'd call myself a lot of types of artist -- a Muslim artist; I'm a Black artist; I'm just as artist; I'm a woman artist; I'm -- yeah, it depends on the setting. But, yeah, I definitely would. I embrace that, too.

ALI: So I don't know if you -- you've talked about some of the more recent work you've done. How would you -- how would you characterize your -- your work now that that is -- that speaks to Muslim history or identity versus, say, your work 10 years ago? So, like, if we look at something, like *As the -- As the Veil Turns* --

KNIGHT: Yeah, that's what I'm thinking about --

ALI: -- versus say, like, *Rites of Passage* or the --

KNIGHT: That's right.

ALI: -- *Ritual and Revolution*.

KNIGHT: [pause] Let's see. I would say my work from before was kind of starting to become interdisciplinary. But it was still, like -- necessitated a certain type of, like, technology. Whereas, like, my work now, I -- is more -- it's -- it's maybe more analogue. Yeah. Like, I -- I still use digital, but it's more analogue, and so -- meaning that my hand is in it more. Like, I will -- I don't necessarily say I'm a painter, but I will paint. I will draw. I will -- you know, there's not anything for me right now medium-wise that I'm -- that's, like, off-limits for me. Like, before, I would not consider myself, like, drawing or painting or anything like that. It was, you know, just lens-based, record, you know? Like, it had to be something -- like, there had to be a machine between me and, like, what I was making. And now there's -- it's not like that anymore. I will still, you know, use some machines but, like, it's not -- not necessary.

ALI: So, is this, do you feel -- what do you attribute that to? Is it preference? Is it ability? Is it --?

KNIGHT: A lot of things. I mean definitely -- like, when I went to Galveston, then I didn't have -- it was just me in the studio, you know? Like, I did not have a printer. I didn't have a camera. I didn't have any of that stuff. So, I was like, "You know what? Let me start drawing. Let me just try. Let me just" -- you know? And even a lot of things that I thought I was going to turn into, like prints or something, they just didn't become prints. They were just better as, like, a drawing, or -- So, I just let them be.

ALI: What -- what do you like about this -- this method or this approach better?

KNIGHT: Yeah. I mean, I like that it allows me -- Sometimes, I like that it allows me to be a -- be a little bit messy. And it allows me to -- I think there's a certain amount of joy in it, too. It's just, like, fun. It's just like -- like -- not to say sitting in front of a computer screen can't be fun to an extent, but, like, there's something that's very meditative about it. Like, even -- Even something like the text-based pieces that I have been doing, actually, for a few years that -- you know, using paint or using stencils on paper -- just being a little bit less in control of, like, the medium. And -- and I think there's a kind of a -- I think there's a certain kind of freedom in being able to just make something and not need a whole lot of stuff to do it. And I think there's a certain kind of directness.

And -- and for myself when I started drawing, like -- like when I lived in North Carolina -- because I lived in North Carolina for four years, like, after I finished that residency in Galveston -- then -- So -- so I moved there because I got married, and my husband was there, and so our first child Muruwah when he was maybe, like, one, probably not even -- not even two yet, but like one and change, you know, that I just felt like -- [coughs] excuse me -- there were certain things I wanted to do with -- Like, I knew there were certain kind of gaps in my artmaking that -- there were certain things I was doing that I wanted to know how to do better. Like -- and I also -- not kind of having sort of -- hmm, I don't know how to put it. I want to say not sort of having kind of our community, but maybe at that point, maybe not even being so sure about what I wanted to do with my work. I don't know. I wanted to do something new. I started taking art classes.

