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Khan, Baseera, Oral history interview conducted by Liz H. Strong, September 11, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.36, Brooklyn Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with Baseera Khan
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.36
Interview conducted by Liz H. Strong on September 11, 2018
at Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn

STRONG: Today is Tuesday, 11th of September, 2018. My name is Liz. I'm here for the Brooklyn Historical Society's oral history project called Muslims in Brooklyn. Here with Baseera Khan. Baseera, why don't you just start by introducing yourself, when and where were you born, and who are you? [laughter]

KHAN: Okay. Hmm. Okay. So, my name is Baseera Khan. Thank you, Liz, for coming.

STRONG: Thank you for having me!

KHAN: We are currently at Pioneer Works, where I just moved in for six months to do studio work, and I'm very excited to be here, 'cause this is, like, a magic machine. I was born and raised in Denton, Texas -- circumstantially, just because of where my father ended up. And we can expand upon that, 'cause there's, like, not nice --

STRONG: Please do.

KHAN: -- nitty-gritty details...

STRONG: What brought your family to Denton?

KHAN: So my father grew up under circumstances of war in India, same as my mom, just in terms of the timeline. But with my father he was a really brilliant man, and he excelled in education. And, you know, studied under a light post when -- because there wasn't necessarily, like, schools. But he was just so enigmatic and brilliant and just worked his way up, and was a part of a selected group of people who tried to start their own college -- like, native college -- in India. And it was called Al-Ameen. And he was responsible for the chemistry department.

So, this is, like, late '50s, '60s, on into the '70s, right, kind of -- kind of work. This is right after the initial split/partition from Britain in 1947. There would be additional partitions after that, but to this day that part of the world is still suffering from the

partition, and it's really seen as something that was in a distinct period of time, which it absolutely is not.

But anyway, he -- he realized that in order to make the school international, he needed to be able to provide an international education. And in that part of the world at that time there were no PhDs to be had. Like, you cou-- you couldn't do that kind of work. There are places in our contemporary time -- times -- where you can't do that. For example, when -- when I was just starting out and thinking about conceptual work out of graduate school, I'm -- I met this lady in Denton, Texas, in -- around, like, 2010, who was a friend of my father's who went to the same university that he did, which is why we ended up in Denton, Texas. So she was traveling from Palestine to Denton because she wanted to pursue a medical sociology degree. And she wanted to receive a PhD because at that time, in this period of time, you couldn't get a PhD there. And so she had this same kind of, like, parallel intention 40 years later, where she was like, "I want to create, like, a native school that has, like, this international pull. And these are the ways in which I can do this." And so that kind of, like, clicked for me, and I started to see the parallels of this, like, woman doing this work in my contemporary moment, whereas my father was doing that work back in the day, right?

So he decided to withdraw from his position at this school that they -- he and 30 other people founded, and he came to the U.S. to do a PhD in chemistry. And he chose Denton basically because he looked at a map of weather patterns and was like, "Oh, this is the closest to Bangalore, India, so let's just move to Denton, Texas." Funny enough, I have a -- I have a -- an app on my phone that basically tells you the global weather all over, everywhere, and so every time I travel I, like, make a note. And so I can -- every day I go in **and** I'm like, "Yup. Same weather in Bangalore right now!" [laughter] So I keep tabs with all the different weather places in -- in -- where I -- where I travel.

So he came here, but there were lots of troubles, troubles in the water, and he was not able to fulfill his PhD. And then he was also struggling with bringing my mom and my brother and sister over, and they also had a child -- my brother, who passed away. And then they had my other brother and I. And so my brother and I are, like, the citizens. [laughter] And we really had to become adult fast, because we were the people who negotiated lots of nuanced moments in our family's life because they were undocumented.

So being an artist is somehow not a chosen profession. Because I always felt that I had to assume a role of creating something visual to communicate because there were so many things that were not -- not in -- in -- not in existence. So the only way to translate would be through visual forms. And then also I was a translator, and I feel like an artist has to translate multiple languages and distill them down to one, and -- oftentimes one visual, symbolic order. And in a way that's what I'm doing with my work. And if I needed to say it quite simply, I'm trying to normalize what it means to be a femme Muslim in America. And I'm coming up with this word lately, "American Muslim native," because Islam is so different all over the world. And America is seen as this place that is secular and other and nonexistent in terms of religious order. Of course, you know, we have grids because of Christianity. We have churches in the middle of the grid because of Christianity. Urban planning's all about, like, that form. But -- yeah. Like, the kinds of, like, positive assertion of Islam being a part of North America before it became North America, you know? Like, Muslims existed in this part of the world before it became America. So feeling like I'm not American or being -- feeling like I could be banned at any time is uncomfortable and unfair, and -- as we all know. Like, I'm spea-- preaching to the choir, but maybe I'm not, [laughter] you know. Like, maybe in the back of people's heads they're like, "Well, question mark, I'll think of what I think of this later, 'cause it doesn't affect my daily life." But it does affect my daily life. It affects, like, all of my friends and family and my future. And my past. So normali-- in

the -- in the easiest sense, normalizing femme woman's and Muslim woman's existence in America is the work I'm doing.

And lastly, I think with the work itself, because I'm a contemporary artist, I'm sort of asked at times to pin myself into a -- or legitimate myself within a trajectory of art history and art -- art aesthetic. And there is so much philosophy of Minimalism that exists within Islam. And there's so much theology and theory that exists within Islam that it -- it -- at the time, when I started to understand, you know, people like Donald Judd or, like, Robert Smithson, and people who did Earth Art or Body Art or, like, Minimalist structures -- Richard Serra, Mark Rothko -- like, all these kinds of, like, people thinking through spirituality and essential forms, like, I was -- I -- I knew it. I had been living it already. And there's -- Islam is such a sculptural religion. And I like to say that it's actually a religion for women.

STRONG: Say more about that. What does it mean to be a religion for women?

KHAN: Well, the Nike shoe work that I've done, I simply just added an *a* at the end of "Muslim" and basically claimed that I'm Muslima. And it's a way to feminize something that is seen as very patriarchal. But that's not indicative of that particular religion. It's indicative of our world. And every major religion is seen through the guise of a man, right? Our laws -- [laughter] the Constitution doesn't actually recognize women. It says "man." Only something like 35 states in this country have petitioned against -- or have petitioned to change the Constitution. So we don't even have, like, solidarity within our own country -- which is supposed to be secular and pro-feminist -- to change those laws. Or those written policies.

Anyway. To say more about how Islam is a woman's religion, well, the Islam that I grew up in being Sunni and having this kind of family who's very well educated and kind of interested in people's rights, a bit Marxist, but -- [laughter] they -- I, like, learned that, like, say, one of the most significant figures in Islam would be Muhammad, *salla Allahu alayhi wa salaam*, which is "Peace be upon him" -- his wife, his first wife, was

sort of the mayor of the Mecca-Medina area. She had short hair. She was a boss-ass lady. And I make this kind of joke under my blanket, which is like my comedy cellar. I basically say that, like, Muhammad was the first artist who did the first artist residency in Mount Hidra [phonetic] and was able to learn how to read and write and came down with this thing, which is the Qur'an. [laughter] So it's, like, she, like, funded -- she was the first philanthropist that funded the first artist residency.

So -- so, I mean, these are the kinds of patterns that I picked up on. And also, you know, in Islam it's, like, one of the first major religions that, like, promoted desire, promoted a kind of sensuality, an unbridled sense of enjoying the earth. Because that's what you get to deserve. And in that sense you can enjoy sex, you can enjoy food, you can enjoy leisure, you -- there's no guilt involved.

You know, it's a highly structured religion. It's sort of like meditation. Or it's like what every New Yorker thrives [phonetic] to be. Like, "I'm going to go to the gym. Then I'm going to eat this. Then I'm not going to -- I'm going to detox that." And, you know, like -- so we all live that life anyway. It's just that within this particular religion it's, like, that's the kind of notion of the day. You know, you structure everything around the moon, five times a day, and this and that. There are things you can't eat, but, you know. There are also things that people strive to detox from, [laughter] so...

Other ways that I think that it is a woman's -- woman's religion is that you are able to own your own property and own your own body. And we're talking about what it actually says in the religion, not the way it has manifested in our modern culture. You know, Islamic states are just as riddled with imperial patriarchy as any other state of religion, whether it's, like, a Jewish state or a Christian state, or a Hindu state. These are, like, the major religions of the world, and these are the political states. You have India striving to be Hindu. You have Israel striving to be Jewish. You have America, in a way, striving to be Christian. If not Spain or something like this.

So yeah, I just sort of, like, felt that I saw myself in it. And I have a great way of just being ignorant towards everything that I don't like. [laughter] But now I'm catching up to that because I have to, like, manifest ways to navigate the things that are very wrong and uncomfortable, and places where I need to be critical. And I try to do that in my work.

