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Oral History Interview with Mohammed Fayaz

Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.52

Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on October 22, 2018

at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali. Today is Monday, October 22nd, 2018. I am the Oral Historian at Brooklyn Historical Society and the Project Director of the Muslims in Brooklyn project. And we are here at Brooklyn Historical Society to interview Mohammed Fayaz for the Muslims in Brooklyn project. So, Mohammed, if you can introduce yourself to the recording, telling us when and where you were born.

FAYAZ: Sure. My name is Mohammed. I was born [date redacted for privacy], 1990, at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn.

ALI: Okay. So, tell me about your family background.

FAYAZ: So, my family came here from India in 1990. My aunt had came here first in the '70s, part of, like, this first wave of Indian American Muslims. She was actually amazing. Her name was Najma Sultana. She was one of the founding members of AFMI, American Federation of Muslim Indians, and I think -- I could be wrong, but I think one of the first women to be president of it.

And, so she started bringing her family here slowly in the '80s and '90s, and we all lived together in Jamaica, Queens, Jamaica Estates. And it was this really big house, huge. But, it was kind of like Indian style where a lot of families live in one home together. And so, even though the house was really major -- and I've shown people on Google Maps, like, today. And my friend's like, "That's where you grew up?" And I'm like, "Yeah, but with, like, six other families." So, it's not exactly, like, the same thing, which felt really nice.

As a kid it was great. I think for the adults it was difficult just being -- to raise your family with all these other families around. But, for me as a child, it was amazing. My

older cousins I grew up with as, like, siblings, kind of. And I have my own siblings, too. And so, it was just a nice experience growing up.

ALI: Okay. So, describe what Queens was like. Describe -- you know, besides your kind of immediate living conditions, what was the neighborhood like for people who would have not known what it was like growing up there?

FAYAZ: So, for my family, it's funny because Dad started working as a cab driver. And then, Mom had finished college, and so she knew a little bit of English but not really that much. And she just moved to a new country with two kids before I was born, and then a three-year-old and a two-year-old, and then I was born. And so, to have, like, three kids in this foreign land and, like, not really know anyone but your husband's family, not, I think, the most ideal situation for her.

For my dad it was chill because basically everyone just got picked up and moved over. But, so for her -- my mom and I are very similar. She's a very social person. And so, she started to -- so, like, Jamaica Estates is at the top of the hill in Queens. And then you go straight down the hill and you hit, like, 179th Street, which is where a lot of, like, Bangladeshi communities are. Huge Muslim communities are over there.

And so, when she started shopping around there, like, grocery stores, fabric stores, even things like Cookie's or, like, VIM, like, all these stores that, like, on the ave that we'd go to, it was so cool to just be in the mix with, like, Regular folks from Jamaica even though we lived up the hill or whatever. So, it was funny to have this experience, like, in the house. But still the way everyone was, that it wasn't -- like, we weren't, like, bougie at all. Like, my both parents worked.

Like, everything was, like, kind of like -- even though the house was nice, like, the work was still kind of tough, and not stuff I ever had to realize growing up. But, Mom started to make connections and meet other families who had migrated and different families

through the masjid and stuff. And so, it was really fun to just, like, be -- there's just always a lot of people around, always.

ALI: So, you said your -- you had two older siblings who were born, they were born in India.

FAYAZ: India, yeah.

ALI: And so, were -- you were the first of the siblings born here?

FAYAZ: Born here, yeah.

ALI: What was it like in terms of your kind of cultural orientation? What were the ways that you felt very much a part of your family's heritage? And what were the ways you felt very much a part of America?

FAYAZ: Yeah. Well, I feel like Desi culture in general, and a lot of Muslim-American culture has this, like, diaspora, like, barrier of, like, where you were born and where you're from. And so, all of my cousins -- and I talk about this with a lot of folks from a lot of different communities. But, this whole first-generation business of, like, not -- of, like, not being of either place fully, because of here, like, America is such a, like, binary, like, white and black country for the -- growing up in the '90s that's what it felt like.

And then -- no longer today, but -- and then, my cousins who came here, like, later, in, like, the early 2000s were -- don't look at -- don't see me as Indian at all. And so, it's very interesting to that, like, to them I'm very Westernized. And I've met other -- I've met, like, queer Muslims from India and Pakistan, like, out in nightlife and stuff. And I'll be so happy to, like, talk to them because I don't really get to flex it that much. And then, they -- and I'll be like, oh, my Urdu is pretty good, yeah? Because I think it's fluent. And they're like, yeah. They're like, you have an accent, but it's like, it's pretty good. And I'm like, oh, great, pretty good. And I tell people I'm fluent in it.

But, I think it's interesting because, growing up, my siblings were always like -- even though they were, I think, either three and two or four and three. But they're barely older than me, and they were toddlers. And they still, growing, used to hold it over my head all the time that, like, I wasn't like everyone else and, like, I was the one that was

born here, so I was different. And then, I think everyone -- we went to India when I was six. And I think everyone just assumes, like, oh, he was born there. He's not -- or he's, like, he's different.

But, I've never let that get to my head. It's never been, like, a thing about being American or whatever, even though culturally it's like a thing. It's like, oh my God, like, born here. But now that I'm older, it's, like, all the same.

ALI: How did you learn Urdu?

FAYAZ: Just my parents spoke to me in it growing up. And, I would do, like, a -- similar to, like, Spanglish, like mixing the two. Like, that's how I just talk -- pretty simple. And I've retained it by watching, like, Bollywood movies and stuff, which are usually in Hindi. But it's similar enough for me to hold onto it.

ALI: Okay.

FAYAZ: Yeah.

ALI: And what was your religious upbringing like?

FAYAZ: So, my family is super-religious but, like, chill. So, like, praying five times a day, fasting, always at the mosque. Like, basically if you're home on a Friday, let's say, which is, like, the major day of congregation, we should be -- like, there's no reason not to. Like, say if it was a random Friday off from high school or something. We would all go to mosque and stuff.

And, it was always very, like, entwined in the culture. So, you were never just, like -- we were never, like, primarily Indian. We were never primarily Muslim. Like, we were just, like, Muslim Indians. Like, it was always one and the same. And so, that as simple as, like, the way we would dress or, like, not eating anything that wasn't halal out in the street growing up. Even, like, wanting to go to, like, Burger King or whatever, or McDonald's with your friends and, like, just going for the fish sandwich because that's what you did growing up, simple stuff like that.

And so, not eating pork, not eating bacon. I remember the first time I had bacon, and I remember, like, freaking out about it. Like, I chose to have it, but I was still freaking out about it.

ALI: Tell me about that.

FAYAZ: It was just like, it was on pizzas, pepperoni on pizza. We were at a friend's house, and everyone wanted to order. And I didn't say anything when they ordered pepperoni. And then, I just, like, went for it. And I was fine with it. But, like, something about the taste -- it's delicious, like, on a pure, like, objective level. And then, I think later on it sat with me, and it just, like, I felt it on my tongue and in my body, and I felt really awful about it. But it's something I've, like, gotten over since.

ALI: Okay. And so, did you -- was there, like, a regular mosque or mosque community that your family was affiliated with?

FAYAZ: Yeah. It was always -- so, we moved around a lot after that first home in Jamaica Estates. My aunt sold the house, and so all the families kind of dispersed. And so we went to Queens Village after that. And, from -- in that new area in Queens Village, there wasn't really a major mosque in the area. So, for prayers, for major holidays, like, either we'd go to Long Island because a lot of the bigger mosques were there, but even back in the day, this is, like, early 2000s or late '90s, folks would still -- like, the communities were still, like, not as organized. And so, people would be praying -- we'd set up, like, tents and stuff and rugs on the parking lot. Or, there was on masjid we used to go to. It was called Elks Lodge in Long Island. And we would -- it wasn't even a masjid. It was just, like, a AARP-type situation, like an old folks' place where they would congregate. And we would rent it for one day and, like, folks would be in the parking lot praying. And, like, that's how much -- that's how big the community was growing.

Now, I think, a lot of the masjids in that area and all over Queens have started to, like, grow and, like, buy the houses next door and then, like, buy a few plots next door and start building really huge -- which is great. But, it's definitely a different environment than it was in the '90s and 2000s growing up. But now I see families that are, like,

bringing their six, seven kids to the masjid. It's beautiful, but it's definitely a different experience than I had growing up.

ALI: Tell me what -- when you were growing up as a child or as a younger adult, what was Eid like in your family? Tell me, like, from either the night before or just walk me through what Eid is like.

FAYAZ: So, I never -- Eid, for us, is just like quintessential holiday. So, like, always got it off from school. And, like, I never felt envy for, like, Easter or Christmas, Thanksgiving, things that would be publicly celebrated, because I was like, oh, I have my own. And, it's always, like, dressing up in your finest clothes. Once we started fasting, like, the end, the first Eid that comes around is, like, our favorite because it's, like, oh, shoot, like, we get to eat. Like, it's over.

Like, when you're a kid you don't really understand the importance of fasting. Or you don't have, like, a real relationship with it yet. You're just doing it because you're told to do it. So, being able to -- and especially, like, the food is really incredible. Lots of amazing cooks in my family, and so depending on whose house we would go to, it was always really fun just to get dolled up and go.

I remember as I started to get older and started to identify as, like, more queer or understand that I was gay, I started to, like, feel very awkward as, like, everyone was talking about, like, politics. Or, like, for me, I don't know. I'm a big dreamer. And I'm a big, like -- I'm a -- I like conversation. I love talking to people. And I love -- I'm the type to, like, my friends joke I can, like, talk to a wall. I can, like -- and we'll go there. Like, I like to, like, skip all the nuances, skip all of the -- not the nuances. Skip all of the, like, getting -- warming up to someone and just kind of going for it.

And so, often in our culture and my family in particular, it's difficult because no one wants to talk about anything real. So, I can, like -- I'm pretty sure every single family gathering I've been to, like, the men -- also, our things are segregated, less so in more

recent years. But the men are sitting in one place, and the women are sitting in another. And it could even just be, like, a giant living room, and they're just at opposite ends. And it's rare for, like, even kids to be -- kids is fine. But, like, once you hit puberty, like, 12, 13, 14, you start hanging out with your own either age group or gender.

And, as, like, a young queer baby who -- now I identify as, like, pretty gender-fluid, gender-non-conforming. But, at the time I didn't have that language. And so, to know that, like, to be in a room with men and all they want to talk about is, like, how was the traffic getting here and, like, what bridge did you take, and all that kind of stuff was so frustrating for me because I'm sitting here like wow, like, I'm queer or, like, I'm, like, not like this at all, or I don't want to talk about sports. I don't know who the Prime Minister of India is. Like, I don't know what all this stuff is going on is.

And, the women are just, like, in the kitchen, which I love to cook now. And I want to be in the kitchen with them where, like, the young girls are hanging out talking about, like, whatever show is on, like, Disney Channel at the time. And I want to be there, or talking about, like, "America's Next Top Model," and I want to be there talking to them about it. But instead I'm just, like, stuck with, like, a bunch of men.

Or, like, young, like, young adults, like my cousins in their 20s who are, like, going outside and sneaking off cigarettes and, like, wanting to hang out with them, but also not fitting in there either because they're not talking about anything real. Cars, sports, like, things that are not -- have no substance to me, so it's difficult to kind of like feel a part of the family.