So I started taking some art classes -- like, just like at a community place -- like, drawing. It was also just a way for me to get out of the house, you know? Like, drawing and printmaking and maybe some others -- yeah, I learned two different types of printmaking -- just certain things that I had just never studied before. And so the crazy thing about drawing was just, like -- you know, you could be in a class with, like, six other people, and one thing everybody's drawing, and it looks so different. And I'm not

saying, like, even the form looks different, but the way everybody draws is so different. It's like a fingerprint, and it's -- somehow, it's you on paper and you --

I mean not to say that, like, a photograph can't be -- because, you know, sometimes you might see a photograph and you're like, "Oh, that's so-and-so," but not the same way how, like, drawing is. Like, the way how a drawing is so, like, specific to that person was just -- I mean even now, it's so mindboggling to me, because just even, in my mind, thinking about how different each one of these women -- because it was all women in these classes -- I was, like, the youngest one -- they were all, like, pretty much retired, right -- in North Carolina who were taking these classes. But, like, just how different everybody's drawing is.

And I think that that's something that I am fascinated by and that I -- I like to kind of, in a sense, see myself outside of myself -- which is, like, on paper, you know? Or just, you know, in the artwork -- whatever the artwork it is that I'm creating. And so I feel like I'm having, like, a dialogue, or, like, I am sort of allowing some other part of myself to exist in the world that I wouldn't otherwise see if I didn't, you know, work like that -- if I didn't make drawings, if I didn't, you know, sort of make art, so -- So that's kind of, you know, encouraging.

And then as you see, like, the -- the different mediums and the different kind of possibilities, and just kind of -- like, to realize that I have, like, certain ways that I make work, you know? Certain things that just come up -- of, you know -- of, like, aesthetic choices that I guess I choose regularly, so -- So, yeah. So -- so I'm just -- at this point, I'm just, kind of, like, pretty open to mediums.

ALI: Okay. So, you -- you were in North Carolina, and now you are in Egypt currently.

KNIGHT: Yes.

ALI: You live in Egypt. What does it -- how does it feel or what does it mean to be part of a -- like a -- I guess now part of a -- and maybe this is in regard to your family, but our

community as, I guess, a diaspora, part of a -- a dispersed diaspora? I mean, Black people are already part of a diaspora, but you are now part of a -- New York, Brooklyn diaspora. What does it mean to be a Brooklynite living in Egypt? How -- how has that experience been?

KNIGHT: Yes, a good question. I mean, like -- hey, so first off, you think you come from a big city, right? And then you go to Egypt. You go to Cairo. You're like, "Oh." Like, you feel like Brooklyn, New York, Manhattan was like a town. It's a town. And so that's one thing -- like, realizing that New York is not, like -- it's not the most biggest, most bustling city out there. It's -- no. There are other big, bustling cities out there.

And -- and then also realizing that a lot of that diaspora is here in the United States. Like the other day, I went -- stopped in a bodega in, it was probably, Crown Heights, and popped in and -- you know, of course, most of the bodegas are run by Yemenis, and so he asked me a question, and I responded in Arabic, and we had, like, a conversation in Arabic. He's like, "Oh," you know, kind of like, "Where are you from?" and all that stuff -- "Where do you live?" And I'm like -- I told him I live in Egypt. And he lived in Egypt and just kind of -- you know, some decades ago. And just kind of seeing that, yeah, I'm -- I'm an ex-pat living in New York. And I think, at first -- and this is what happens to me a lot of times when I've moved -- or especially, you know, once I moved away from New York -- you kind of have this -- at least for me -- this sort of nostalgia, this sort of still wanting to be a part of everything that's happening in New York.

Like, I remember when I was in college and I was in grad school, and people would, you know, still have get-togethers or, like, the artist intellectual get-togethers. Like, "Y'all don't stop sending me invites! Keep sending me invites!" Like, "But she don't live here." "Says who?" you know? And just kind of, like, still wanting to be a part of things.