One other thing is I grew up in Texas, right, Denton, Texas. So I grew up in the '80s and the '90s, and by early 2000s I left to come to New York. I grew up with Ann Richards as our governor. And I wasn't very -- I didn't know who Ronald Reagan was. Like, I just thought that Ann Richards was the president. 'Cause I was sort of just, like, in my own Baseera world, and I clearly still am. So I grew up thinking that our president was a boss woman. Like, she's so cool. And, like, her family's so cool. And, like, so stylish and funny. And then I also would turn on the TV with my father and watch world news, and Benazir Bhutto was the president of Pakistan. Where I kinda saw, "These are my people. Like, these people look like me," you know, kinda thing. So I grew up for my formative years thinking that women ruled the world. And that's just, like, that kind of weird tic in me that kind of, like, allowed me to have space to think about all of these major ideological things in my own idiosyncratic way.

STRONG: As -- as you're describing women's places, they -- in a patriarchal world they seem distinctly countercultural, the -- the way women gather, the way women talk, the way women, you know, lead. And when you're saying "normalize" these ideas, are you implying that you'd like to replace the patriarchy, I guess is what I'm asking?
[laughter]

KHAN: Replace the patriarchy.

STRONG: What does it mean to normalize? Who's -- who's the envisioned audience?

KHAN: My -- my envisioned audience is -- let's see. [pause] Let's see. Do I want to take down the patriarchy? Do -- [laughter] do -- in the -- my kneejerk reaction is [snapping fingers] "Yes. Which knee do you want?" [laughter] Colin Kaepernick, tell me, which knee

would you like? But -- you know, something that my contemporaries and I have been talking about recently is these kinds of, like, systems that are the world, and one of 'em is patriarchy, one of 'em is a kind of, like, structure around Whiteness and the kind of empiricism around it. I use that word right, "empiricism"?

STRONG: Sure.

KHAN: "Imperialism." Imperialism. Sorry. I'm the person who gets Mel Brooks and Mel Gibson confused constantly. So I think that -- I love men. That's the problem. Like, I'm not somebody who's, like, "Yeah, let's burn it down." But I -- I love men, and I -- I loved my fa-- my father was a -- you know, just passed away in 2014, and he gave me humor. He gave me insight. He told me that education's your only armor. It's not money. It's not fame. It is how you know what to do, how you can understand structure in any given space. And he -- you know, he instilled that in me, and no one else really did that work. So I don't think that taking down patriarchy is the right way to think it through. I think that -- [sighing] [pause] I think that there's a kind of pessimism around the way the world has created policies and laws. And it's really hard to move forward because those laws are so tightly wound in the senses of a specific kind of person making those laws work for their people or their kind of gender. And you can't undo that. You can't undo that work. I don't think it's possible.

So how do you manage that trauma? So I think that that's what I do is, like, I -- I try to figure out how I can manage that trauma. Because I'm not the -- I'm not an advocate for burning things down. But I am an advocate for choosing the right people to teach in my classrooms, meaning, like, teaching -- I don't have a problem spending the whole semester just teaching artists that are women or women of color. Because I've -- was brought up only learning about white cis male artists -- or politicians or whatnot. So that's the way that I can redirect and manage my trauma in a imperial, patriarchal society. So if everyone does that work, collectively, I think that just the sense that we're all defecting at the same time burns it down without fire.

STRONG: Got it.

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: So to normalize something is kind of like a mass defecting from...

KHAN: Mm-hmm.

STRONG: Got it. Thank you for explaining. [laughter] One thing, I'm just going to turn this like that so that we don't get as many pops in the audio. And then you can just keep talking --

KHAN: Okay.

STRONG: -- straight at me. I love that we got philosophical right away. [laughter] We may go back.

KHAN: Okay.

STRONG: But I'd also like to get really specific.

KHAN: Okay.

STRONG: So tell me about you as a kid in Denton. What was play like? What was friendship like? What was family like? Anything that comes to mind.

KHAN: Oh my God, that's such a -- ahh! That's such a hard question. My brother Aleem [phonetic] was my best friend. And, like, Khaleel [phonetic] and Matheen [phonetic], my older brother and sister, they were sort of, like, my parents. And they were the cool ones. Like, they were the cool parents. And then my parents were, like, my grandparents. So that's kind of the, like, weird structure that I grew up with. And it was very insular. We didn't really have a whole lot of friends outside of it. We didn't really journey outside of our little plot of land that we had -- that we rented. [laughter]

It was a really -- it was a really small town in Denton, but it had big ideas. There was a university there. And everyone in my family was educated at that university.

My mom never went to school. She didn't really even go to high school. But she was a fashion designer in India, and people from all over still ask about her and, like, have patterns that they haven't figured out. And so when I took her to India in 2016 after the death of my father, people were, like, lining up around the door to meet her because

they hadn't seen her in 23 years, and they were like, "I still haven't figured out this pattern." So she -- so -- so literacy and education also are, like, misunderstood and mis-valued and are also seen through the lens of imperial patriarchy, right? So, you know, I just needed to point that out. Because it's too simple to say that my mom didn't go to high school and didn't go to college. Because clearly that wasn't her plot in life. She had, like, a higher calling or something.

So then my -- my brother that's a little older than me was already a junior in college by the time he graduated high school. [laughter] So he went to UT and did his thing. But I -- for me -- I grew up in a small house close to the high schools and co-- and the college. And then when I went to school I just had to go a block down from where I lived -- oh, and I was born in the hospital a block from that. So I felt like it was an island. Like, I had, you know, my first car crash, block to the north; my first, you know, like, love, block to the left. You know, like, all of this stuff was, like, in an island. And I lived that way until around 25. I had spent some time in India with my family, but other than that it was really just that little block where everything happened. It was very much like Venice. [laughter] I hear that that happens in Venice.

And then I moved to Dallas to do an artist residency, and that was a really big deal for everyone. Because, like, an unwed young lady going away, far away -- like, a whole 45 minutes away on I-35 -- was, like, a huge, disruptive deal in the whole family. So I said, "Screw it; I'm doing it anyway, and this is the point where I try to live my life." So I did it, and then from there I moved to Austin, and from there I moved to New York. I couldn't just, like, be like, "Okay, I'm going to New York!" Even though that was my plan the whole time.

I didn't have a whole lot of friends. And part of that was fear. I think my family was very afraid of opening up to other families because they were undocumented. And there's this weird thing that it's not a black and white issue. It's like, there are, like, prejudices

inside of the inside. Like, there's othering in the othering. So we were South Asians. But the other South Asians in the community weren't very protective of us because a lot of the people in Denton who came there were very affluent, and they were Pakistani or, like, Arab or something like this. And we -- everything bad happened to us. And my father was able to stabilize his position in India, but it di-- it wasn't because he came from family. Like, his family was murdered in the war. His father was Afghani. Like, I didn't even know that until I needed to get blood work -- I needed to get documents for blood work right before his death. So there are these ways in which our family came from a rich history, but we didn't have -- we didn't have earthly ownership. [laughter] And -- and we were punished for that, in a way, for being -- for being a Muslim family that stayed in India. We were punished for it. We were punished for wanting more. To - - to expand the native school in India, you need a PhD, but we were sort of, like, punished for having that desire.

And so I grew up thinking about exile and kinship a lot. And I've sort of dedicated my practice to those nuances. Because it's not even -- like, in America it's, like, "Well, a White person did this." And then, "Well, a White person's doing this to the Black person." But it's really not true. It's like within these communities there's interwar within the communities, and that's the problem. Because you have, like, within -- you know, just within my own purview, you have, like, light-skinned North Indians, and then you have Indians from South India, whereas they don't see me as Indian 'cause I'm, like, partially Iranian and Afghani and East African, and I have dark skin. And so she's, like, the bad one, because her skin marks her bad. You know, these are things that are embedded within the culture. And it -- it's such a deep wound. So if you have that within your own psyche, then how can you even, like, say that it -- this is, like, an institutionally racist space? Because, like, you have to start -- you have to decolonize your own self first before you can even battle that, like, larger institutional structure. And I think that's why I was trying so hard to answer that question about patriarchy. It's, like, not that simple.

But yeah, these are things I was thinking about when I was a kid. I just didn't know how -- how, like, easy it was just to read academic [laughter] texts. I mean, I was just, like, pulling from, like, myths and thinking about my own experience and -- and then I got into sociology in undergrad. So I was painting and kind of going through the motions to be an artist, and then I realized, like, I wasn't just an artist. Or -- or, like, an artist isn't just, you know? Dot dot dot. So I studied -- started to study sociology and started to -- to -- to learn, like, German theory and French thought and, like, all these kind of European schools of philosophy and gender studies, and just really starting to get into the canon of what it means to be from the West. And all I could really see was Eastern philosophy in all of it. So I kind of was, like, because I was doing this invisible work of, like, reading the Qur'an and sitting with my family and, like, painstakingly having to, like, read the translation when all the other kids are at recess, [laughter] like, all that work really helped. Because at the time of when I finally was like, "Okay, I'm ready to learn Western philosophy," I could see me in it. And that's the way I was able to create a defect, like a defective sort of virus to where I could, like, make it my own. And that's kind of where we're at right now with our current politics. It's about people, mostly women, like, standing up for their rights and, like, saying what they need to say. Like Serena Williams, for example, and...