But just, it was just this thing where -- also just being an awkward teenager is never, like, ideal for anyone. And so, having to navigate all of these things at once has definitely made, like, those days as, like, glossy as they are, and they're, like, the perfect day, everyone gathers. Even if my mom is, like, not talking to someone in the family

and they're there, it's like a thing. But it's not a thing. And it's just like we're all kind of like getting really good at avoiding each other and stuff. All these, like, family dynamics that you see everywhere, it's like all of that's happening on top of, like, a young person's, like, identity coming out, too.

ALI: And how did you navigate that in those places?

FAYAZ: Honestly, I'm talking about it now, and I have no idea how I made it through, like, a sane person, not that I feel sane all the time. But, thinking about, like, my crutches would be my -- so, two of my cousins that I grew up with were very just, like, macho, very, like, fit in very well into the culture of, like, being straight and, like, tall. And, like professional-- their professions are one was a cop and one worked in IT. And so the professions were not like doctor, lawyer, engineer, which is always kind of driven in our community. But, they were just always around as, like, younger folks who -- and they came here when they were, like, in their teens, late teens, early 20s. So, their experience here growing up was different, too.

But they were smart enough to kind of keep an eye on us and make sure we weren't going off too far, like, out of, like, the realm of what's acceptable for a family. With me, I'm not sure if they spotted it early or not. I have no idea. But -- the queerness, I mean. But, when they got married, their sister -- so, my new -- I think of them as sister-in-laws. We would even call them bhabhi, which in Urdu is, like, sister-in-law, even though they're my cousins. And, that was almost like a way to be around my family but have these external folks come in, and these, like, feminine external folks come in, and to be able to be, like, my young, like, 12, 14-year-old self and, like, attach myself to them in proximity to their husbands.

So, I'm still, like, around the men, but to have a good relationship with them and also to be that, like, younger brother in the family that can be around them in, I guess -- this is so dumb but, like, in a non-threatening way. Or, like, it's not weird for me to, like, love being around them so much because they're my brothers' wives, if that makes sense.

ALI: Okay. So, you've -- you know, tell me about how you came to realization of your queerness, of your queer identity.

FAYAZ: I've known for, like -- I've known in the way that I think most queer folks you can talk to know that they're different. And, from a very young age I was just super-soft and very, like -- I didn't like being too far away from my mom when I was, like, a toddler. And, growing up I had lots of friends in middle school and stuff, but they were all women, all of them girls. I just didn't have anything in common with the boys. And, like, I didn't like the aggression. I didn't like the humor or just the energy.

And energy is something I think about a lot nowadays in the folks I have around me. So, to kind of know that I was operating the same way as a kid is kind of cool on some, like, witchy-like, just a really cool vibe to tap into, that I've always had. And, I used to play with dolls when I was kid. And I know people say, like, not -- just because, like, a boy is playing with dolls doesn't mean anything. But, I know that it is, like, an early expression of, like, how I felt with, in relation to just, like, beauty and, like, fabric and apparel and clothing and, like, all of these ideals and stuff, always very creative.

So, I draw. I'm an illustrator. So, I've always been drawing. I remember the earliest memory of drawing is, like the third grade, just like doodling. I remember I used to draw, like, bugs in, like, my notebooks and stuff. And, just always kind of being -- kind of understanding that, like, all this stuff is going on in the world and, like, I don't fit into any of it. None of this really applies to me. I don't -- and I look in TV, and I don't really see myself as a character. Even, like, watching, like, Bollywood movies that were super-hetero-normative, I wouldn't really see myself in those, even though these are, like, my people. And then watching American TV I wouldn't really see any queer kids or queer characters at all.

And so, knowing that, like, it's almost as weird -- having this mirror of society held up to you and not seeing yourself in it at all almost helped me kind of just look inwards.

And I start to then find myself better. And my earliest crush I think I remember was, like, the eighth grade on, like, a math teacher. And just, I think, like, eighth grade, I think, like, 12 years old-ish, puberty, and starting to understand that, like, oh, these are, like -- this is, like, not normal, like not everyone has this, but not really finding any flaw in it, always just kind of knowing, like, okay, this is what it is, and we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Don't know what the bridge is or what it looks like or what I've even talking about.

I didn't know what sex was until, like, the sixth grade. Just, like, grew up in a very religious household where we didn't talk about it and didn't even talk about abstinence or didn't talk about, like, not having it. We just didn't talk about it. And, I don't know. Just having this sense of, this, like, trying to accommodate this sense of self always. And it didn't always work. Many years of not knowing who I was or many years of, like -- even in high school, I didn't. I would -- so I have an older brother, and I would always wear his hand-me-downs. So, just, like, giant, like, oversized button-downs and, like, jeans that didn't fit me, barely got new sneakers ever.

And, like, I didn't -- think about it now and I'm very, like, image-conscious now. And I never -- I wonder what -- I wish I could remember those years more clearer of, like, early teens where -- or even, like, yeah, early teens in high school. Everyone is starting to, like, really, like, mature and grow into themselves a bit, and me not having that until 15th, 16. And I think that's the first time I started to sort of reconcile with, like, okay, like, I want my jeans to be a little tighter or, like, I want to get a haircut every two weeks, or, like, I have a crush on this person, and it's actually a crush.

And I think at some point in my early teens there was a recognizing of, like, oh okay, I'm gay. And, there's no such thing as a gay Muslim -- never heard of it, probably will never hear of it. It's just not a thing, not anywhere I look. And the internet was around, but I don't even think -- I was probably looking up, like, porn before I was looking up,

like, queer Muslim on Google, you know? So, it's funny to think of, like, what avenues are, like, accessible and what roads we don't even know exist, which I think is different today, which is nice, and which is something I like to do with my artwork.

But, it's like kind of hope folks can skip over a lot of the, like, nonsense and a lot of the questioning that I went through, and not even questioning of, like, oh, is this right, but like questioning of, like, what is this? Like, is this a thing? I remember thinking, like, I would still -- even 15, thinking I'll probably just marry a woman, probably just, like, have kids. It'll be super-chill. Maybe I'll find a woman who's, like, a little bit more like -- who's possibly queer herself or maybe not. Or maybe we have, like, a pact or something, or just thinking of all these, like, loopholes instead of, like, oh, I can just be who I am and let the cards play out the way they can.

And it's hard to talk about now because I'm thinking about it. And I'm like, this is so ridiculous. Like, the hoops and hurdles that a young queer child has to go through to, like, solidify their existence when in reality, like, the way I live my life now is that, like, queerness to me is very -- like, whatever rules there are, whatever boundaries there are, they don't exist, when in reality you wake up and you're just like yourself, and that's it. And those, like, 30 seconds after you wake up or, like, those 30 seconds right before you're about to fall asleep, when all you are is you and no one you know, nothing you've done, nothing you're about to do is relevant at all, it's like that peace and that, like, calmness is what I am, like, achieving for.

There's a word that my mom uses a lot -- *sabr*. I don't know if it's Arabic or Urdu, but it just means, like, peace and, like, a respite almost, like, after the storm, like, after all of this, just, like, finding peace. And I use this word a lot with friends who are going through, like, recent losses in their families and stuff, and most recently for a really good friend who lost his mother. And I told him this word, and I told him it's not even

about, like, getting over it. It's just about finding that moment where the tock is clicking -- where the clock is ticking and you're just, like, not tormented.

ALI: Yeah. I mean, I think in Arabic, I don't know if it's the same thing, but in Arabic it means patience.

FAYAZ: Patience, yeah.

ALI: So, just like, to just, as you said, like, a kind of stillness and let time --

FAYAZ: Stillness.

ALI: Just let time pass.

FAYAZ: Yeah, and to sit with things, yeah.

ALI: Yeah. Did you have -- what kind of reference points did you have as you kind of went through this? Like, you know, how were you helping to arrive? Or how were you arriving at the sense of self that you were having?

FAYAZ: I think the first real, like, public -- so I knew about "Will and Grace" because that was, like, something that was in the '90s that I had never seen, I wasn't really allowed to watch, I didn't want to watch. And I just knew, oh, like, that's not me. Like, four white people on television, I have nothing to do with that. And then I knew when *Finding Nemo* came out and Dory was, like, such a huge deal, I think 2004, maybe earlier, and then, like -- everyone's favorite movie, and then knowing that, like, looking up the cast and stuff -- the internet was around -- and then finding Ellen DeGeneres and being like, oh, like, here's this, like, lesbian. I still didn't feel any connection, really or didn't see any big deal.

I think I had seen the magazine cover when she came out and, like, I'm gay. That was the thing. I was like, okay, cool. But, in high school, gay jokes everywhere, didn't really know. Like, didn't know anyone who was queer. Had heard rumblings, had seen a lot of butch lesbians. But, like, there's a certain level of acceptance for that. And I went to a pretty hood high school in Queens. I went to Van Buren. And so, like, also knowing on that level I couldn't really be out, like, amongst my peers and stuff.

But even though everyone knew, like, the way I was and the way I carried myself and the things I was interested in, the people I was with, but it still wasn't a thing that I spoke about. And then I met a queer person, or a gay person, I should say. And, through a friend of a friend, he -- I think he had gone to our high school but was, like, a year older or two years older and was, like, one of my first crushes. And I was like, whoa. I was like, this is, like, someone I actually really like, someone I could actually want to pursue, like, dating or being with, maybe.

We were both in a court for a cotillion, like a Filipino-specific scene. And, I remember, like, it was the whole thing of the summer. I was, like, so into him. And it was like a back-and-forth kind of thing. And then, just wasn't into me, which is normal. It's just, like, fine. But at 16th, being like -- 16, 17, being, like, blown away, like, whoa, like, this is brutal. Like, this is really rough. But, that person ended up being a really good friend and then kind of -- also wasn't a stereotype at all. This person was, like, super-chill, was also an artist, amazing illustrator and would do, like, sculptures and was going to community college and making a lot of the community college programming for art, was making, like, really cool Halloween costumes, was a big comic book nerd, like me, too.

And, it was cool to just kind of have this example of a gay person who wasn't a stereotype. And it took meeting them in person to be like, oh wow. And it was so nice to me because then all of a sudden I got to, like, strip everything I knew about, like, gayness or queerness. I'm thinking back on it now. There was another gay person in high school who I was, like, acquaintances with but not really friends with. And I think when I had come out to some people in that cotillion, he, this other gay person had started telling some folks in high school. And I remember being, like, so enraged and so upset and stuff. And now I'm thinking about it. I'm like, it's fine. It's not a big deal.

But, to know that, like, these certain examples of, like, gay folks, it's like any other types of folks. You'll find good people in this world. You'll find bad people -- maybe not bad people. You'll find troubled people in this world. And, they're going to do whatever they want to do. And you just start to understand, like, how you interact with people.

ALI: So, you've used two terms somewhat distinctively from each other. Tell me what queer versus gay means to you.

FAYAZ: So, I guess with, like, LGBTQ, lesbian, bisexual, gay, trans, the I is also in there for intersex and A can be in there for asexual, and then Q for queer. And so, queerness for me, so I had never heard of the term until maybe 2013. But I had only known of, like, gay culture. And I only knew about LGBT culture. So, you were either a lesbian or you were either gay, or maybe you were bi, or you were trans. And even trans folks ten years ago, we didn't have the language that we do today, or even visibility that we do today. And queerness I'd never even heard of.