But I think now, I'm more -- I -- I embrace, like, where I am in that. Like, I -- Yeah, I just kind of am part of a lot of different homes, you know? Like, Egypt is like home,

Brooklyn is like home, and North Carolina feels like home for me, too, and just -- And that's just kind of like, you know, the -- the nature of it. I don't bump into a whole lot of, like -- I don't really bump into other New Yorkers or Brooklynites in Egypt very much, you know, but -- You know, but it does feel -- it does feel good to be able to, like, come back, you know, whether it is I come back in the summer. And that, you know, to see people, you know, familiar, whether it's like as soon as we, you know, pull up on -- on the block that I grew up in. And, like, my same neighbor from, you know, when I grew up is just, you know, passing, walking, you know, down the street, and you say, "Hey, how are you doing?" You know, that kind of thing. And you're just, like, "Wow, gosh, I've known these people for 30-something years," you know? Like -- and she has a child, and I don't have any child, and it's just, like -- it's just crazy, like, to see people and know people for so long, you know?

And, of course, my family is a big family, so we have, like, a -- you know, a lot of friends, a lot of connections and stuff in Brooklyn in particular. And so, it's -- it's -- it's -- in addition to us just being big and just trying to be connected, you know, with each other, just -- you know just, kind, of being -- It's -- it's nice that, you know, you're -- to be in a familiar place always, you know, as Brooklyn is a familiar place even --

ALI: Are there aspects of -- of the Brooklyn you remember growing up in and living in that are -- are now unfamiliar or as you go through your own neighborhoods?

KNIGHT: Yeah. It's only to -- to some degree. Like for sure, Flatbush is like the same, honestly. [laughter] Like, Flatbush is pretty much the same. And according to the real estate people, it's pretty much going to stay the same for a long time. There's a lot of ownership there, you know, of private properties. Still Caribbean. I mean, though the building is more -- I mean there's more, let's say, you know, non-Black Caribbean people who live there now than before, but still not much, you know?

And, like, they spruced up the building quite a bit. You know, but it's -- it's not like it hasn't been spruced up many times before in my lifetime, you know? So, like, that's

nice, but it's still, like, same stores for the most part, still Caribbean food, still -- you know? And now there's Uber Eats, so that just lets me get more -- you know, stuff delivered to me more. But -- but I still feel like I'm discovering things in my own neighborhood, you know? Like, I discovered, like, another, you know, Trinidadian restaurant that I just never got from before. They've probably been there all that time, you know? But things like that. Or, you know, we stopped at Dumbo when we met. You know, afterwards, I went to -- there was a Matcha Café. They didn't even accept cash. Who does that, you know? Six-fifty for, like, a matcha latte? And all they have is matcha -- I thought it was coffee. It was really good though, but -- [laughter] you know?

It is -- It's interesting to see how the -- the borough has, for sure, changed a lot, you know? But -- you know, but I felt like ever since I was in high school, I always thought Brooklyn was nice, you know? I always thought Brooklyn was really nice. And I always -- you know, Manhattan was really crowded and especially I think, you know, like, post-9/11, I didn't even want to go to Manhattan at all, you know? We tried to stay in Brooklyn, like --

ALI: Why?

KNIGHT: -- as much as possible. It was dirty. It was, like, you know, after 9/11, there was a lot of -- You could -- I could tell there was a lot of that pollution was in the air. Even I remember my feet would be black, like, coming -- like, if went to the city, like, my feet would just -- or even downtown, my feet would be black, and it wasn't like that before. And -- and it doesn't happen anymore. Like, the air was just -- all that stuff got in the air, you know? The air was really bad. But also just kind of, like, the crowd, and then I think post-9/11 just kind of, like, the police presence and that kind of thing. So, Brooklyn definitely felt a lot more chill, you know? And, you know, and that there's -- you know, the restaurants and stuff like that.

You know, and part of the thing of -- of Brooklyn is -- growing up here, part of it is that, like, you got older, so of course, you're getting to explore more, you know? So, I'm sure

Brooklyn has gotten fancier, you know, but then I'm sure there's parts of Brooklyn that I just didn't experience before because I was just, you know, not as independent to -- to experience things, you know? But, yeah, I always thought Brooklyn is a nice sort of place. Definitely Bed-Stuy was not always nice [laughter] -- like --

ALI: Have you --

KNIGHT: But it also had wonderful parts.

ALI: -- have you had a chance to visit the mosque communities that you -- you spent your young adult life in?