So, yeah. Like, all the, like, work I did when I was a chi-- I didn't really have a childhood. I was -- I worked a lot. I was, like, helping my mom sew. Or I was, like, you know, being the person who cleaned the house and, like, helped make the food, mowed the lawn, did the laundry. I di-- I was just sort of, like, a part of a -- a big working system. So I didn't have...

STRONG: Translated.

KHAN: Yeah. And I -- I didn't have friends. People thought I was weird. People thought I smelt weird. It was -- it was a lot of bullying. And I was bullied primarily by girls. And teachers, who were usually female. So I had to overcome that in and of itself, of being

othered by my own kind. And then being othered by people who looked the opposite of me, or, like, looked American. And -- like, even though I probably looked just -- just American and fine, but I didn't -- I wasn't given a space of inclusion. And so I kind of, like, was a unicorn in all the spaces.

And I still feel that way. I still feel like there isn't a place for me. There's, like, no there there. But I feel, like, truly independent and like I have a voice, so -- I realize, like, I am there, there. And, like, people find homes in the spaces I make. So. That's kind of what I'm trying to think of now is, like, "Oh, I'm -- I'm the space." [laughter] So people find -- find a space here. And that's why I think the work I do's so important. But I have to think that the work I do's important; otherwise [laughter] it's, like -- it makes no sense! [laughter]

STRONG: Can you give me an example of making a home for people?

KHAN: Mm-hmm. I -- I'm really dedicated to senses of pedagogy, and teaching's a really cool and important thing in my life, and I probably got that from my father. And in a way my mom. She taught me -- she's the reason I'm an artist. She taught me how to sew and, like, stitch and embroider.

But one of the first homes I created inadvertently was -- one of the first gigs I got teaching was at the New School, in -- in the Parsons Department. And I was asked to teach a design class. And the group that came through, I asked them to rethink architecture. So I was like, "Okay, so think about architecture and the way in which spaces are created and how we can make them more tenable for us." And keep in mind that architecture essentially was -- is a -- is a man-made structure. Like, White, cis male structure. [laughter] Modern -- modern structure. And so for that structure they were trying to create spaces for themselves, like, safe spaces. But the crazy thing about that semester was we were building towards having a female president. No one thought that that -- that was going to be, like -- I mean, I -- I remember in one of the debates, like, Hillary Clinton almost checked out. And her, like -- her eyes rolled back in the --

her head, because everyone thought that she was going to be given this presidency. So then one of the hard things about that semester was coming back the next day after -- what was it, November 8th -- and everyone was devastated. And no one showed up to the class. Not -- my -- in -- not in my class, but no one showed up to school, but everyone came to my class. Like, people who weren't in my class came to my class. And it -- that was, like, that moment where I was like, "Oh! I get it. It's not about me. I'm not the one who's supposed to be able to feel space and safety. I'm -- I'm given the tools to make that space." And that's when I got it. So it was, like -- it's we-- it's a weird -- it's a weird thing to, like, make work, but then you have to give yourself the honor to understand when something's working. And that -- and that's you that did that. So that's, like, an example.

STRONG: That's a beautiful story. Thank you.

KHAN: Yeah. It was crazy, to, like, have to come back from that and, like, these -- all of the kids in my class were primarily people of color. And there were, like, three or four sections of that class. And we would do these intervisits, and there were rarely people of color in those other classes. So there's, like, weird things happening that I don't even want to admit to. Like, I don't know what the circumstances were of that. But - like, I just realize, like, "Oh, I'm here for a reason, and these things, A, B, and C, are happening for a reason." And then I have to be like, "Wait. That's too weirdly juju Islamic style to think that way." So I have to pull myself back to my secular self. [laughter]

STRONG: It's good that you have a backup [laughter] just in case.

KHAN: I know. Exactly. I'm so lucky.

STRONG: Just in case the secular doesn't work out for you.

KHAN: I know. Like, [laughter] I actually -- I'm so lucky. It's so funny, Liz. Like, my sister just moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, and it's, like, the nobody-wants-to-live-there place, right? And I -- she's -- she hurt her body, and she's, like, getting into a salt pool and, like, trying to reconstruct her muscles and, you know, doing -- doing a lot of work, right? So she was like, "Let's go to the mosque." So it was, like, a Friday. She's like, "Let's go to the mosque." I was like, "Okay. Let's go to the mosque." So I'm sitting there, and this,

like, kid, who's, like, half the age of me is the imam, but that's okay. And at first I was, like, rolling my eyes. But then he just, like, started saying these things, and I was, like, in tears. And one of the things that he said was, "We should be really lucky for all the things that we have and the fact that we're here and there's air conditioning and, you know, there'll be food afterwards. But, like, also, like, even if you only believe in Islam, like, 1%, that's, like, a backup plan. 'Cause a lot of people in this particular country aren't raised with any kind of ideology or structure." And there's always this kind of, like, sense of bottoming out when things don't work out, right? And I think, like, a lot of times when we think about, like, the Tea Party or, like, people who, like, have no other option but then to pick up a gun and shoot kids at a school, like, perhaps maybe one of the things that bottomed out was the country and education system and, like, not giving these people fundamental tools to, like, have a core and be independent and believe and trust in themselves. So they were like -- so -- so the imam was like, "Oh yeah, so at least we have this as a backup plan if all those other things fail in our secular life." And I was like, "Hell, yeah!" [laughter] You know?

STRONG: Yeah.

KHAN: So it's, like -- it's so - really important for me to find my privileges. And actually be, like, really happy that I have them. 'Cause I think we live in a society right now where, like, people are meant to feel guilty for their privileges. And that's, like, not helping anyone, right? So I, like, purposefully notice my privileges and, like, share them or just be happy with them and, like, try not to ever feel guilty about the things that -- that can help people, if you share it.

STRONG: Yeah. I mean, something you said was very meaningful to me, and so I just kind of want to say it back, this idea that having this -- this fallback, as you put it, this -- this other way of seeing than what is given to you, which is, you know, the White, patriarchal society...

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: People who have only, you know, White supremacy and patriarchy have no imagination for anything else, and they can't get out, and it breaks.

KHAN: Right.

STRONG: Whereas people who grow up outside of that, you know, for better or worse, in terms of quality of life, have another imagination, have another place their mind can go, another structure of working through issues. Anyway, I just wanted to underscore that, 'cause I think that's really beautiful.

KHAN: Yeah. It's -- I think it's important that you said that, because my identity in the United States is being Brown, with a capital *B*, [laughter] not being Black, with a capital *B*. But if I step onto the nation elsewhere, I am labeled Black. So these are, like, also kind of contemporary things that are sliding and getting out of hand in my mind. And so I have to sift through that and do the, like, intellectual labor for that kind of identity crisis in my head. But if I'm thinking about the American experience of being Black and Brown, when you hear those words you're primarily thinking about what it means to be Latin or what it means to be Black, like Black from slave descent or migrating over from Africa after that. So something that is interesting about the kind of, like, racial imaginary is it's often seen as amazing that Black and Brown people have this other state of euphoria or this other way of imagining, to help them through the hard times. But we have to remember that they weren't seen as people, and -- or we weren't seen as people -- and so therefore we were treated as property. And between you and I, because you co-- you come from, like, a femme lineage -- I'm assuming you're a woman. [laughter] I mean, I'm making a big assumption here --

STRONG: I am.

KHAN: -- because we never know.

STRONG: I love being a woman.

KHAN: So -- so the fact that you come from a femme heritage, somewhere in your psyche or your epigenetics you also know what it means to be owned. So it's those ways in which I try to unwind that kind of identity crisis, because it's not about the other racial or gender imaginaries that we are inherited. It's about, like, people who are White to -- to get out of that space of guilt or empathy and do their own work. Because that's what, like, Black -- people with Black slavery and the heritage of that have had to do. That's

what people that land was taken from them in Mexico have had to do. You know, that's what South Asians that were displaced because of political war or, like, because of refugees, that's -- that's the work that they've had to do.

That being said, like, one of the things that I think has, like, been such a privilege to be a part of was the Racial Imaginary Institute over the summer with Claudia Rankine. I was invited by Lumi Tan to do the exhibition part of it. And I was able to lower my ceiling -- this piece here and this chandelier was a part of this, like, lowered structure. So when you walk into the space you automatically understand your body in relation to architecture. And that was, like, a great way to set people up to go into the larger space and see the other artworks.