Queer, at the time, or even growing up, had just been used interchangeably by most, like, gay media publications. So, you would find a list on the internet. Even five years ago you'd find a list on the internet -- five queer icons that we love. And it would just be all white gay men, and maybe RuPaul. And so, you know, it's like not exactly encompassing of, like, a whole community or facets of a community.

And then, I started to meet folks through Tumblr, like, 2012. I'm, like, jumping ahead a bit, but -- and it was amazing to start to understand this concept of queerness. And it was just like this idea of, like, when I tell -- now I can speak on it more retroactively. But, like, when I tell someone I'm queer, and they tell me they're queer, I know we can speak on gender. We can speak on sexuality. We can speak on race. We can speak on politics in a certain way that's going to be -- that's going to mean, like, I don't have to be -- I might -- I'm mostly not going to be afraid you're going to say some really crazy, transphobic shit in front of me. Like, I can take that for face value.

Maybe we can talk about the Muslim ban, and I'm going to kind of assume that you're not going to be in favor of it. Or, I can tell you how, like, I'm upset about something in the news, and I just know that you're going to approach this whole thing with the same lens that I am. Or we can -- like, the other day, a coworker posted on Instagram. They were at, like, I think, a giant thrift, the kind of thrift place where you can throw in a lot of things in one bag. And so, they posted -- they had a bunch of stuff. And then, one of the slides was like, a janamaz, like, the rug that we pray on.

And, I guess, I mean, that's not really in the culture at large. And so, they posted a picture with it. And they were like, "New Halloween idea -- go as the rug from *Aladdin*." And, like, in my head, like, that's so grimy and so, like, offensive because it's not just, like, a rug from this movie that's already, like, pretty -- I loved *Aladdin* growing up. But, like, when you think about it now, it's like, were they Arab? Were they South Asian? Or what's happening here? And so, it's, like, pretty problematic as a movie.

But, I sent that to a group chat. And there's straight folks in there but also queer folks in there. And the nice thing about queerness is that I know we can talk about this with the lens that, like, this -- like, yes, this is a white coworker, and that's relevant. Had a -- maybe it was some coworker who grew up here and maybe didn't grow up Muslim posted that same image, that's also relevant. And so, like, with queerness there's a certain context to everything. And I know that we can talk about all these things. Also, the fact that it was, like, so a white woman posted it, but the image was like her white boyfriend was like a beard, a very Brooklyn stereotype, and so what, like, Brooklyn gets a bad rep for.

And, it was just, like, all of these things are relevant. So, when I say queerness it's nice to just have the context of, like, this is -- we're going to talk about this, and we're going to talk about it through the lens of race and class and gender and what it means for this white couple to be posting this and that kind of thing.

ALI: So, it sounds like what you're saying is that queer identity allows for you to be more intersectional --

FAYAZ: Exactly, yeah.

ALI: -- than just gay.

FAYAZ: Yeah. And for me, gay culture is Madonna and Lady Gaga and Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen and, you know, like, Twist in Miami and every gay club I've ever been to around the world. And it's its own. I've spoken to so many folks who grew up in these spaces, myself included. And even 19, 20, 21, going out in Manhattan with a fake ID at first and going to gay bars and being told about, like -- so, imagine, like, all of that stuff I told you about growing up, and then finally being of age to kind of go out into the world and starting to drift away from family a little bit and developing my own identity, being given access to this community, and then being rendered invisible or just, like, either ignored or fetishized.

And so, going to bars in the East Village, the look at the time was -- so, the East Village at the time was very, like, the alternative space if you weren't, like, a gay person going to Chelsea or Hell's Kitchen. And, it was, like, lots of bears, so, like, lots of larger, hairy folks, maybe, like, not in shape, or super-muscular but super-hairy, things that are just like outliers of, like, the gay community in New York but at the same time its own. They just developed their own niche, their own exclusionary niche.

And going to these bars and, like, befriending folks but not really, like, not really being seen as, like, a legitimate person in these spaces. So, that was super-difficult. But I had a crew from Queens. And we would all -- some from Brooklyn, some from uptown Manhattan. And we were all of color before we even knew what, like, POC [people of color] was as a phrase. And I chalk that up to growing up in Queens, just having grown up in a super-diverse environment, but all gay boys. Maybe someone's sister once in a while was in town or something.

And, we would go out, and we would be the most diverse group in the room but not even know it or think about it. And so, like, we felt the politics of it. But we didn't really know what it was. I remember going to -- I started going to school at Baruch [College] right after high school. And I remember taking the 6 train, so taking the E from Queens to, like, 53rd and Lex [Lexington Avenue] and taking the 6 train down. Being on the 6 train and not understanding, like, why I felt so uncomfortable, and just, like, hordes of white folks who just, like, don't know how to control their energy and are out here, like, aggressive as hell or staring or whatever it is.

And I never knew what that was. My aunt, the same aunt who brought us here, also grew up in a different generation, very much like a pull yourself up by your bootstraps and, like, this is America, you can do whatever you want, kind of thing, and no lens of queerness, no lens of, like, race and stuff. And, knowing that -- like, she would tell my brother and I that we had, like, an inferiority complex. And this was a woman I, like -- she's passed since, and I loved and cherished and admired her. I think about her all the time.

And, to have someone tell you that from a young age, instead of, like, oh, you actually live in a white supremacist society and, like, every card is stacked up against you, and you need to carry yourself a certain way, you need to speak a certain way, you need to -- instead of, like, being given the tools to navigate it, instead just being told that, oh, you -- being told, oh, you think you're lesser, which from her generation I think it makes sense for her to see folks kind of like impacted by a system that's really not meant for them, not even thinking about the queerness aspect of it, which is even more going to beat me down, and then to kind of like not -- instead of giving me the tools to handle it, like, thinking that's the tool to handle it.

And so, kind of bringing it full circle back into, like, coming into queerness maybe, is that, like, juggling all these cards and, like, being in this hometown, it's such a huge,

vast place. And, like, having to navigate these different identities, it wasn't until I started seeing folks kind of like make fun of white folks on Tumblr and, like, kind of point out, like, oh, like, white culture is, like, mac and cheese with raisins in it or potato salad with raisins in it or, like, you know, like boxed mashed potatoes or, like, things like this which are, like, extreme stereotypes. And, just like, it was for the first in my life that I understood whiteness as a structure.

And it made sense why I could watch -- why I could see an ad for "Will and Grace" in the subway and know that it's this big, big gay thing and have no relation to it, or to -- and now that I think back at it, to have, like, pretty visibly gay teachers growing up and not feeling any camaraderie or not feeling any sort of mentorship or not feeling like, oh, this person's someone I could talk to maybe one day. Even guidance counselors in high school that I -- were amazing, and, like, some were super-motherly, some were very nurturing, but not having that connection.

And, I hate to, like, sound so divisive and stuff. But, the community that's, like, been built around, like, folks of color, queer and trans folks of color that started to find each other early on in the internet and now in real life, has been so nurturing and so comforting. And, it was my friend Oscar [Nñ] who I'd throw a party called -- so, I'm in a collective called Papi Juice, and with two guys, Oscar and Adam [R.]. And, Oscar is from Honduras and lived in [Washington] DC for a long time, then moved to New York. And the other guy is Adam, who's from Sacramento and then also Bed-Stuy and lives in Bed-Stuy now.

And, when I met them, when I met Oscar first, I met him. And when I first met him, I met his whole crew of friends who were all self-identified queer people of color. And I was like, oh, this is so cool, like, folks who are talking through these lenses of race and gender and stuff. And I remember when I met Oscar I was still in New York, like, generally speaking. If you're talking about Latino folks, five years ago, folks were just

saying Spanish. Like, all my friends, my Dominican friends were Spanish. My Puerto Rican friends were just Spanish.

And so, now it's more understood that, like, culturally you should be -- Spanish means from Spain. And I remember one of the first times I hung out with Oscar he's like, do you want to get some food? I was like, yeah. I was like maybe some Spanish food. And he was like, okay. He's like, do you mean, like, from Spain? And I was like, no, I was thinking, like, tacos. He's like, okay, so maybe Mexican food? I was like, oh, yeah. I'm like, yeah, that's pretty accurate. I was like, true.

And, like, it wasn't a sense of shame, or it wasn't a sense of, like, oh, like, that's really fucked up that you said that. Like, just folks learning how to be respectful, and on both ends. So, like, for him to say that to me as a learning moment and for me not to be offended, and to be like, oh, true, that actually makes so much more sense, in the same way that, like, I'm Indian. But, like, I'm sure my friends who are Punjabi, like, don't -- want to be called Punjabi primarily. Or, if I have friends who are East African, like, they want to be identified as Somali. And, like, that's okay. Like, that's totally fine. That's, like, actually beautiful to own our heritage like that.

And it comes from growing up where I had a friend growing up whose name is Parabjit. And, growing up we used to call her Parabjit. And, like, all of these different ways that all of us were, like, kind of -- even a room full of people of color would be, like, bending over backwards to make ourselves more -- less unique as possible. So, to find people who are just embracing that -- and Oscar is four years older, three years older. Adam is four. And so, to be around folks who are a little bit older than me, self-identified as people of color, is really beautiful. I was like, oh.

And, when I looked back at my own group of gay male friends, I was like, oh, like, we're all super-diverse and stuff. But it was missing that, like, intersectionality. And, like, we

were making jokes. We would make jokes of, like, of referring to trans folks with, like, derogatory terms in a way that was very common in the culture. And we had no trans friends. We had friends who were gender-fluid, but we didn't have that term. GNC [gender non-conforming] wasn't a phrase. None of these things were phrases. So, to have this, like -- to find this community, it almost felt like a door.

I always describe it as, like, so I heard of queer as a term on Tumblr. And then I met Oscar and this crew of folks and stuff. And then it wasn't until -- let's say, like, in the spring. It wasn't until, like, the end of summer. And I always describe it as, like, the clouds opening up and, like, the sun shining on me and feeling like, oh, shoot, like I'm a queer person of color, too. Like, this is really beautiful. And I'm like an Indian Muslim of color. And, like, I am the child of immigrants. And, like, starting to take all these pieces that I had been, like, juggling and wrestling with and things like relationships with my mom that was, like, suffering under queerness or relationships with Islam that was suffering under -- as I explored my gay identity and finding my, like, footing in that world.

All these things started to, like, stitch together back again in my heart and in my soul. And I felt so, like, for the first -- I would say, like, it felt very validating. And, just before this, like 19 to about 21, maybe, or after my first boyfriend, who was this guy named Sylvester, and he was Jamaican-Syrian and lives in Brooklyn. So, I would take the bus from Queens to Brooklyn all the time. And, he -- we dated for, like, a year. It was amazing. And after that I -- at the end of the year we just kind of like grew apart. Or I felt myself growing at, like, a really exponential rate.

And then, so I, like, ended things. And we couldn't stay friends. But, so I felt, like, very -- not isolated, but I felt very, like, almost like a clean slate, like a new chapter had started for me. And so, I was abstinent for a year. And, in that year, at the end of that year, I felt like I just was like doing a lot of soul searching and a lot of, like, a lot of work on myself.