KNIGHT: Mm-hmm.

ALI: And have you seen any changes there?

KNIGHT: Oh, yeah. There's so many. I mean, actually, Masjid Khalifah, it's interesting because like, you know it used to be Mosque No. 7C or Temple No. 7C when it was part of the Nation, and I think there were some latent parts of that property for a long time. So, like, I remember that community is very much like a "do for self," you know, type of community. And I remember when they were like, you know, "We need to clean up this -- the basement. We need to clean up this part of the building. We need to --" And -- and it's funny, because I'm like, maybe there were these parts of the property that they just hadn't used for a decade, 15 years, something. And when I was -- like, in the '90s, they had all these campaigns to, like, raise money in the community, and just people to come out and volunteer to clean up, you know? And so, like, one space became Akbar Hall -- you know, once it was cleaned up. Another place became the Sister Clara Muhammad School. And that school has been going strong for, you know, probably at least 20 years, you know?

And then there's -- Like, the other day, me and my sister went -- I -- I came right to jummah -- well, I went to -- after jummah -- and [laughter] -- to see people. And one of the spaces is kind of like a conference room -- you know, and that's where the elders sit there to watch the jummah. It's on the -- you know, on the street level, you know? I was, like, "Oh, wow, this space is, you know, really nice." I don't really go in that space much,

but just kind of still noticing things, you know? And, like, you know, they're always sprucing that place up. I love it. They're always sprucing it up.

ALI: Do you feel that young Muslims growing up -- how do you think their experiences might be similar or different to the experience you had growing up?

KNIGHT: Interesting. I kind of think -- I think --

ALI: Or maybe we -- or we can phrase it this way: as a parent now, what would you -- what do you see available for your child or children? Child?

KNIGHT: Children, yeah.

ALI: Children, children --

KNIGHT: I have two.

ALI: -- children growing up.

KNIGHT: Yeah. In New York, in Brooklyn?

ALI: Or wherever you are -- or that you would want. You know, thinking about your experience and what you know you had growing up, --

KNIGHT: Yes, it's funny --

ALI: -- do you think that's still possible?

KNIGHT: You know, see, because I was telling my husband the other day, I was, like -- we were in New Jersey and on a date night, and I was like, "Oh." We -- we stopped in this place. It was, like, a candy store slash -- a bunch of different types of soda and just kind of -- funny, you know, sort of gimmicky type of toys and stuff, you know, that a kid would probably do a prank with or something, right? And I was like, "Oh." There was, like, Swedish Fish and, like, Sour Patch Kids -- just these candies that I used to eat, like, as a kid. And I was, like, "Oh, wow," you know, like, "Nurula, he's just not going to grow up with, like, this stuff," you know?

Like, when I was growing up, we would just play from, like -- once we woke up, we would go outside and we would play until, like, it was dark -- and like, you know, everyone's mom would be like -- you parents would be like, you know, "You could play from this tree to this tree," you know? So basically, it was as far as they could see, right?

And, like -- and then there was the corner store, and so at some point then there would be, like, a corner store trip, and you -- you know, you'd ask your parents, "Oh, can I go to the corner store?" Or you'd get somebody -- somebody to go the corner store and you'd get whatever candies, right? But that was a part of the day of playing, right?

But now it's like, "Yeah, we live in Egypt. Like, A, I don't see kids playing outside, and, B, there's no corner store." And so [laughter] -- fine. You know, so I was like, "Why wouldn't he be able to do that?" Almost like he thought I was, you know, giving some sort of critique. Like -- and I was just like, "It's just a fact." Even if he grew up in the same neighborhood on the same block, that -- you know, like, we -- we've spent, like, a whole summer -- like, three months, you know, in Brooklyn, at my parents' -- you know, at the place where my -- where I grew up, and it's not the same. Like, kids are not playing outside. Kids were -- we were doing everything outside. Like, we would -- it was double dutch. It was the single ropes. It was roller-skating. It was hot peas and butter. It was freeze tag, hide and go seek, skate-boarding, bicycle-riding, football, basketball, you know? It's -- I just named 10 sports, right? Everything was happening in the street, right?