So there was a symposium. And there were many scholars invited, and it was just a -- like, an incredible experience. And it's all recorded and documented. And anyone from the public can go and, like, spend time and review that stuff. But there was this particular scholar who -- who reminded us that -- I think there were a few people in the audience that appeared to be White. 'Cause that's also -- that's like -- for me it's also hard. Like, I -- I will never assume you are who you are. Like, I'm waiting for you to tell me who you are. But there were a few people in the audience that, like, had a sense of, like, White aesthetic. And they were like, "Oh, what do we do, how do we go from here? We just feel, like, helpless." And that triggered this thing with -- with the scholars, where they were like, "Well, we've been -- we've just had a head start, 'cause we've had to, like, find a way around not being treated as human and being, like, you know, literally surgically worked on without anesthesia and, you know, we've had to endure. And so we've had to find a way out. Otherwise there's no other way than to -- than suicide."

So instead of feeling guilty and feeling empathy, and -- and instead of finding your space in Black and Brownness, you should find your space in White supremacy. 'Cause

that's the only way you can defect that. Because -- because in a time where in -- even the most left, left, left White person in America is still going to be protected by White supremacy. They'll still be able to sleep at night. But if we swing the way we're swinging with [Narendra] Modi and [Donald] Trump and all the other kinds of right-wing factions that are happening, if we continue that road, which very well could be the road we're taking, the only people at the end of the day that will be hurt are the ones that are seen as privileged because we have another way and another imagination. But that's a symbolic gesture, just to, like, keep the spirits up. It's not a structural policy or law. It's just a spiritual thing.

So the way -- the way that I believe is that -- it's hard to say, because I have -- like, the loves of my life, they're all, like, from all different walks of life. They're all religions, all genders. But the way in which White supremacy can be taken down is not by Black and Brown people; it's by White people itself. And that's the way they need to do that work. Like, they need to start identifying with White supremacy and the ways in which they're similar. And then they can break it down from there.

STRONG: Thank you for exploring that with me as well.

KHAN: It's a -- it's a radical gesture, but it's the way in which I see myself in Islam, because women aren't getting educated; women are being treated badly; women are getting beaten in -- in marriages. And I can't expect someone outside of that religion or cultural purview to do the work for me, right? Like, I have to do that work inside that space. So it's the same thing with, like, White supremacy. Like, everyone can't work to break that down. We can all do our job, but then the -- [laughter] really the only person who can do that work is, like, White people themselves.

STRONG: Another mode of defecting, in a way.

KHAN: Defecting, yeah.

STRONG: Yeah. To jump back in time again --

KHAN: Mm-hmm.

STRONG: -- take us to your undergraduate experience. What was -- what was that like?

[laughter] Didn't you start as, like, computer science or something?

KHAN: Yeah. I -- I -- I started with computer science. That's what my father told me I should do. He was, like, "Well, you're artistic, so do computer science." [laughter] I was like, "Okay, um, I think I have a grasp on geometry, but I don't know what calculus is." [laughter] So I tried to do that for a year and a half, failed miserably. At the end of the day to get my GPA up I, like, gave every ounce of my energy to the work, and I ended up pulling my GPA up. But I just, like -- I just knew it wasn't -- I don't know if it's that I'm lazy or, like, [laughter] I -- I just, like -- that kind of work for me wasn't where I felt like -- I just didn't see it. I see -- I'm so very grateful that I had enough sense to just, like, push through. Because some of the ideas I learned from computer science and coding and whatnot has come to help me. Or has, like, allowed me to understand other work better. But I -- it wasn't for me. And it was very -- it was a very man's world. And I couldn't handle it. Like, there was so much I had to -- to manage and handle, like, that -- that too would have ruined me.

So I actually dropped out of school. Didn't tell my family. And lots of kind of, like, really hard things happened. And I did a lot of soul-searching. And I tried to figure out who I was. And then I got back into school and started just -- I started from the basic foundation classes, just drawing for eight hours a day, Painting 101, watercolor. And then I started to understand that, like, you can't really learn how to be an artist. And so I was -- I was going to Dallas a lot and looking at the galleries there and tried to be in a few exhibitions to see what that was like.

And I also started to work at the galleries at school. There was this woman, Diana Block, and this other woman, Sara-Jayne Parsons, who were the curators of that section. And they were just incredible people bringing people from all over the world to Denton, Texas. And so I met people like Amy Sillman and Wenda Gu and, like, Daniel Bozhkov -- they're people who are huge international players in the

contemporary art scene. They still maintain that. I think Amy Sillman's, like, one of the most famous American female painters in the world. And also, oddly enough, Regine Basha, who's the director of the artist in residence here, at Pioneer Works. She met me when I was 20 years old, in undergraduate school. And she came in to be the juror of this thing called the Voertman's Prize. [laughter] And she saw these, like, little paintings I was doing, and she was like, "These are really cool narrative paintings. These are the ways in which I'm, like, struggling with understanding. Tell me more." And that, like, critique really helped me try to, like, work past that. But, you know, she was somebody who just sort of, like, kept coming up every couple years in my life. And she also worked a lot with Daniel Bozhkov and was one of the reasons why they were in Texas.

So yeah, it just, like -- it's so funny how these -- these kinds of, like, small ways in which you're trying to give agency to your life end up becoming, like, these big things later on. You just never know. So, like, being here is -- is something that a lot of people want and a lot of people deserve, but out of those people I'm here. And, like, it's oddly -- it's so interesting that -- that this person from when I was an undergrad is here with me.

And the other day our first open -- open Sunday -- there's a second Sunday opening every da-- every month here at Pioneer Works. And so during that opening Regine was like, "I remember you and I back in that day. And I remember how the art world was, like, there was one person that represented everything." And she was, like, "It was hard for me, and I felt threatened -- a lot. And I can see that now." She was like, "You were the Muslim. I was the Iraqi. You know, that person was --" -- and Cauleen Smith was the only Black artist anywhere. Like, you'd go to an opening, and it's just, like, one pixel, you know? One pixel of me, one pixel of her, one pixel of Regine.

So those are the ways in which, like, undergraduate school consumed me. It was, like, psychological. So in terms of, like, aesthetics, I studied painting. I studied with Vernon

Fisher and Ed Blackburn. And Vernon Fisher has a kind of international platform. He taught me about film. And he was a painter. So because -- he just said he was a painter. Like, I think he was a psychologist and a film theorist. And, if anything, he was a writer. [laughter] So that's -- those are the conditions in which I learned painting. So I was always set up for failure. [laughter] So I just sort of, like, did the best I could with painting. And I think, like, it was a really good place for me, because I don't think, like, in painting it doesn't speak back to you, even though there's all this theory around, like, the gaze and how it speaks back and all this stuff. But that's all, like, psychological. Like, I'm literally speaking to you under the blanket. Like, I'll get a mic under the blanket, and I'll be talking to you. With a painting it's really, like -- it's a space where you can kind of put a lot of subtext and subliminal, like, very subjective things into it. And it's your right to -- to be opaque about that. And that was a place for me to get through all of this stuff.

And I feel like I have more agency now and a little bit more support in the world, so I'm able to enter my body, slowly, into my practice. So the past two years I've been doing performance. And the paintings themselves were always built up with acrylics. So I -- and I worked with paper. So I always felt like I was doing something sculptural. And it goes back to me thinking, like, the religion that I was brought up in gave me so much of my, like, logic of intellect and -- and beauty and sex and whatever. So I think of my work as sculpture and performance. Though in undergrad I was exposed heavily to painting, and it's in there someplace. [laughter]

STRONG: I have to ask, how did you hide this major transition from your family, and why?

KHAN: Oh. They're such traditional South Asians, and they just lost -- they lost it. They lost all of it through war. And they were -- they were, like, basically a political refugee in the United States. But South Asians are -- South Asians are put under duress and the worst conditions you could live in the world, but somehow when a South Asian comes to this country they're seen as, like, "The immigrants that are trying to take our jobs!" Or, like, the kind of, like, upward mobility person who's trying to elbow us out. But I don't know

what that is. I -- I like to turn to race and criticism in that way because, like, I know that Syria or Iran or all these other spaces, there's so much duress and political conflict. But those people can pass as White. And South Asians can pass as Black in America. Or, like, some of them are lightly complected, but the thing is is, like, Bangladeshis and South Indians are considered Black in India. And Muslims are, like -- there's, like, a active genocidal support to get rid of Muslims in India. And it has been like that for a very long time. And I don't understand why, like, a Brown person isn't seen as a person who deserves the right to have political refugee status in this country.