And so, from, like, 20 to 22, right before I met Oscar and this new queer community, I think I was doing a lot of work on myself, between the abstinence and then just, like, trying to -- and not even from a religious point of view. Just from, like, a I need to learn my body point of view.

I kind of realized that, like, this -- let me see where I was getting at. Oh, so I was just kind of working on this sense of, like, happiness and acceptance within myself. And by the end of this, like, work and this journey -- and it's always going to be a journey -- but I kind of got to this place of like where I think of, like, a barometer for folks on where they are in their life. And, like, I find happiness in the center, between, like, let's say, like, mania and depression. I found this, like, really beautiful middle ground of happiness.

And, I still to this day, like, find that to be my, like, neutral state. And, I fluctuate a lot between the two. But I know what that center feels like and how it feels to be centered. And I learned that in those early years. And so, to come into queerness with that centered, like, part of me or to feel like I was in that place was a really beautiful way to start the next journey of my life.

ALI: As we get to that, tell me how your relationship with your family -- you alluded to it a little bit about your relationship with your mother. Tell me how your relationship with your family changed or was impacted by your kind of emergent queer identity.

FAYAZ: So, we were living in Queens Village. And, we -- as I was turning 17 into 18 and college was about to start, I was like a bird that flew out of the nest. And so, for my family that was difficult because my brother had his moments of, like -- so, being the youngest of three, so brother's four years older, sister is three and then me. And so, anything my brother did first was like my parents' biggest culture shock of, like, raising children here. Anything my sister did was alternatively a shock because she was a girl.

And so -- and my sister's story is interesting because she was very -- she, like, had, like, an acting-out phase. And so, like, she was getting into fights and stuff. And she was, like, in, like, this girl gang. And there was this whole thing. And then, right at the end of middle school, beginning of high school, beginning of high school I think she had some sort of revelation, and she became very pious. And so, she started wearing niqab by her own, like, volition. No one really made -- no one asked her to. My parents actually didn't want her to.

And actually, around 9/11, so I was 10. My sister was 13, brother was 14. Brother was just starting high school. Sister was just finishing middle school. And I was just entering middle school. And, my sister was wearing niqab at the time. And, so that was -- to backtrack a bit from getting into, like, the late teen years, but that was difficult being -- I remember being ten years old, about to turn eleven the next day, and living in New York City at the time. And, I remember that day was really weird because, like, early on in the day folks were starting to get called out of school a lot. But, like, of course none of the kids of color because their parents had to work no matter what.

And so, they -- it was just, like, really bizarre. And then, like, we had heard it was, like, a traffic accident, a really bad -- we heard it was a really bad traffic accident on the Van Wyck [Expressway]. Like, that was, like, such a dumb rumor, that, like, ten cars. Like, to us, to a ten-year-old's mind, like, whoa, that sounds really bad. You almost wonder if your parents are okay. And then, I ran into my sister in the hallway in the middle of something. Oh, so then they told us the news of what happened -- very bizarre. There was a white girl in class whose father was working in the towers, and so that was just like a really somber moment for our classroom.

And, like, no idea who had done it or what. Like, that news didn't trickle down. But I saw my sister, I think immediately after school. We used to take the bus home together. And, she was like, oh my God, like, you know Adil, my cousin Adil works in the towers.

And I was like, oh, shit. And I had no idea what my older cousin did. And so, that was really strange. And we got home, and we didn't even have cable at the time. And so we had to, like -- you know the antenna wires you used to plug into the TV? And so, we plugged that into the TV, and we're, like, trying to -- I think I have a very vivid memory of my sister holding it so that it would, like, catch the signal, and watching this shit.

And it was -- I literally felt my, like -- I think back in my lifetime. I'm like, oh, like, that's when my childhood ended. Like, all of a sudden, like, ten years old, as a Muslim family in New York City, on September 11th, 2001, you're no longer a child. And, like, I think honestly the days after that are a blur. I don't remember September 12th. I don't know if, like, a lot of people do or don't. But, being ten, it's just like -- I don't know if it's traumatic. I don't know if, like, my mind has picked that up and locked it away because it was just like a lot. But, just knowing -- there were other Muslim kids in the class, and so that was easier. But, that on top of just being not white, and like, that on top of, like, just the already awful and, like, weird time of being in the sixth grade was tricky for sure.

And, I remember my parents begging my sister to take her niqab off. And, she finally did after, I think, taking the bus one day. And she said it was just the most, like, painful, like, uncomfortable experience that she had felt in a really long time. And the girl was 13 at the time and wearing -- and, like, so into her own faith that she was wearing niqab and after, like, a really wild phase that she had. And so, that breaks my heart to know that, like, that happened to her. And, I'm sure that they, like, kept a lot of stories away from me and stuff.

And for my brother who was starting high school, which is, like, also a brutal time for any young person, and so to know -- like, I don't even -- he hasn't even told me stories of, like, what that was like. And so, I think slowly but surely folks started -- and also to, like -- so, my brother was very political at the time. And, he was very invested in, like,

Palestinian Liberation Movement and stuff. And so, he had -- so, I think it was the sixth grade still. So, you would think that I would try and make myself as small as possible. But, my brother stopped standing for the flag after they started going -- after the war started.

And so, I, of course, was so inspired by my big brother that I also started doing the same. And my best friend growing up in middle school was this girl Reem. She was Palestinian. And so, it was her and I, like, against the world. And we both stopped standing up for the flag for the pledge of allegiance. I think at first we started by standing and then wouldn't, like, wouldn't do it. And then, eventually we wouldn't even stand up. And so, thinking back now I'm like, wow, like, this baby radical was out here doing the work before I even knew what, like, radical was.

And, it's amazing because I think about, like, if my niece told me she -- so, I have a four-year-old niece now, five-year-old niece. And if she was doing that, I would be like, girl, you sure? I don't know. Now I think I would. It would become comfortable. You know, I think about, like, this baby doing this movement, this work, this movement. But I think it's really beautiful. And, it's funny because not until talking about it right now did I remember this and do I -- haven't thought about Reem in a little while. So, it's really sweet to kind of uncover this.

But, yeah, so that was -- I guess in a sense that it was like partly devastating but partly also activated a sense of pride and also just, like, oh no, like, you don't get to -- like, I guess I was starting to understand white supremacy before I even knew what it was, just understanding that, like, oh, like, you don't get to like, devalue or, like, isolate a people like this. Or, also knowing that it was, like, different, like, men, like understanding it was different men that did this and not Muslims that did this and not Islam that did this.

I can't remember for sure, but I'm sure all of the khutbahs on Fridays were about this and how we don't do this. And, it's been strange because I remember even getting a haircut maybe, like, five years ago in Rego Park in Queens where we were living at that time. And, one of the barbers, I think he was Eastern European Muslim and was, like, trying to talk me about it. And, he was trying to say something about how, like, the States having set like, set themselves up for failure and then about going to war perpetuating it more and more.

And I remember thinking about how there were, like -- how the NYPD and how the FBI had, like, were, like, had informants out here who would just try to, like, get people, like, entrap people and stuff. And I remember not trusting this barber to talk to me about this. And I remember just being like, yeah. And you can't even nod uncomfortably when someone's cutting your hair. So, just like all of these things are so related, in that, like, not being able to trust your government and not being able to trust someone who's trying to talk to you about 9/11.

I actually have, like, a really low threshold. There probably is a lot of trauma there because I can't -- like, I hate when movies or documentaries, like, show images of it. I hate when anyone is, like, putting it in, like, a campaign ad or something, or if -- or even you see trailers for, like, movies sometimes. And they'll, like, share it. Or someone will post it randomly on 9/11 as a memorial kind of thing. And I'm like, it is actually traumatic to look at that because it's just like, damn. Like, not only the amount of, like, death and pain that happened on that day in this country but also what it spawned, like, across the world, and for the last 16 -- last 18 years, like, what's that been like, and what's still perpetuated because of it.

And, then I think about my sister, and I think about my mother who must have so many stories that she hasn't told me. My mom works for the post office now. And so, like, even little things like that, stories that she keeps from me. And my father also, like,

my father, for a long -- so, his name is Fayaz, my last name, which isn't something that we do culturally. It was just my mom had trouble with the paperwork when she came here. Like, other Indians take the last name -- take the last name from the father's first name, but we don't generally do that.

But, my dad at the time, in the early 2000s, in his business ventures and stuff, he was telling people his name was Fred. And, like, that today breaks my heart because, like, he should not have had to have done that. But, my father can pass as, like, Latino sometimes or Persian or, like, Arab. So, I think that was just his way of, like, protecting himself. And, like, to know that all of us Muslims just -- my brother, whose name is Anam, started going by Adam. And, yeah, just to think about all of these little things that every member of my immediate family was doing to, like, just protect themselves.

And for me, if that meant, like, acting out politically in my own little baby way, then maybe that's what that was. But yeah, definitely really cool to think about right now, that, like, the role of being a Muslim at that time in New York City, and how -- and just how we navigated that.

ALI: And how did your relationship with your family and your religious identity, how was that impacted by your coming out or your coming to your identity as queer?

FAYAZ: Yeah, so as I started to come out as gay first, I would, like, tell some friends. In general, I think I was becoming less -- so, I started drinking with friends, 17, like, in backyards and stuff and, like, garages and basement parties and stuff. And then I remember -- and I actually started drinking, having drinks for the first time with my straight crew, which was from middle school, that, like, I carried on because we all lived in the same area. And then, as I started to develop a gay crew we'd go out and stuff.

But at first, that was super-wholesome. So, I've always craved, like, a family structure, not even mom and dad and kids but just, like, a community network, always a tribe, always, like, my people. And so, whether that was my straight friends, who were the

first people I smoked with, the first people I drank with, or my gay friends or, like, my high school girls, like, whatever my crew is, I was always, like, crew-natured. I was never like a lone wolf or anything.

And, as I started to explore, like, the kinship with my gay friends, most of who were, like, young guys in Queens and stuff, and they were all -- at the time I was 17, 18, and then they were all, like 19 -- they were slowly about to turn 21. So, we were doing really wholesome stuff and just being out late, even if we were in Central Park walking around, like, taking pictures or just, like, talking about whatever, God knows what. I don't even know what we did all that time anymore.

But, if we were just, like, hanging out, that summer where I could just be myself, and I could wear whatever I want, I could say whatever I want, we could talk about cute boys, we could talk about the new Lady Gaga album, we could talk about where, what Beyoncé was doing with her new album and, like, or, like, wondering what direction she was going in and stuff, or even Instagram wasn't out yet. So, to, like, have this sense of really not isolated but, like, there wasn't as much of the performance that there is now. And so, we were just, like, young kids doing this thing.

We'd walk around, like, Columbus Circle, or I remember walking with one of my best friends, Steven, also from Queens, from all the way from, like, 110th uptown to 14th Street one day. We were just walking and, like, talking and talking and talking. And, I lived in Queens Village at the time, and he lived at 169 in Jamaica. And so, we would always take the train home together. And, like, just developing these friendships of, like, super-tight, super-close, talking to people in a way that I've never spoken to anyone, not even my straight friends.

And so, to have that, to develop that sort of kinship and that blueprint for what I still have for, like, the folks around me, it really kind of planted a seed in my head of, like,

how I wanted to be treated and who I wanted around me and what kind of love and support I wanted around me. So, when the summer rolled around and I thought it -- and I wanted to start to wear super-short-shorts, like way above the thigh, my dad was, like, freaking out and was just like you can't wear your shorts that short. In Islam, good Muslims don't wear shorts that short.