And, like -- but kids don't even do that anymore, you know? Like, they just don't. And the corner store -- there's not even a corner store there anymore, you know? Like, the corner store is, like, you know, like, two -- a block, two blocks away, you know? But just kind of like -- it has changed, and I just accept that. It's different. I mean, you know, between videogames and, you know -- whatever, you know -- the computers and YouTube and -- whatever it is, or just -- Because there are children. I'm like -- I'm just trying to think, "Is it that there's no children in the neighborhood?" Like, there are children. I don't think there's as many children, though. I don't think there's as many children in the neighborhood. You know, it's just different, and I don't think they would have those kinds of opportunities of how people sort of engaged or built kind of a community in the neighborhood sense, right? Like --

Because even in Egypt, it just feels like -- I don't know. It was even tough for me, like, when my son -- when he wasn't in a nursery because, you -- you know, like, you might go out, and there's not really other kids out there. Even if you go to, like, a playground, there's not really other kids out there. Like, you and your kid, playing, you know? You've just got to -- Or even in Brooklyn, it's just like -- it's just not like that. So there is that part.

And then there's also -- You know, now, my family -- we're all, like -- a bunch of us are visiting with my parents, and so I was at my parents'. They have a house in New Jersey now, and -- and now my twin sister has an apartment in Brooklyn. And, you know, it's nice for them to have -- you know, my son, like, to have, you know, all these cousins to play with and what have you. But, you know, I think growing up, we had -- more of us lived close to each other. We didn't have, like, you know, cousins who lived in Doha, and who lived in Egypt, and who lived in Dallas, and who lived in, like -- We -- you know, we all lived, like, in Brooklyn or in Queens or, you know, relatively close by. There's that.

And then I think also, parents -- a lot of, like, my Muslim friends -- because I felt like -- I kind of had -- growing up, I had, like, kind of neighborhood friends, school friends, Muslim friends, right? Muslim friends were mostly from the mosque and -- and those groups didn't necessarily mix so much. I mean, a lot of my Muslim friends were friends because maybe we went to the mosque together and our parents were also friends. So, like, my parents used to have a lot to get -- a lot of get-togethers at our place, and then other Muslims would have get-togethers -- sorry -- at their places. So that was another way how people built community, so --

And not to say that you can't do that again. For sure that -- you know -- That's -- that's a thing. I don't know. But it just feels like people are more dispersed. And I think maybe

we are. I think maybe because of opportunities. Even, like, financial opportunities -- I think that is a big part of it. And people -- because most people are -- you know, within my family are -- are -- live where they live because that's where they work. That's where they found, like, the better, like, you know, job opportunities. I think probably for my parents' generation, like, if you grew up in Brooklyn and you wanted to stay in Brooklyn then, you know, you just got a job in Brooklyn, you know? It wasn't like a big pull -- driving -- something pulling you to live further away, because, like, it'd be much easier for you to, you know, have a -- have better, like, financial opportunities there, you know, so --

So no, I don't -- I don't think he would have a lot of the same things. I don't know what it -- you know what it would be. I don't know -- if we were to move to Brooklyn -- I don't know, because, like, when I think about North Carolina, there was some of that there. But, yeah, definitely there was a good environment there. Not in the neighborhood -- not -- not in the neighborhood sense and kind of not even in the mosque's sense. More so in this kind of, like, network of friends, kind of. It's kind of like the AI group. Like, we didn't -- none of us even went the same mosque. I don't even know what mosque you went to. [laughter] Maybe we didn't go to mosque. I don't even know, you know? But somehow we -- because of the, sort of, intertwining interests then, you know, sort of, built community like that. So I think my life is still somewhat like that that now. So, yeah.

ALI: All right. I think we're -- this is a good place to stop.

KNIGHT: Yeah, agreed, agreed.

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