So if my dad had had that status, our lives would be different. I would be able to afford being an artist. [laughter] Because maybe I would -- maybe my father wouldn't have had to, like, work illegally his whole life. And he worked the night shift cleaning bathrooms at a state school. So I -- I didn't really have a father growing up either, 'cause he was asleep when I was awake. And he was -- you know, he was a -- he was brilliant. So. That's a thing that I feel sore about. And I try not to feel -- I try not to let that bitterness -- there's, like, things that are triggers, and I can feel really bitter about them. So that's a lot of intellectual work too, to transform that bitterness into something positive. Especially in, like, elite spaces, like Pioneer Works or, you know, like, New School, or, like, the Queens Museum, or, like, these spaces where I'm supposed to be light, right? I'm supposed to be, like, radiant, affirmative person. But -- and I -- and I am those things, and I want to be those things. But sometimes I'm just, like, really upset. And I want to blame someone or blame something. And -- or point out the problem. [sighing] But I -- I -- I guess, like, that was a triggering kind of question, and I don't even remember what you asked.

STRONG: I asked how and why you hid the major transition of...

KHAN: I think it's, like -- I think it's because, like, they're South Asian, and they're very, like, conservative. And the culture in and of -- in and of itself was that way. And I didn't want to disappoint them, 'cause they've already gone through so much trauma and disappointment. I was like -- I wanted to be who I wanted to be, but they didn't

necessarily need to know that. And so on some level, like, performing -- I've been performing my whole life. And what they didn't know wasn't going to kill them. Because I wasn't doing anything to hurt anyone. And I'm certainly not hurting myself. It's just -- it was too much to handle having to overcome my own senses of alienation and exile on top of, like, being exiled by my family itself.

And I actually went through divorce recently, like, the past two years, and that wasn't a thing that I took lightly. I -- no one in my family has been divorced, so -- and then the fa-- and the fact that I'm a woman, it's just, like, such a painful, lonely experience. And I -- you know, in a time -- in that particular transition, in a time when I needed a lot of support, I didn't have support from anyone. And in fact -- not my family, but also, like, the jobs that I was doing -- like, I was at the New School at the time, and the structure of the design department was in such a way -- it was so obscure that I didn't even know who to turn to. And in fact I had, like, one of the worst semesters I'd ever had in my teaching career, and -- and it led to, like, so much misunderstanding and not -- I mean, I'm not there anymore. And I think it's, like, best to just sort of take hiatus at times with -- as an adjunct. Sometimes it's not about a paycheck; it's about, like, self-preservation and just, like, really trying to hustle in another way. So I actually don't have a teaching appointment this fall. So I'm having to kind of, like, beans and rice this day; who's going to pay for my meal that day, you know? [laughter] Like, having to do a little bit of that.

But -- do you understand, it's like, I can't really tell you the transition other than, like, it was just an immense amount of fear about disappointing my family, but also it's an immense amount of fear of, like, letting anyone know I was Muslim. Because I think, like, religion and spirituality and, like, the kind of, like, acknowledgment of ancestry and all of this thing is, like -- it's a thing now. But when I was in school, like, if you even had an inkling of interest in religion people would shut you out. And on top of that if you were Muslim it would be worse than that. Like, I had death threats. My family

would -- I would wake up and there'd be toilet paper wrapped around my mom's roses. Like, it's no-- it was-- I grew up in Texas. Like, this is -- like, people are talking about how terrible it is that Trump is president. But, like, when Trump became president I was, like, "Oh, I got this; I've been living this life," you know? So -- and -- and -- and like the way in which, like, American Muslims are executed and no one, like, even stands up in the street for them. So -- and women. It's -- it's about women being executed. But then also men. But, like, so -- so yeah, there's just, like, a lot of fear of, like, revealing what's in my heart and who I am.

So I try to just, like, find ways to obscure myself, and painting was doing that for me. And a lot of the work I'm doing now is very much on view, in fact, [laughter] the windows here. But I try to think about very concrete things, like the policies. So the Nike shoe for me is a very distinct kind of, like, lawyer-style practice, where I'm really thinking about policy, and there's, like, an absolutist kind of thing there. There's nothing poetic about it. Because, like, it is a company that is Islamophobic, and they understand that there are billions of Muslims with billions of dollars, and they will boycott. So individuals are very powerful. And so corporations have to be, like, reminded of that, year-by-year case. So this is a very important practice for me. The rugs are an important practice for me because it's my way of, like, understanding what meditation and spirituality can be in the future and what it is now. It's, like, redesigning -- it's redesigning the rug for the modern woman. [laughter]

And -- but then there is, like, performance that's more about obfuscating myself and my sense of sexuality and, like, who I am and, like, only allowing you to hear the texture of my voice instead of seeing my body. So I get under these acoustic blankets, and I do these performances. And that's more like painting for me. That's more like the space in which you see a veneer or you see, like, the reference of something, but you're not quite sure what to get. And you can see how I use these, like, see-through materials. That's a speaker material. So there's these kinds of, like, points of creating a body where I'm not

present. Or, like, filling a Minimalist structure, which Minimalism itself is about wiping culture from a space and creati-- creating an -- an -- a -- a kind of essential form. And so I'm -- I'm ta-- taking that trope back and filling -- literally filling -- my acoustic blanket with a Brown body inside it.

STRONG: With yours.

KHAN: [laughter] Yeah. With my --

STRONG: Your body --

KHAN: -- particular Brown body --

STRONG: -- specifically. [laughter]

KHAN: -- inside of it. But yeah.

STRONG: You brought up your marriage in passing. Can I ask you about it?

KHAN: Sure.

STRONG: How did you meet this person and become married to him?

KHAN: We met in Austin, Texas, and became good friends. And then we re-met in New York. And they were really interested in Islam. And it was, like, easy to just sort of, like, be around this person. And they were really a friend to me. And -- and then they were like, "Oh, I want to enter Islam." And I was like, "Oh, that's awesome." [laughter] And then the NYU mosque -- Khalid Latif, who's, like, this insanely awesome, cool imam who's, like, been on the *Colbert* [laughter] *Report* -- so, you know, he, like, sort of officiated, which is really just, like, doing the shahada. You can do it yourself. And it was easy. And then he was like, "Okay, I'm going to go see your parents now." And I was like, "Okay." So, like, [laughter] he goes -- he flies to Denton, Texas, and, like, tells my parents cold turkey, "Hey, this is me, and I want to marry your daughter." And then my dad, like, hugged him, apparently. And it was all good from there.

But then it was just really hard to be with that person. And it was hard to be -- it was har-- it was, like, the -- one of the first times where I realized, like, "Oh! I'm American, but I'm this other thing too." And, like, there's, like, these cultural scenarios in which I just -- I couldn't get over it. And so I started to feel further and further apart from that

person. And also, like, I really wanted to assert myself as a -- an -- an American artist. And I wanted to be out about being Muslim. And I didn't want someone else to, like, take that sense of agency from me. And there was so much stress about family and, like, making a family and, like, money and all this stuff. And I was like, "I've never had money. Like, literally. Like, no heritage of money. We went to s-- my dad went to school under a lamppost. Like, money isn't something I've had to strategize. So all I know is what I need to do in my heart. So I can't be with you and do this." But then all the while I would see him move strategically through space and get the things that he needed. So -- and then he expected me to be his equal. And that's when everything broke down. 'Cause I was like, "It's one thing to be a feminist as a -- as a man and be, like, 'I won't open the door for you, and everything's equal pay, and, like, I'm -- you're going to pay at the table.' But these things are, like -- it's actually -- for me, it's not right, because I'm always walking into the room and people're throwing coats at me. Like, people think I'm the hired help. When he walks into rooms people think he's a scholar of something, even if he's not. Like, he gets to be an Islamic scholar, but I don't? That's actually something that happened.

And so there are these ways in which it was, like, these, like, paper cuts, constant paper cuts. And it was, like, 10 years of paper cuts. And then I -- I don't know if it was out of envy; I'm human. I don't know if it was out of jealousy; I'm human. I don't know if it was just out of fatigue. But all I knew was, like, I needed to do me. And there was no space for him anymore. So I had to -- I had to divorce him. Or separate or something. Like, he's cool, but I didn't know how to reconcile those paper cuts.

STRONG: So you said that was a tough transition, and you said that a -- a key point of it was needing there to be a space that was you, or for you. Tell me about the journey to build that after the divorce.