And in my head I'm thinking, like, that doesn't sound real, but okay. Like, what does that have to do with anything, but okay. And then thinking about him in the '70s wearing shorts that short, so -- or even I have long hair. It's, like, down almost to my rib cage. And, to know that my dad hates it so much, but I know he had long hair in the '70s, and like not this long but had long hair. And, to think about, like, all these little rules and stuff that were being imposed on me, I think because my parents had seen -- had gone through it twice with two siblings, they were kind of like, okay, we can't -- like, if we let this one go, it's like, it's it. He's going to get so far gone we can't do anything about it.

And so, this level of, like, top-down parenting that's, like, super-aggressive and super, like, you can't do that or you can't be here, or -- I remember being 18 or 19th, and my dad coming into my room, knocking on the door, sitting on the couch -- sitting on the bed, and I was laid up on my bed, like, on my phone or something. And he was like, listen, if you plan on being gay, you can leave this house right now, and me being like, 18, just started college, no job, was about to, like, fail out of college, like, was not, like, in any sort of place to not be at home, thinking, like, oh, okay. I'm like -- and my instant reaction was like, what are you talking about? Like, no, like, I'm good. I'm fine. Like, whatever.

And to have that moment, so, like, that was -- and when I think about my parents, Mom had a similar experience. This was the extent of my coming out to my parents. So, with Dad it wasn't -- I said no. And then, Mom one day had -- I was logged into Facebook.

And Mom was using my computer and opened up Facebook and came across my Facebook but definitely was, like, snooping and then saw “interested in men” and told me she saw it. And she was so upset. She’s like, can we talk about something? I saw something. I’m really upset. Why does it say, “interested in men”?

And my instant reaction was just like, oh, Mom, it’s a joke. It’s, like, whatever. It’s funny. And then she was like, okay, because you know, like, it’s really not -- like, it’s not cool. Like, we’re Muslim. Like, we’re not like that. And so, even that simple message right there of, like, telling an 18-year-old, like, we’re Muslim, we’re not like that, tells -- and for me to be like, oh, well, I’m like that -- and not even like -- I wasn’t even out here, like, acting wild. Like, I was just, like, young and gay and had, like, really cool gay friends that were really talented and really interesting.

And so, and it was like a version of the community I found later but just, like, interesting folks. And it wasn’t about only drinking and only going out and only, like, consuming gay culture. Like, it was just being around other gay people. That was what I was really falling in love with. And, to know that, like, this top-down direction was coming from home, which was from a large extent coming from religion, it was really tough because it was just like, oh, shoot. Like, I don’t know if I am going to have a relationship with my family. Like, I don’t know how long I can, like, just, like, hide this.

I remember days where my parents would have folks over, and I would be going out. And I would, like, wear a hoodie and jeans. And then I would go to, like, our lobby, our little foyer. And then I would, like, take off my hoodie and my pants and put on my shorts and T-shirt and then leave them in the lobby, go out, come home and put them back on before I went back inside. Crazy. And I know my sister has memories of when she had her acting-out phase. I know that she would take off her hijab before -- like, would wear it out the house and then, like, take it off.

And so, little things like that, and we're talking about, like, ten, eleven years old, twelve years old, so not even like anything to, like, judge or anything. And, not that it should ever be judged, but to know that, like, a young person finding their identity in, like, a time of your life where, like, of course the world feels like it's falling apart and you have no idea who you are. But, you think you know everything. So, the clearest answer to me was, like, oh, well, my parents who should be loving me unconditionally, because this is what, like, gay white culture and media has taught me, is that, like, come out to your parents. Live in your truth. Live in your light.

Or, like, your parents should love you unconditionally. If they don't love you, that tells you everything you need to know. This kind of idea of, like -- and, like, in media, as you're sort of seeing more and more LGBT culture, it's always like the evil parents who kicked their kids out. And so, I had no model for -- like, it was bad enough that I wasn't in med school already. And so, to know that I already had this other thing that's going to be extremely disappointing -- and I've always had a strong personality in the sense of, like, what's right and wrong. And to know that I felt like I was being treated unfairly and wrong, it -- sparks started flying in, like, the worst way between my mom and I.

And we would bump heads a lot. I would go out -- when I first started going out -- oh, actually, I remember -- this is fun. I remember going to my first Pride, 17, with that person I had a crush on and some of our friends, and coming home super-late at night. And so, I probably got home around, like, 11, which is kind of late for a 17-year-old from my family at the time. And my sister banged on my door and was like, where were you? And I was like, I was out. And she was like, where were you today? And I was like, I was out with my friends. We were in the city.

And, I, like, went to, like, slam the door shut because I was like I'm not doing this. Like, you're not my mother. Like, I'm not doing this game with you. I'm not playing this game with you. And then, going back and forth a lot, and then eventually, like, she had

gotten the door open just enough. And then she was like you are a disgrace to my parents. And she spit in my face. And I was 17. And so, I remember, like, very -- and my sister and I have always had a difficult relationship. And it didn't get better until she got married and left the house. We started to, like -- and then she had kids and we started to understand, like, okay, like, for the sake of, like, these children or for the sake of, like, you who have just gotten married, let's work on -- let's work on this.

But, at that time, 17, my older sister just spit in my face and told me I was like a disgrace. And my parents are having these, like, conversations with me. And my brother, I'm not really, like, that close with at the time, only because he's 21 and going through his own shit and so not having, like, not really having anything at home, like, keeping -- making me feel nurtured or comfortable or secure or loved, these things that are, like, really, really crucial for anyone, just put a straight fork in the road.

And, even though my name is Mohammed and I was introducing myself as that to everyone, I just knew that me and Islam right now are not it. It's not happening. None of my friends were religious. I didn't know any queer Muslims. I didn't know any gay Muslims. Maybe there were -- if I were to go out, there would be, like, an Arab go-go boy. And that was, like, my closest relationship to Islam and, like, and anyone gay. And so, just really difficult. I think, yeah, there were, like, reality shows and stuff, and nothing real, nothing substantial, nothing I could relate to. And so, it's actually really sad when I think about it now because, like, those things -- like, any teenager is going to have that moment with their parents, whether it's who they're dating or if they've started drinking, if they want to go away for college, if they -- whatever it is. And so, it just sucks because that was my version with my parents. And so, at some point around when I started to kind of go abstinent and then kind of pursue happiness or sense of self, I had learned to forgive my parents for those interactions.

And, as I started to understand the world at large and this world and this society being the product of, like, men having manipulated and abused a lot of things, including religion, I started to understand that, like, my parents are -- love me, first of all. They only want the best for me. For my parents to not want me to be gay is for them not to want me to go to hell. For them, it's a simple equation. You're gay. If you act on it, you're going to hell, simple as that. For people who love me who want to spend eternity with me in the afterlife, who want me to have an easy life here on this Earth, like, queerness, gayness, doesn't compute. There's no room for it. It doesn't make any sense.

It's crazy because my dad is the youngest of eight siblings. And my mom is the youngest of thirteen, so over 100 cousins combined on both sides. I've met most of my father's family. Most of my mom's family I have not met. And, mathematically speaking I just know there's queer folks here. I want to know if there was a queer uncle that y'all don't tell me about. Thirteen siblings, is there a queer uncle I don't know about? Who has a butch daughter? Like, who had queer twins, you know? Or, like, what's that one family that -- like, I know a lot of families that have multiple siblings are queer. And so, I wonder, like -- I know one family where all five children are, like, LGBT.

And, I want to know, like, of the sheer number, like, who is it? Like, just point them out to me. I just want to know, you know? And so, I feel like that information is being hidden from me. It's fine, but I know it's there. And, or, you know, that one aunt who never got married and lives with her best friend, like, I want to -- like, that's who I want to know and meet, you know, because those are my people. And that's my -- those are the answers I want to know about. And so, at some point I forgave my parents, and I just told them, like -- I didn't tell them this.

But in my heart I told them, like, listen. They love you. They want the best for you. Once you realize -- once you accept that they're also people with hopes and dreams

and, like, came to this freaking country -- and dad came with his family, so I give him less slack, even though there's, like, a lot of pressure there about just, like, being a man and providing and supporting and stuff. And he never finished college. So, to, like, come here with that is, like, difficult. And his sisters did, and so, like, there's a lot of complexes that I choose to give him.

And then, so my mom, too, my mother, who told me how she would -- I have a really low tolerance for one of my older male cousins that I described earlier. And, but I started to cut him some slack after my mom described to me how he would babysit us while she would sneak out and take driving lessons so she could learn to drive so she can get a car, so she can, like, go get a job and stuff. She did that behind my father's back. And so, my dad actually opened the mail one day and saw my mom had her driver's license and was, like, freaking out.

But, like, that's what it took for my mother to do that. And to know that she didn't do that for herself, like, I mean, for herself, definitely. But to know that she did that so that her children could just, like, have a better life blows my mind, because by my age my mom had three kids, was raising three kids, in a foreign country, barely spoke the language. I visit, like, Puerto Rico now, and I'm, like, clinging to my best friend because my Spanish sucks, you know? Or, like, we go to Montreal, and I'm like, Oscar, can you order for me? You know, like, I'm so -- it's just I don't have half the strength or courage that she had.

Maybe I do as a queer person, like, out here, even giving this talk, like, this oral history, to live in truth like this, too. But, whenever I chose to forgive my parents, it just started to mend things there. And I had to mend that relationship before I could mend my relationship with Islam because I stopped fasting. I stopped praying. I did become very spiritual. And so, I had faith in something. For a while I would say agnostic, like faith in something but not any one thing, because I was just learning about the world, learning

about colonialism, learning about how folks had just, like, taken religion and just, like, destroyed the world with it under its guise.

And then, to know that, like -- I still had not really separated the two. So I was feeling very spiritual. And so, I would, like, talk about the universe a lot and think about, like, blessings in that way and think about Mother Nature and the planet and, like, equilibrium and, like, think about karma a lot. And I still think very much about karma and just, like, being a good person. And so, after a while -- and I was meeting maybe a queer Muslim, mostly women here and there. But after a while I would start to understand that, like, oh, like, these concepts of spirituality and then these concepts of, like -- I'm, like, I'm a very -- I like to be, like, a very moral person, like to treat people very well.

And, like, these things are what I grew up with as a Muslim person. And these virtues are very important to me. And I'm, like, forever a Muslim in that regard. And I was never not calling myself not a Muslim. I would never be, like, put in a social gathering, getting into it with someone, and if someone was like, oh, like, how are you Muslim and gay, I wouldn't be like, oh. I would probably just be like, oh, I don't really practice but I'm definitely Muslim. So I was never not identifying with it, but I wasn't practicing. And I had no relationship with Allah in the way that I was raised to have one. And so, not even praying or not fasting at all during Ramadan.

And so, I think at some point -- again, when I started to come into, like, queerness and to own my culture, to own my background, and then I think I started to realize, like, oh, like, this is -- and I went through a pretty bad, like, heartbreak. And I'm a Scorpio, so I'm a water sign, so very emotional, very, like the smallest thing can just, like, tip me over. Even talking about this heartbreak now can, like, think of it easily.

And, the only way I really got through that, I think, was faith, and to kind of understand, like, my -- like, what keeps my heart ticking and what keeps me meeting really interesting folks, and what keeps my health, and what keeps -- what's helped me love myself for the first time in a long time, what's helped me mend my relationship with my parents. My mom's my best friend now, and we've spent the last five years working on this. But, just kind of this sense of, like, almost like putting her on the pedestal she deserves because, like, to know that, like, she's done so much for me, and my father, too, and to love my siblings in this way too, and to kind of have a deeper sense of love, and then to take that and to understand that that's God, and that's the same love that I have for my friends.

That's the way -- one of my best friends growing up in high school was Dominican. And we have nothing in common. But we can just connect. That's love. Or, one of my best friends at -- I started working at Warby Parker when I left college, and I met this girl, Judy, who was Christian, and very, very, very Christian. And to hear her talk about her faith -- and she used to go to, like, a progressive church on Sundays. And, like, it was like a rock band kind of church and, like, super-corny to me. But, to see, like, a young person so in love with their faith and so in love with God, and to move with this kind of energy that was attractive to me and that reminded me of myself, I started to be like, oh, shoot. Like, I can praise God. Like, I can start to, like, reconcile my relationship with Islam with my queerness, with myself, with my parents, with my friends and my relationships and my community. And even, like, I can read a book now, and I'll read a passage, and I'm like, whoa. I'm like -- like, I'm reading *Sula* right now by Toni Morrison, my first time reading Toni. And it's so magical. And, I find so much, like, love and, like, magic and, like, God in her words. And, like, the way she'll describe something, she describes this one passage of the way, like, a character's lover, like, loves on them.

And, she describes how, like, the character -- I think it says something like, she didn't know -- the quote is, "She didn't know she had a neck until he commented on it." And, like, to me that's, like, religious. Like, that is so beautiful and pure in its essence. And that's the same way I feel when I pray or when I'm fasting or when I'm at the masjid or when I'm with my Muslim girls. Like, just that connection, that, like, little -- it's like a little live wire. And it's just, like, threaded throughout all of us. And it's really beautiful to tap into.

And to have that now feels like the most -- like, my faith is rock solid. Like, there are days where, like, I am, like, dealing with depression now. And, like, there are days where I have a really hard time getting out of bed. And, all I have to do is really hone in on that energy or that love. And then I can, like, rise on, like, many levels.

ALI: So, let's talk about your relationship to art. Tell me -- you talked a little bit about when you first started drawing, you drew bugs [laughter]. And you're a comic book fan. Tell me, when did you start seeing yourself as an artist?

FAYAZ: So, I was drawing all through high school, I remember, not paying attention to classes. And, I coasted by through school a lot just by, like wit -- I was really a writer first. And, because I was drawing, and I was reading comics, and I wanted to make comics and stuff, but never as a career because that wasn't a viable option with my parents. But I was always drawing, and I would do little comic strips and stuff. And I would draw a lot of superheroes.

And, I started to realize, like, oh, like, I really like this. Just like, I'm good at this. This is my thing. But before I could draw as well as I wanted it to look, I was a writer, like a really good writer. And, I would write stories with the comic book characters. And then, so not my own characters but just, like, little stories. And then, I got good at writing because I wanted -- I had to be good at -- like, I was honing some craft. And so, that was being honed first.

And then, through college, I went in doing finance just because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and that was kind of like a parental directive. And then, I started going to Baruch, which is a business school, a CUNY [City University of New York]. And then, one of my first semester classes was sociology, and I was just, like, blown away. I was like, whoa. And this was before I met queer folks or any people of color or knew the term. And so, it was just so cool to talk about, like, how, like, fucked up white supremacy is, or how racial dynamics work in the States or, like, zoning laws, like really cool introduction, basic-level stuff. And that was really exciting for me.

And then I thought I wanted to be a social worker. And so, that was on my map for a bit. And so, and the art I was just doing. And so, I kept on doing it a lot. My first boyfriend gifted me a Wacom tablet, which is like a tablet you can use to draw on the computer. And so, growing up my parents were not buying me canvas or paintbrushes or, you know, any sort of like pencils or anything. And so, I was always just, like, drawing with my own materials and stuff. But, that really unlocked a new level for me because I -- so, I taught myself Photoshop through, like, Lynda.com tutorials I pirated. I pirated Photoshop at 17.

And, I was able to just make -- and tablets have a really long learning curve, so even when I got that I was like, oh, like, this isn't it. And I learned about those through, like, Tumblr and like -- not Tumblr. Deviant Art was a website people were using. And so, I was looking up tutorials and stuff. And at that age your mind is just so ready to learn that I was picking up things pretty quickly. So once I got the learning curve of the tablet, I was like, oh, shoot, this is awesome. So I would make my own little cartoons and stuff.

And I started posting them on Tumblr, 19, 20. And I had my own Tumblr. And then I had a Tumblr called -- so I called it Mojuicy. That was the art -- the name I was making art under. And I still have that on my website. It's something I kind of hold onto. I'm

not sure how much I'm going to hold onto it, though. And, I was just drawing and drawing. And I was drawing folks of color without even realizing what I was doing. And, I think at some point I was drawing all these, like, superheroes from, like, X Men and, like, The Avengers and stuff. And they were all white. And I was getting really bored of it.

And I started to draw mostly characters that were either of color or, like, of a different color like green or, like, characters that didn't have to be white. And, I think I was undoing work in my head. And my references would always be, like, fashion spreads or even, like, from newspapers and stuff, like the covers or interiors and stuff. And, as I started to just, like, move away from that, literally, like, maybe a year before I met queer folks, I was starting to do that kind of artwork.

And then, I was putting it up on Tumblr. People were really liking it a lot. But it was just a hobby, just this thing that I do. And my gay friends never really -- maybe it was an age thing or something about the culture wasn't, like, uplifting one another's talents. Like, we would go to each other's -- like, one of us was a performer, so we would go to his shows all the time. But, for the most part everyone just worked retail or worked at a café or their parents' restaurant. There wasn't a sense of ambition in that crew, by no fault of their own.

And, I didn't -- so, like, they liked my art, but they never really uplifted it. And when I met these queer folks, that was literally one of the first things. Well, we met on Tumblr because of my art. Like, Oscar loved my artwork. And then, we realized we both lived in Brooklyn, so we met up. And, when I met his roommate Chan for the first time, both of them were like, we love your work. Like, it should be in a gallery. And I was like, what are you talking about? I was like, what, like, oh, that's cool, thanks, like, not even able to accept a compliment, not understanding how they could think that.

And me thinking that, like, you know, the galleries I've seen are, like, oil paintings and, like, straight up, like, Picasso and, like, Rembrandt. Like, you go to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] and it's just, like, all this work. You go to MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] and it's all this, like, beautiful work, work that I didn't really understand, didn't go to art school, had no lens to, like, look at, or like would look at all these people, like, fawning over a contemporary piece and me not getting it.

And, like, also a lot of these queer folks that I met were super-educated, like, master's and in, like, grad school and stuff. And so, for me to have been a college dropout, all I had was a high school degree and, like, my wits and my street smarts and my, like, you know, just own personality and stuff. It was really intimidating to, like, have folks tell me, like, they could see my art in there. And so, I never -- it was hard for me to kind of put that together.

But, that summer, everyone just started meeting each other. And so, folks were -- I think Instagram was around but not what it is today. And, I met a friend, a photographer friend, name Yuki James, an amazing photographer. And he told me, he was like -- I posted an artwork of a hijabi one day to my Instagram. And Yuki was like, wait, is this your work? And I was like, yeah. And he was like, whoa, this is amazing. And then I sent him my Tumblr, and he was like, wait, get out of here. He was like, you need to start posting all this stuff on your Instagram because you need to just, like, put it out there. Like, not only is your Instagram for your cute photos of you and your friends. You need to also make it about your brand and, like, what you do.

And I was like, oh, that's really good advice. And at the time he had, like, thousands of followers in early days of Instagram. And he was posting his photography, and people were really vibing with it. And I always knew the work was good and unique because I'd never really seen anything like my work. And I wasn't always able to talk about it like this, but I am now. And, I saw -- so then, I started sharing it to my Instagram and

people were like, wait, what? Like, this is so good. This is amazing. And I was like, oh, thank you, like, this is just what I do.

And so, as I started to meet lots of, like, dozens of queer folks in Brooklyn, so Oscar and Chan and their other roommate, Melissa, they all lived in Bed-Stuy, off Classon Avenue and the G. And, I lived in Queens at the time. So, it was really easy to take the -- it was -- I had just missed the days when the G train used to go all the way to Forest Hills, because that used to be a thing. And I lived in Rego Park, so it was perfect. But, I would just take the train from Rego Park to the LIC [Long Island City], to Court Square, and then take the G straight to Classon or Bedford-Nostrand, which I live at now, Myrtle-Willoughby. And so it's really funny that, like, I was going back and forth a lot. It was actually really easy. And something about being 22, an hour on the train's like whatever. Now I'm, like, calling a car easily. I'm like whatever. I'm not getting on the train for that long. So, it was nice to just be young and meet all these people who were liking my work. And I've always known it was good. So, to have that validating experience is very nice.

And then, I started going to this party called Papi Juice. And, I had missed the first one. And I went to the next one. So, I had gone to a Beyoncé concert at Barclays. And afterwards I was with my best friend, also from Queens. And we went to this bar called One Last Shag. There, I ran into Oscar, who I'd not seen in a little while because just living in different boroughs, like, you don't -- it was just, like, not a thing.

And then, he's like, hey, like, I throw this party called Papi Juice. Okay, full transparency -- Oscar and I dated, and it didn't work out. And so, my Scorpio ass, I was like, I need a break. I can't, like, I can't be around you or whatever. Like, I need a little break. And so, it was cool because I got some time to, like, kind of sit with the whole queerness thing and also still be on Tumblr and still, like, meet lots of folks and stuff.

But, when I came around, that was kind of my peace offering. I was kind of like, hey, Oscar, I'm cool to be around again. Like, I'm chill.

And then, he was like, hey, I throw this party. You should definitely come. And, of course, my stalker ass on Instagram already knew about it. And I was like, oh yeah, yeah, cool. I'm totally down. And so, I was totally down. So then I went to the next one the week after, and I dragged my friend from Queens, my friend Christian. And then, it was the most exhilarating, still one of the most exhilarating nights of my life. Like, just being -- hearing music I had never heard in gay clubs and, like, just, like, hearing hip-hop and R&B and reggaeton and bachata in the club, music that I grew up loving and listening to, and then just didn't -- I'd never put in the same room as queer folks or, like, you know, folks of color or anything.

And, it was beautiful to just, like, have that moment. And I met so many people that first night that I still know today. I remember dancing on the stage, a tiny little bar, 75 capacity. And, there was a backyard, and so that was just, like, a really good vibe. And so I went to the first one. I went to the second one. They were happening kind of randomly. And, Oscar and Adam started Papi Juice. They, just two black and brown kids in the city, living in Bed-Stuy. They had gone around Chelsea. They were friends. They were bar-hopping in Chels-- not bar-hopping, gallery-hopping in Chelsea on a random Thursday night for the free wine and just, like, really enjoying it and stuff.