KHAN: [sighing] Well, luckily in 2-- it was May 2016 when we sort of did it. And I was working towards an exhibition for this space, a nonprofit space, in the Lower East Side, called Participant Inc. And this was a -- a relationship I had been building with the

founder, Lia Gangitano, since graduate school. So I was very familiar with this space, and I think there was a lot of trust between the two of us. So I was just able to kind of, like, dream with her. And she kind of just said, “Do what you need to do. This is your space. Don’t worry about money. Don’t --” I mean, of course there’s always worry about money. She was just like, “Just do what you need to do in this space.” So I proceeded to think through what do I do to [sighing] give myself the voice now. So I thought, “Okay, I need to self-mythologize in order to be seen in this country.” So I kind of thought, “Oh, why don’t I just go out -- go on and say it: I’m Muslim. I’m Muslima.” So -- and then, you know, *Artforum* was like, “Hey, we want to give you free advertisement.” And Lia was like, “What should we call the title?” And I was like, “It’s, like, eight months before the opening. How do I know what the title is?” And I was like, “Okay, well, if I’m mythologizing myself and making myself legible in this country, then why don’t I just go ahead and have that be the title? And let the cards fall where they may.” So we went with it. And we called the show *iamuslima*.

So around that time there was everything in production. Like, the rugs were in production. The corners of my body for the *Braidrage* wall that I learned how to climb myself on, those were getting produced. The blankets were getting produced. So things were sort of in action. I was doing these prints. So -- so I was working on the prints. Like, everything...

STRONG: This beautiful black thing, you mean?

KHAN: Yeah, but there’s several prints. You’ll see them on my website. But everything was in production, and a-- I started to think about, “How am I going to look for the opening? I’m single, ready to mingle -- am I ready to mingle? [laughter] Like, I don’t know. Like, all I want to do is, like, be my best self. This is an important moment for me.” And so I was like, “Okay, well, I’ll just be vain. I know how to do that.” [laughter] So I wanted to design my own Nike shoe. Because up until that point, all of my students have always, like, ignored me in class because they were online trying to design their own shoe.

STRONG: [whispering] Oh my goodness.

KHAN: You know, I taught this photography class for Success Academy, and they all are given these computers, and they're all connected to Wi-Fi. And it's, like, so hard to get their attention, 'cause they're all obsessed with shoe culture. So you have to, like, basically build your curriculum around shoes. So at this point it was, like, retribution, like, "They're going to see my cool shoes." So I tried to make the Nike shoe. And I couldn't put the word "Muslim" or "Islam" on the shoe. And that's what kind of roped me into this whole, like, world of policy and law making and, like, corporations being anti-Islamic and -- that's how I got to the shoe as the object of the exhibition.

STRONG: So the title, *iamuslima*, came before the shoe was on your radar?

KHAN: Well, the shoe was supposed to be the banner of the show. Do you know what I'm saying?

STRONG: Mm-hmm.

KHAN: The shoe was supposed to be, like, the poster of the title of the show. It wasn't supposed to be the thesis of the show. 'Cause we were -- we all thought that Hillary Clinton was going to be president. [laughter] 'Cause I was just trying to self-mythologize my boss-ass ladyness. And, like, I know that, like, in this country I've experienced forms of racism and, like, anti-Islamophobia, but it's always, like, right under the thick skin. And there's always this sense of paranoia. Like, "Is this happening? Is this not happening?" But then when I found that to happen with the Nik-- and before that, like, Lowe's, Whole Foods... Like, lots of corporations are anti-Islamic. Because there's so much money invested through big entity money that is very adamantly against people from specific nationalities having agency. It's not really about religion. It's about Iran not having agency. It's about making sure that Saudi Arabia's cordoned off to a specific place. It's about Pakistan being, like, contained. It's about, like, Syria being sort of, like, a boundary of space in which it can have just this inkling of agency. It's like -- I can go on and on and on. Like, there are these different shades [laughter] of Blackness, right?

But at the end of the day I was able to make lemonade. I -- I was able to make this, like, amazing project. And there was, like, a second attempt to show the shoes, and when I tried to make new shoes, it was when I realized, like, okay. So the lawsuit is over. Now there's this hijabi wick [phonetic]. Okay, now there's also this new way in which you can design the shoe, which is you can only use three letters. The first, second, and last name. So this is the way in which, like, they took that away from everyone in order to keep the fascist and people of -- that are anti-fascist. They -- they wanted all of the money. [laughter] And, you know, like, we're in this space now with Colin Kaepernick and these kinds of, like, people whom we all hold a deep amount of respect for because of the kinds of sacrifices that they're making. But, you know, Nike's now open about their payroll, and people are, like, "Wow, Nike's this amazing company," but it's not -- it's not about that corporation. It's about the people that are sort of policing them, right? So there's a history of Is-- Muslims boycotting Nike. There's a history. And, you know, there's a history of Nike abusing people -- Asians, Africans. You can never say that this corporation is great. What you can say is individuals are great. And that when they come together all the little component parts make a big force that no one can deny. And that is what -- and that is what makes corporations great, because they're able to make a bunch of money and, like, there's some movement forward. [sighing]

But yeah. So then there're just, like, different ways in which my practice is -- is so expansive, and it allows me to constantly try to figure out who I am. And it allows me to have that singularity and that space to, like, claim who I am post-, like, being someone else's. [laughter] Because now I'm, like, this single person in this world and trying to find sense of what it means to be without a child, without a partner. And sometimes it scares me, 'cause, like, I don't want to be, like, an old lady where my cat eats my face. [laughter] But -- but right now, right here, I'm just really trying hard to, like, get my practice to that next level where I can be seen. And I really want to be seen on a pop cultural kind of, like, platform so I can reach more people, instead of it just being about, like, students and art stuff. So I'm trying to make the steps to do that. But

idiosyncratically. Like, I would love, like, the *Times* to just be like, “Do a profile.” Or, like, *Vogue* to be like, “You’re so vogue. Let’s do *Vogue*.” And I’ll be like, “Okay, strike a pose.” [laughter] But you can’t really, like, strate-- I can’t really strategize that stuff. Because I can’t pay a PR person, nor do I want to pay a PR person.

So -- yeah. Like, the next steps in my practice I’m thinking about making, like, a huge floor rug, and -- and I’ve been working on some songs that I’m hoping to record here at Pioneer Works. And I want to, like, get the lyrics sewn onto a series of Nike shoes and, like, create a whole wall of the shoes that create the sentences. And I want to work on a monograph of *iamuslima*. So I had been sort of doing that with a publisher, and things didn’t work out. So I’m just going to kind of move forward on designing the pages in my free time and then at least having a sort of structure, and then, like, maybe moving forward with, like, finding the right publisher to do that. But I think it would be an incredible resource for a student or a curator or anyone to just be able to pick up this book called *iamuslima* and then understand the, like, very specific soup of politics that happened within this transition from Obama to Trump.

STRONG: I have to ask you about Cornell too, because you told me that’s where you were radicalized, in a way.

KHAN: Mmm. [laughter]

STRONG: And you had two very important mentors [laughter] there that we need to talk about.

KHAN: Yeah. [laughter]

STRONG: So tell me all about that.

KHAN: I was an -- I was an artist, and, you know, like, doing paintings. And I was in the city, and I had just met my partner. And things were pretty good. But then at some point I realized, like, “Oh, I’m not given the space to do this art thing 100 percent in a way that I feel like I know what’s happening in my practice.” And painting started bottoming out for me. Like, I wanted to be more forceful with my voice, but I didn’t know how to do it. And during my day job I was working as an -- a curatorial assistant and gallery

manager for BRIC Arts Media, which is now this, like, awesome, you know, nonprofit space in Brooklyn. And I realized, like, "I think I need to go back to school." [laughter] So, like, in between web pages I was, like, filling out my application. And then when I heard somebody walk by, I'd, like, switch back to, like, my work page. And, you know, I was doing my work, and got into Cornell.

And when I got to Cornell it was 2010. I got to Cornell. And I -- it was, like, literally the first time where I walked into an institution and there was, like, a Brown person who was, like, the boss. I was like, "What is happening?" 'Cause, like, Iftikhar Dadi was the chair of our department. And he was a art historian, but also an artist. And he's also Muslim. So that was, like, a mindfuck for me. I was like, "What is happening in this world, and, like, how myopic is my world that I didn't know this existed?" Right? So I was able to sort of get pushed, or be pushed, by Iftikhar in terms of the meat of my work. "Go further" -- you know, these are, like, often things that was -- that were being said in my crits. "What does it mean? Go further. Be more legible." [laughter]

So I realized that being an MFA student or an art student at -- in graduate school at an Ivy League school seemed like -- I got into that place again where I was like, "I can't really be trained how to make art. And I think, like, I really want to just learn the world here."