And they were, like, looking at these spaces and, like, were wondering, like, why are these spaces so white? Like, what the hell? Like, where do we fit in? Where do we belong? And so, even that bar, One Last Shag, was, like, pretty cool and, like, chill but, like, might randomly play rock music all night or, like, might not be very queer. And there were queer parties happening there for folks of color, parties like Azucar. And that was mostly like women and femme-centered, and lots and lots and lots of, like,

queer nightlife organizing in Brooklyn and Manhattan for years for, like, I mean, decades, really.

But, for that community, Oscar and Adam just weren't really finding it for themselves where they felt like they fit in. And so, they were at the bar one day on, like, on a Wednesday. And they were friends with the bartender, this guy named Pepper. And, they asked him, they were like, hey, like, we want to throw a party here. Like, what do you think? And Pepper looked at his calendar, the bar calendar, and was like, okay, let's do it. Like, next Saturday, you're up. And so, that's how they did the first one. And all these folks started coming in through Instagram. It was just word of mouth. They did the first flyer on Photoshop with, like, some image from Tumblr. It was a little rough, but it was cute. It worked. And so, they were doing the flyers and stuff. So, all of a sudden this community was just, like, activated.

And there was a lot of folks who went to school together, a lot of folks who had just moved to New York from the Bay [Area], folks who knew each other from Tumblr, folks who had been in New York forever, and so me bringing folks from Queens, like, just this really -- folks from uptown, really just this melting pot -- I hate that phrase. More like -- I always call it more of like a pot of gumbo, like, really seasoned and really savory and, like, always simmering, like, never still, and just like a really beautiful vibe in this tiny bar, and it would get packed.

And so, I was going a bunch. And then the fifth party, they asked me to do the flyer. Oscar asked me. And I was kind of like, I don't know. Like, what would it look like? And they were like, we love your work. Like, we just want you to do it. We think I would be really special. And I was like, yeah, sure. And, like, we can pay you. And I was like, oh. That's cool. And they were able to pay me \$30, my first paid gig. And I was like cool, this is a cab home all the way to Rego Park. I'm good.

And, it was really fun. And when they posted the flyer, people were blown away. They were like, what? Like, who did this? Like, who drew -- who painted this? Who did this? And it was a digital painting. But -- and I remember it's four men on the image. And it was October 5th was the party, Oscar's birthday. And, so I drew all the boys in, like, jackets and then -- but no shirts under so it was all, like, open, or zipped up but then all in underwear. So, like, some were in briefs. Some were in boxers. Some were in -- one was in a jockstrap.

And so, and there was, like, hairy legs and different complexions and different body types. And, it was so fun to just, like, flex like that. And, everyone was blown away. Everyone was like, wow, like, this is so cool.

ALI: Was that your first time incorporating queer images in your work?

FAYAZ: No.

ALI: Or you had done it for a while?

FAYAZ: Yeah. I had been doing it, yeah, yeah, yeah. But it was the first time that it was, like, for an event or, like, a commissioned gig. And, so actually we did a talk earlier this year. And our friend Tiona, she did, like, a New York City club retrospective of the different crews and stuff. And so, we did a panel, and she described -- we were talking about each one of our roles. When she came to me, she was like, I remember the first time I saw a flyer for Papi Juice. It was the one that -- the first one that I did. And it was -- she was blown away. And she was just like, who the fuck has, like, a professional -- like, their own painter making -- painting a party flyer for them? Like, who does that?

And she was like, these guys must be rich. Like, they must be really well off, which is so funny because they paid me \$30. And they weren't making any money. And so, at that same party, this guy Cristobal [Naranjo] who is Puerto Rican, who I'd seen around a lot in New York City nightlife but never really, like, knew, he also joined the team. He also did -- he did photography for that party for the first time. So, the seeds were kind of planted for everyone to kind of come together.

And then, I didn't do the next few flyers, but I was going to the party regularly and just, like, meeting all these people, dancing all night. And then, Cristobal started doing photography more regularly. And then, the new year passed. They did a new year's party. It was super-cute. And then the new year passed. And then, early on, like the seventh party or so, they asked me and Cristobal to join the team, so we did. And then we were like this four-person scenario, and we were a crew. And we started throwing this party.

And so, that meant, like, booking people and planning and organizing and stuff, promoting and stuff. And it was amazing because it was free or the first year, which is, like, unheard of now. But, free for the first year, \$5 for the year after that. And only that \$5 was so we could start booking DJs and paying them. And the whole platform is -- so Papi Juice, our mission is to aim and -- we aim to affirm and celebrate queer and trans people of color. And the space is for queer and trans people of color and the folks who love us. So, of course, there are people who have white partners, people who have, like, close colleagues and friends they want to bring, and that's okay.

But the space is truly a celebration for us, very FUBU, for us, by us. And so, it's really, like, very -- we had a party this past weekend and it was incredible. We flew in a crew from San Francisco -- the Bay Area -- called Club Chai, these two Arab folks. And then we brought in an artist from LA. We flew up this duo from New Orleans, these bounce artists. It was really incredible. And so -- and we have two rooms now, sometimes a roof, at this space called Elsewhere. And it's, like, enormous. Sliding-scale cover, so it's, like, ten to twenty dollars early bird and then, like, it moves up. So, there's still, like, \$10 tickets if, like, for folks who can't afford a \$20 ticket to a party. There's, like, still there.

And, it's just grown into this really, like, massive community of folks of, like, every walk of life. It's really beautiful, actually, and I'm really proud of it. My boss came this past

weekend and texted me this morning like, I just want to congratulate you. Like, that was so beautiful. And, even I this morning was looking at the footage from the bounce artists. And, like, everyone climbed up -- they invited everyone onstage to, like, twerk. And it was -- I had not seen anything like it. I remember my jaw dropping several times, like, in the night.

And to know that we're five years in and we just have grown so exponentially -- Cristobal is no longer in our crew. But there's three of us still. And it's such family vibes. But for every party we hold each other's arms, a little prayer circle. And we -- and they're not necessarily religious. But, like, I am. And so, it's nice to just kind of bring that energy and touch each other and pray for, like, good vibes, good energy. With the presale tickets, often, like, our budget taken-- is mostly paid for so we can, like, let that stress off and just, like, remind ourselves, like, we did this. We're here. We've made it. It's beautiful. So, yeah.

ALI: So, I hate to kind of change the vibe a little bit. But, in talking about the creation of this space, of a space around the celebration of queer and trans people of color, it does bring to my mind what happened in Orlando with the Pulse shooting in 2016. Can you tell me what -- how you experienced that news of that happening?

FAYAZ: Yeah. It's insane because we were out that night, Brooklyn Pride, so I think June 10th or so. And, we were at the Bell House. I think Bklyn Boihood or some crew was doing a night. And, I remember getting -- our friend Abdu was DJing, so I remember being backstage. I remember being -- I think Oscar might have been DJing, too. It was just like all of my closest, closest friends were all there and just, like, celebrating, reckless abandon, like not a care in the world. I remember, like, selfie videos. I remember filming the whole thing -- so much fun.

And then I remember crashing at Oscar's house, and then the next day waking up to the news. A coworker had texted me, my friend Tara. And she was like, I'm so sorry. This is devastating. Like, call me if you need anything. And I had no idea what

happened. And so, I think I pulled up my phone and looked at it. And I was like, oh. I was like, this is awful. Like, I was also still drunk. But yeah, I just couldn't really fathom, wrap my head around what had just happened. And then, like, news started trickling out. And it started -- it was Latino night.

And it was -- I don't know if we knew the shooter early on or not. But then, news came out of who the shooter was, and it was a Muslim. And I remember just thinking, like, oh my God. And then, as folks started posting pictures of the survivors -- I mean, those who were killed, and the survivors were, like, starting to speak out to the news and stuff, it started to hit. And, it literally felt -- like, I was stone sober now. Like, it felt like getting hit in the face and the heart and the soul with, like, a bag of bricks, and just feeling like -- coming from the -- also, like, not being -- I'll never shake the fact that we were out that night.

I remember how crowded it was. I remember how that's the last night of my life that I've walked into a room and not counted the exits, and that I've not, like, thought about, like, just the -- like, when you think about a place like Pulse and, like, Latino night where, like, folks of color-- are gathering, to me that's like a sister party for us of, like, what we do. And, I think about just the pure, like, terror and the pure horror of, like, what that was. And when you read the accounts and stuff and when you think about, like, how just the horror of everything about it is just so -- it's, like, really devastating.

And, the week after, a bunch of folks in New York, all these nightlife folks, did a -- all these queer nightlife folks, mostly women and femme folks, did a memorial at Come On, Everybody in Bed-Stuy. And everyone -- it was free. It was by donation, I think, for just the fundraisers and stuff. And they asked me to do -- they printed out the pictures of all of those who had passed, those that had been killed, and had set up a shrine on the stage. And they asked me to write the names of those murdered. And, so I did.

And I remember, I was subletting a spot in Brooklyn at the time, in Bed-Stuy, very close to the bar. I remember being on my backyard patio with my marker. And I use a lot of butcher paper, so I just rolled it out. And, my heart -- I literally started crying onto the parchment as I was rolling the parchment, the butcher paper, because I kept having to roll more and more. And, I also remember having to look up, looking up -- I wanted to, like, get their names with the accents. It was, like, really important to me. And, just taking forever -- it being forever to even find that online. Like, folks had just not had the accents on there.

And, I remember just writing and writing and writing. And my arm hurt. And as I looked at the list, I had another 25 names to go. And I remember my heart was just, like, devastated. I couldn't believe it. And so, it was one thing to even get the energy to go there. And so, I wrote everything out. And then I go there, and I had the parchment rolled up. And I get there, and everyone is there. They were playing music but very som-- like, chill, nothing -- it was supposed to be like a celebration of life and also a memorial.

And, I just think about it now, and it's the most -- single-most -- like, the way that I spoke about 9/11 earlier, that also changed my life. And, I don't know. Something about -- there was a reading of the names. I had no energy to -- and everyone was invited to come read some names, but I had no capacity to. And even when I think about it now, I walked in Pride this year, in the march for the first time, through both Warby Parker, which is my day job, and then L'Oreal, which I did a job for this summer, an illustration for, for Pride.

And I remember walking, and only -- and one person had a sign with the images of those who were killed. And it instantly -- just super-joy, super-high-energy. And seeing that out of the corner of my eye, I, like, ran over and I hugged the person. I thanked them. And my heart just broke. And, like, any time I -- it comes up, it's instantly, like,

triggering. And I don't use that word for a lot of things, but it instantly breaks my heart. And I just thinking about, like, I remember the interviews.

And I think about the murderer, and I think about all the stories of him actually being closeted and, like, him going, doing this thing as a Muslim, also being so upset that, like, a Muslim can do this. And then -- or, like, a man can do this, and then, because he's Muslim, this is a Muslim thing. And, for me, I ref-- instantly, from the jump, I refused to have any role in that narrative of, like, oh, like, how do you feel as a queer Muslim that this happened? Like, no. Like, don't put that on me. Don't put that on my community. Don't put that on my people.

This man might have been raised Muslim and might have thought he was a Muslim, but nothing about this is in Islam, like not a thing. This man was very removed from his religion or was very removed from his relationship with God and was very tormented for whatever reason. I, like, don't even want to do that work for him or give him that benefit of the doubt or anything. It's, like, it's devastating. It's, like, truly -- it's my community. I remember just feeling so broken that day.