So I kind of bounced and started in the government/German studies department. That led -- that led me to the Africana studies department. So in the Africana studies department I knew that Salah Hassan was there. Like, that was, like - Cornell's on the map because of Salah Hassan, and, actually, Iftikhar Dadi was one of his students. So I wanted him to be on my committee. And he was in sabbatical, and he was, like, teaching one class. And I just sort of, like, got in where I could with this person. And it was with this person I started to understand and radicalize. There would be these small classrooms where he would literally, like, put his hand on my head and be like, "How

are you going to be radical? Baseera, like, Fanon was 33 when he died. What are you going to do?" [laughter] You know, he was like -- it was, like, really intense. [laughter]

So, you know, I -- I studied primarily the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and started to understand the politics of the island and how, like, South Asians were brought there in hulls of ships and incorporated in these nasty ways in this nasty kind of culture of slavery and labor abuse. And it was -- it was on from there. I mean, I -- I studied the hell out of Fanon. I read Saussure [phonetic - 01:23:21]. I was obsessed with Glissant. Glissant was, like, someone I was able to be in the presence of before they passed away. They passed away in 2011. I finished school in '12. I was able to be in their presence. I wish I had worked harder on speaking French when I was in school. [laughter]

And -- yeah. I mean, I worked with other people who were really incredible -- Diane Rubinstein helped me understand, like, kind of, like, the psychology of photography and the kind of, like, history of photography as a kind of -- like, a legal tool that showed you what is honorable and what is criminal. And that was a real defense mechanism for me. Because I make images. And so a lot of the, like, critical theory I use now is through kind of, like, the theory of photography. Currently, like, Ariella Azoulay is somebody, like, I look at a lot, because she does these really cool commentaries on, like, civility and how the -- the camera and the technology has come to a point where it doesn't even exist, and we feel that our image is taken already.

So yeah, I -- I was very much radicalized. It was also a period of time when Occupy Wall Street was at a head. And quickly thereafter the Arab Spring. And it was, like, a -- it was a shift, in a sense, of who we are and -- you know, that kind of -- that kind of shifting was happening right before graduate school with Obama. And I was in school and doing my work during Occupy, trying to understand why we are where we are. And then when Trump became president, I was able to use that force to collaborate and

work and create working groups, primarily for people who felt like they couldn't go out and demonstrate because if they were to be put in jail they would be deported. So because I come from an immigrant family being worried that my parents would get deported, I was able to, like, have that kind of space to create, like, interior working groups that were private, where people would come in and air their grievances in that way, while other people were out on the street doing the important work of demonstrating in public. And I feel like it was that kind of work that I did and the stuff that I saw and my upbringing that was a-- I was able to be in that position.

STRONG: Can you say more about that experience? How did you get involved in making these spaces and...

KHAN: Oh, I just would -- it was all through Instagram. And just, like, mentioning -- creating a hashtag. So it was just all through hashtags. So calling it #whatnext and then just proliferating that, and then people would come to visit. And I think it was, like, a perfect storm, because the, like, *iamuslima* show was coming up. And there were a lot of people willing to give me and donate space to me. And then the Whitney Museum itself made space for artists to tell the institution what they wanted.

And so there was this thing called J20, and I was invited to speak there. I think that those talks are online. So it really sort of, like, radicalized everyone. And also gave me space to speak. And people were able to access that. I think that most important thing was people were able to access what I had to say. And also I was the only one who was - well, that's not true. There're so many people. But, like, I was easily able to say what needed to be said without a flinch because -- I mean, I grew up in Texas. I know what it is to feel racist gestures. I know what it feels to be muted. I was the only person of color that had ever gone to Cornell University. Like, it -- it's, like, insane the kinds of, like, nuanced kind of experiences that you have that you don't really understand them while you're in them. And then when there's enough time that's passed, you're like, "Oh my God. Yeah." So I -- I think that people were taken by -- I can assume that people were taken by the ease of me being asked to do something, and in 24 hours I was able to

write the mo-- like, very poignant things. Because I just -- it's been inside me. And they had been written already, in my head.

STRONG: So you began teaching at Cornell as well, which is another way you said that you made these spaces for people or these homes for people. And --

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: -- something that's very important to your work. So take me through learning that you were a teacher.

KHAN: Oh. Well, Cornell was a place where you could be an MFA student, but they gave you an opportunity to be a TA. So they gave you a stipend. So I took that opportunity. Didn't know what to think of it at first. And then I was able to work my first semester with Jeffrey Gibson, [laughter] who's a really incredible artist and cultural thinker. He's a Native-born, first-generation artist. And their work is about, like, giving voice back to the subaltern or the ones that aren't with us any longer, in terms of, like, first-generation peoples in America. And -- and so he sort of comes to campus and is like, "Okay. What are we going to do? How are we going to structure this class?" And so we would just have these lunches and, like, these, like, really long studio visits and just, like -- they -- they -- they often became about showing me a safe place. And I think that's how it started, really, for me, is that they were so generous with their time, and they were so intrigued and interested in who I am, that just in that, like, time that they gave me, it gave me this sense of confidence in this space that I'd never experienced before.

So, you know, we went through this class together. We structured the class as, like, learning certain kinds of theories and artists that were working within those theories. And then the latter half of the class was about creating your own project and then doing this little exhibition at the end. So, for example, like, one week would be about beauty. One week would be about capitalism. One week would be about bioneels [phonetic]. One week would be...you know, so there's a way in which you can show what artists are doing what in those categories, and what texts make the most sense.

So that was sort of the first semester. And we were sitting at a table at -- seminar-style. It was, like, freshman students and then Jeffrey and I. And it was -- it was a turning point -- it was a milestone for me. I -- I -- there -- there's -- there are -- there is knowledge in your body that you'll never know you have until it's triggered. And it was in those moments where I was able to, like, vacillate through so many different spaces. And I think even Jeffrey was, like, "Who are you, girl?" [laughter] Like -- so I -- I bloomed from there intellectually. And knew that teaching was a space where I could be who I am, make safe space for myself, for the others, and continue my art practice. Yeah.

STRONG: Okay, so walk me through your trajectory as a teacher. Where -- where did you teach next, and how did your styles of teaching change, and how did your teaching inform who you are in your work?

KHAN: After Cornell I started working at Abrons Art Center. They have an experimental teaching department. So I would, like, go to Ocean Ridge and teach human geography to graduating high school students. Or I would, like -- you know, I got -- I started teaching at Success Academy, and I would teach, like, photo -- basic photography.

The thing about my strategy of teaching is I spend, like, the first week or so understanding who you are and where you come from. Because, like, you can come in with a sort of, like, basic plan of what you're going to teach. But you can't really teach someone something that has this other way of seeing. Because that was my problem. Like, I shut down when I was taking art history classes. I shut down when I was taking history courses. Because actually, like, in my time of -- of school, people got history wrong. Like, there was none of this, like, reproductive taking back history going on when I was growing up. It was, like, all false. And I knew a different -- a different truth. So I shut down. I did badly in school. And then in art history, like, I didn't care who Richard Serra was. How did it affect me? Like, all I saw was Richard Serra was taking ideas from Islamic Minimalism. That's all I saw. And when I would try to say something about it people would tell me that I was misguided and that I needed to

read. So I was -- I was disciplined in those situations. So I -- through my experience I want to be able to at least spend a few days kind of absorbing people's desires and where they come from. And then I'll, like, be able to add in some sort of sense of space for them. So that is a -- that is a teaching strategy. And it's really subjective. I can't really put my thumb on it.

The other kinds of strategies are not thinking about teaching as the alternative history but thinking about it as a primary history. So instead of going into a room and teaching Joan Jonas as a performance artist who also makes sculpture, I will teach them about Senga Nengudi, who was a Black performance artist and person who made sculpture. But they just were Black. And they didn't get the voice that Joan Jonas has. They tried to make it out here in New York, and I don't know why they didn't stay. But then they ended up making their life in Colorado Springs. We don't -- we don't know. Some of it's paranoia. Some of it's historical racism. We don't know.

And so these are the ways in which -- they're really the only strategy I have. Most of it is just learning from the students and making sure I do the homework where I don't know enough. [laughter] 'Cause, I mean, like, I'm a -- I'm -- I'm hopefully crossing my fingers, 'cause I haven't gotten the contract yet, but I'm hoping to go to Virginia for 15 weeks to teach at VCU, and I'll teach two sculpture classes. And, you know, like, I know it's in me. I know that's there's, like, sculpture -- I know that there's sculpture. But -- and I know how to teach it. But, like, if I'm going to have to do, like, a wax cast, then I'll have to, like, spend a day or two on remembering how to do that before I go in. But then also I will be open about that. I will say, "You know what? I haven't done this since my undergrad. And I did a few tests. So if any of you have this skill, you will be my TA." You know, I -- I'm like really -- I have pride, but I, like -- I don't really have anything to lose. So if somebody else wants to do my job for me, then, like, let's -- let's do that, [laughter] you know?

STRONG: Yeah.

KHAN: Do you mind if --

STRONG: Do you need to pause? Yeah, of course.

KHAN: Yeah.

(break in audio)

STRONG: Okay. So, since we need to wrap up, let's talk a little bit about Skowhegan School of Design and Painting. First I'd love to get the story of your deciding to apply --

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: -- to that.

KHAN: Oh, okay. Okay. It's the Skowhegan Sculpture and Painting.

STRONG: Sculpture and Painting.

KHAN: Yeah. Design is further from the truth. [laughter] Okay. So it was -- right out of graduate school in 2012. I was kind of, like, going over to Participant and, like, kind of seeing if I could help do research or think through the curatorial aspects of helping with some of the upcoming shows there. Like, Vaginal Davis was doing a performance work there. Greer Lankton was coming up. There were just like these -- these projects, these big museum-style projects coming up, and Lia needed help. So, you know, I was kind of there. And I was also working on a waffle truck [laughter] for this -- this up-and-coming Belgian waffle company, food truck company. And -- and the other thing I was doing was working at a design firm that was sort of one of the teachers from Cornell's friend, and so she hooked me up with that, and I just kind of went there and did an initial interview and started working at that creative agency.

So I was doing these things. And around 2013 I just -- [sighing] I was just kind of, like, done with making art. I was done with -- I was done. Like, I was thinking, "Okay, why don't I just put myself through design school, and I can get that kind of creative thing through doing this kind of work." And so I started taking classes at 3rd Ward, and then 3rd Ward closed down. And my money closed down with it. I never got that money back. 3rd Ward, if you're hearing this, [laughter] give me my money back. So I was just like, "What is going on with me?" Like, "I can't get it right! I can't get it straight!" Like, I

was having a mental breakdown. And I was just sort of, like -- a friend of mine was applying to Skowhegan. They were like, "Just apply. It's no big deal." And I was like, "Okay, I'll just apply with the, like, 27th hour of the day." So I was getting up in the morning to go to the commissary to pack the truck up to drive it into the city and park it and then start serving waffles. And this kind of work starts at 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m. And, you know, on the way through the subway I was trying to fill out the application on my iPhone. So I was, like, editing the photos and writing everything in my phone, and then I sent it. And I got in. And I just thought it was hilarious that I got in. I was like, "Someone was sleeping at the wheel when they got me in." [laughter]

So I get in, and it was such a transformative experience. It felt like family. It felt like -- it felt like family work, you know, like, getting a truck for everyone to be able to get up to Skowhegan with a small amount of money. And, you know, like, getting there and making sure everyone gets into their studio. And, like, you know, there was always this sort of, like, sense of family obligation. But the kind of great stuff, you know? And then just meeting people who saw me as elegant and amazing right away. Which wasn't something I ever experienced. I always experienced skepticism and, like, confusion. But that wasn't what I experienced from anybody at Skowhegan. So there was, like, 65 members plus faculty and the staff. So there were a lot of people I met all at the same time, and it was all on the same page, and everyone thought everyone was amazing.

And there was -- there was a donor who had given a space for recording. And it was a green screen lab too. So I was in there thinking through stuff, and I -- all the stuff that's always been in my head, that came out through my voice box. And that was when I started to develop my performance -- like, outward performance work. And I had written scripts and had people come in and read the scripts with me. So I was doing, like, video installation work that shifted to sculpture and performance. So it was a transformative time.

After Skowhegan is when I kind of started my path on working with teaching in universities and working at Abrons Art Center as a teacher. And from that point I've just been blooming and doing more and more work. And hopefully I will never run out of work. [laughter] But, you know, it's always like -- I didn't get -- I didn't get a teaching appointment this semester, and it made me really sad, and I'm really scared to not have a job. But it's like, what are you going to do?

STRONG: Make art? Maybe?

KHAN: I mean, you can't really just make art if you don't have enough money to pay rent, you know? So it's like, you ha-- it's -- it's not simple. Like, there's always a kind of -- you just have to negotiate a lot of different things. So -- but I'm able to do that. And I will -- I'll figure out a way to do that. And I think I can take -- I think I can teach some workshops here at Pioneer Works, so there'll be, like, a little bit of incoming money. And -- and, you know, going to VCU -- hopefully I can go to VCU -- will be an opportunity for me to, like, just make work and teach. And I'll, like, kind of just station myself there and sublet my -- my apartment here in New York and just be there for 15 weeks. So that'll be really good for me to catch up with teaching and catch up with my studio, and hopefully big things. Hopefully big things will come after that. Crossing my fingers. [laughter]

STRONG: Yes, and knocking on wood and --

KHAN: And knocking on --

STRONG: -- every -- everything we can think of.

KHAN: -- this plastic right here. I don't know where the wood is.

STRONG: These chairs.

KHAN: These chairs! [knocking]

STRONG: There you go. [laughter] So what else did we miss in this time that we've been talking? Is -- is there anything I didn't ask you about that would have been important to say?

KHAN: We didn't really talk about the pop album that I'm trying to make. There's some songs that I'm making under the blanket. I was just too shy to sing them in person.

And I have this kind of, like, slight learning disability where, like, if I get nervous I go blank on words. And so under the blanket, even though I've performed so many times and I know the songs by heart, I still have to look at the words when I'm singing. And so there's this little, like, illumination under the blanket. It's because of my iPhone. And sometimes in between silences I'll, like, check my Instagram [laughter] and stuff like that, which I think is really hilarious. But I -- I'm making these songs, and the songs are, like, a culmination of all the things I love about sound. And I'm -- I'm -- initially the idea came to me because, like, singing brings me the most joy. And I feel that I have a good voice.

And music was the thing that really gave me my first sense of safe place. I think that's not abnormal. It's a very common thing, right? But music was the place where I felt safe. And when I was an undergrad I was a terrible student, and I failed out of everything because I worked for Rubber Gloves Rehearsal Studio. And I would be up until 8:00 a.m. every night. So I wasn't much for the day. So I was very much like my dad. But I was working at a rock venue. And I was, like, meeting Ian Svenonius and, like -- you know, like, Miranda July and, like, Gwen Stefani and, like -- I was meeting all the people that were shaping my sense of aesthetics. And, you know, it wasn't just, like, going to a big concert. It was, like, having a say in who's coming to the venue, and, like, being the doorman and, like, creating a space. So I was really doing the work I'm doing now then, when I was a teenager into college. And so now I'm -- like, I was always sort of a passive viewer, seeing everyone do that work when I was just observing. But in a way I was just learning how to do it myself.

And so now I'm, like, trying to make my own music. And one of the people -- one of the bands that I was closest to was Rainer Maria, indie band from Texas. And one of the -- one of the band members, Kaia Fischer, is someone who's been performing with me. They -- they perform slide guitar with me. And they perform with me at the Whitney Museum. They've performed with me at the Queens Museum. Sometimes when I have

to travel afar I'll do it unplugged. But it's really important work. And hopefully I'll have some tracks down before I leave Pioneer Works.

STRONG: Tell me about your sound. What do you sound like?

KHAN: The sound is kind of like indie music with a little bit of trap aesthetic. But it's -- it -- it's all, like, from a kind of, like, central European style. Like New Order, kind of, like Tangerine Dreams kind of thing. But all of that music came from the study of Sufi culture. So for me indie music or, like, this kinds of senses of alternative music comes from my culture and the study of my culture. But that isn't something we have access to. So again, it's, like, taking back. Work that -- work that's about taking back a history that's been erased.

On top of that I'm very invested in music that comes from critical moments in history where you can't turn back. So this is a different subject. So central European music was formed around the architecture of its space because they couldn't go back to the music that was hap-- that happened before because it was connected to fascism. So there was a group of young people who came together who were from the arts and from -- some of them were classical musicians, and some of them were scientists. And they all came together to make new instruments and new sounds. And a lot of it came through the architecture. Like in Düsseldorf and places like this -- like, Kraftwerk is, like, one of the most popular bands that come from that era.

And a lot like in the United States, there's this critical moment where a bunch of young people were like, "What do we do about our trauma and weight in America and our history in America?" So, like, trap music, in a way -- like, chopped and screwed is from Houston -- is one of the ones that influenced me. Like, these kinds of musics come from, like, dilapidated architectural structures that, like, eminent domain or gentrification had something to do with. And so a lot of the, like, dissonant sounds reminded me of what I liked about central pe-- central European music. And so I'm trying to, like, think through this history while I'm making this pop album.

And really what I need to do is write an essay that leads to a book. [laughter] And I'm trying somehow to do that and put that out into the world. And over this summer, a part of the Racial Imaginary Institute was inviting galleries to do public programming. And this person, she owns a gallery named after herself, called Helena Anrather, and she invited me to do some of that initial work. So she picked out a few texts based on architecture and racism and had me read them and respond to them. And I told her that I was really interested in, like, kind of doing this -- this intellectual work and creating this sort of map of my interest in music. So -- so some of that thinking started there.

STRONG: We're out of time --

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: -- unfortunately. But thank you so much for the time you have given.

KHAN: Yeah.

STRONG: It was really wonderful talking with you.