And I remember just the level of, like, just, like, damn, like -- I mean, we, for Papi Juice, we don't call it a safe space. We don't believe in safe spaces as queer folks in this world, queer and trans folks. There is no such thing as a safe space. Like, especially if you think about nightlife and, like, liquor and security guards, and even just the capacity of anyone to fuck with our community. There's no safe space for us in the world. And so, we call it an intentional space. Safer is something we bat around with. I'm not really comfortable with that either, especially after something like Pulse.

And to this day -- my office has construction going on right now at Warby Parker, and for a while our closest exit was blocked off. And I remember that giving me, like, severe anxiety, just not -- you know, our address is available publicly. Who knows? Some

lunatic doesn't get his glasses in time and shows up at our office. My facilities team actually had training for what to do in a live shooter situation, just like, I guess, the building was doing it. And just know-- even, like, yeah, it's bizarre.

For Saturday, we list -- every party that we do, we do a bunch of slides on Instagram, just like who the space is for. You know, if you're color, gladly take up space. If you're white, there's lots of parties tonight. Think about, like, what space you're taking up and stuff. And then, we also started with accessibility notes, like about wheelchair accessibility and whatnot. We also started including, like, exits are here, here and here. Like, that's information that everyone should just know and should have for that situation. We're not safe anywhere.

ALI: So, when you talk about community, and maybe it's communities -- I don't know -- but what are your -- what is your community, or what is your communities? How do you define that or them?

FAYAZ: Community, it's like a micro-scale and a macro-scale. So, micro is just like my best friends, my closest people, people I call to when I can't get out of bed, people I call to say Eid Mubarak to, people who I -- like, later today I have nothing going on, for once. And I'm like, I hit up, like, four different people to see if they wanted to cook dinner tonight. So, like, that's a lot of people. But it's like, there's, like, certain rings to it. So the closest would be, like, my, like, Papis in Papi Juice.

And then, like, I'm in a group chat with my friends. It hasn't been as active lately, but it's called Messy Muslims. And it's all of the folks on Instagram that I follow. We follow each other. We're all aware of each other, that are Muslim or grew up Muslim or might have converted or something but have some relationship to Islam. And, it's beautiful because it's a lot of South Asian folks. It's Bangladeshi folks. It's Bangladeshi folks via Australia. It's a lot of Somali folks, Sudanese folks. It's Pakistanis in Texas. It's me. It's a friend from the UK. There's just, like, a very diverse crew, mostly women and femmes and gender-non-conforming folks like myself and then a few guys or, like, two guys.

ALI: Why is it called Messy Muslims?

FAYAZ: Messy Muslims? Because we -- we're messy. You know, some of us don't practice.

Some of us practice. Some of us eat bacon. Some of us love -- some of us don't only eat halal food. Some of us have -- some of us grew up Muslim and are maybe not really Muslim anymore in the sense of, like, practicing, but are still Muslim, if that makes sense. And, some of us have complicated relationships with Islam. Some of us fast, and some of us don't.

So, this year -- so last year we were all -- last year the group was very active. And, we started meeting up, and we started having dinners, and we started going to Yemeni Café on Atlantic and just like endless tea and just ordering plates and plates. And places like that are amazing because they don't kick you out. Like, there's never -- the check will never arrive unless you ask for it, which is ideal.

And it's amazing because I think we all got that from our families and the way our families sit around and act and stuff. And so, messy in that sense. And it's beautiful because I really wasn't fasting. I wasn't really -- for Ramadan until this group chat. And last year I did ten days. And then, this year I did 25, like all on my own volition. And, it's beautiful because I can bring it up in my -- in the chat, like hey, like, what are y'all eating, because this oatmeal's not cutting it, you know?

And it's beautiful because then -- and then, some of the girls can be honest like, oh, I'm actually not fasting this whole week because I'm on my period. And, like, for us to not -- for me as, like, someone who grew up male to be, like, not freak out about that is, like, so beautiful to also talk about that and to think about, like, oh, like, is there -- are there other ways you do -- what else do you do on Ramadan if you can't exactly fast? Like, are you fasting the mind or the spirit or the tongue?

And, like, to have these conversations about, like, what Islam is for us in 2018 is really beautiful because there's no right answer to it. And, some of us artists, and so to see it in the work is really beautiful. A lot of us, a lot of them are black, and so to talk about the ways a lot of South Asian and brown Muslims control the narrative of Muslims in New York and Muslims in the States, to know -- so, like, I have access to platforms as an illustrator to -- if someone's approaching me about a project and there's no -- and they want it to be -- so, I did a Mother's Day card for a group called -- I can't remember the group, but the project called Mama's Day. Forward Together, I think, does it. And they just do Mother's Day cards every year.

And so, for my card, I did one before. And then for this card I wanted to do a Somali family and just because I wanted it to be diverse. And I wanted it to look like actual families out there and not -- and to know that I have this platform and I have this moment to do something about a Muslim mother or Muslim motherhood. And, I can make this about my mom. Or, I can think of my group chat and think of the fact that there's always South Asian representation in these stories.

And so, I can either do that and just be, like, super-honest and just present it as, like, my story and this is me honoring my mother. Or, I can reach out to my friend who is Somali, and we can sit together. We can talk about, like, hey, like, I want to do this project. Do you think you can help me? And she's like, yeah, absolutely. So we did this piece together. And I paid -- I gave her some of my fee from the project because, like, that's how this should work.

And, we drew this really beautiful family with, like, the matriarch in the middle and all women and, like, babies and, like, young folks and, like, some are getting a job. Some are not. Some are fully covered, one is in a T-shirt. And in the background it's like this couch and, like, Arabic on the walls and a thing. And it's just, like, very typical. And I

even spoke to her about the fabric and what it should look like, and she sent me references, so like a true collaboration.

And, there were no men in the image. And she said, you know, it's really beautiful that you did that because that's the way her family came over here, as refugees. Her family came over here, and her father wasn't able to come. And she said that's the story of so many Somali refugees. So to have that moment, to have that -- kind of like, for -- so now to work with a Somali woman, and for her to share that with me, and for this image to now speak to other Somalis, and for this image to be out here as a card of Muslim motherhood, and it's more about, like, a matriarchy, she just said it was, like, perfect. And so it felt really, really good to share.

And the organization sent it to me, sent me images of when they shared it out at a masjid in Seattle, which is a huge Somali population. And she said the kids, the mothers, everyone was freaking out, like how accurate -- like, how this looked like them. And so, it was so beautiful. And I felt so -- like, and that came as a direct result of Messy Muslims. Like, me having this relationship, us having these conversations on anti-blackness in the Muslim community, and uplifting black Muslims and, like, things that I might not be talking about if I'm only talking to South Asian Muslims.

And in that realm, thinking about, like, only thinking about queerness, so, like, the intersectionality coming in and going out in many different levels has been really beautiful. And, since then, that group has been less active. And, another thing that came up was how a lot of the South Asians in the group were sharing things in the group that were South Asian-specific. And so, it was alienating for some of the black folks, and so the crew started to feel a little, like, not the most active as a group chat anymore.

And so, for us to kind of check that and to talk about it and to apologize, not out of shame but out of, like, oh, shoot, like, that makes sense of why that's upsetting, and so it's a work in progress. That's a version of community because here we are. And I think we're working on it. I think what's happened now is we've migrated to group chats and our private relationships where we can, like, text each other and be like, hey, like, this is happening, how are you feeling? Or, hey, like, did you see this or did you read this article or whatever, which is really beautiful.

ALI: So, I guess my last question is about you coming to Brooklyn, to live in Brooklyn. Tell me how you -- I mean, because you've been doing a lot of work in Brooklyn. Tell me the circumstances of you coming to Brooklyn and why Brooklyn, what that has meant for you.

FAYAZ: Yeah. I think proximity to my community was the primary reason. So, living at home up until 2013, and then -- well, no. Living, like, being primarily based in Queens and not really doing any work in Brooklyn or anything, and then my -- as I started going to Papi Juice in Bed-Stuy, that, like, bloodline of -- like, that vein of, like, Queens to Brooklyn was opening up a lot. And I was always on the G train, like, four a.m., like, passed out, waking up at my stop being, like, thankful, which is really great.

You know, the E train goes local at night, so that was really helpful. And then, starting to explore Downtown Brooklyn and BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], and, like, walking around Fort Greene. My first time at Fort Greene Park I remember just, like, the most -- like, those rolling hills are so special. And, like, I have parks in Queens and stuff, but like in the city. But, with my gay friends, Manhattan was such a central point because a lot of folks were coming from uptown and Queens and Brooklyn.

But, to start to feel this nice camaraderie for what was happening in Brooklyn at that time was really, really nice. And so, there was a lot of times where I always felt like a Queens kid at heart, and I didn't really want to move. But as the community and the folks I was building with was all really starting to be in this area, I knew my heart was

leading me towards that way. But, culturally, we don't really move out. We -- the idea would be that I was, like, straight and married and then had kids. And then my parents could retire. And then my brother could also have kids, and then they could start watching the kids, and we would all work. And it would be like a six-income household and, you know, great plan. Wonderful. Not for me.

But, luckily I have older siblings, so I'm off the hook a little bit. I get to be this artist. But, being able to build outside of my immediate area -- and then, 2016, I did a self-imposed retreat in New Orleans. I left New York for the first time. And I'd been traveling a little bit here and there, but I just, I, like, left. And I found a room with a friend of a friend and just, like, learned a lot about myself.

And then I came back to New York, and my parents -- so, end of 2015 my parents and I and my brother had all -- my aunt had passed, and she had left my brother and I a little bit of money. So, we pooled that, and with my parents, and the money they had saved up, to buy a house for the family. We're looking in Queens, not really finding anything nice with the amount of money, the way real estate is here. It's insane.

So, having to take -- having to go from that to -- they started looking on Long Island because both parents drive. And, they were just finding much nicer things. And I was dragging my feet, and I was like I'm not going to Long Island. I love living at home. I love it here. Y'all, like, I don't want to move out. Also, I don't think I can move out. So don't -- I don't really want to do this.

And so, but after that trip to New Orleans, I told my parents -- I was just soul-searching a lot, so I was having a really nice moment to myself. So I told them, I was like, listen. I'm down for the spot we had seen Elmont, which is a very black and brown neighborhood, which is nice, had a lot of homeowners and stuff. And so, I'm, like, really

proud of them for 25 years, 26 years in the country, buying their house for the first time. It's kind of like a major deal for them.

And this is the values that are important to them. And that whole thing of, like, recognizing my parents as people, as, like, fully realized people with goals and hopes and dreams and ambitions, this is one of them, if not the biggest, one of them. And so, to help them with that, and even, like, take this money I got from my aunt and just to give it to them for this reason, like, felt very necessary. And I knew it was, like, somewhat of a calling, like an obligation that I had, that I wanted to fulfill.

So, moved back to New York. Literally that weekend we had a Papi Juice. And the next day we moved. So my life has always been, like, this, like, really tense scheduling thing where I have everything happening at once. And, I just see it as a test and something -- that was two years ago, so, like, something I've gotten through and have learned how to navigate. And, which is a long way coming from my sister, like, spitting on me for going to Pride.

And so, it's nice to kind of like choose that moment to, like, rebuild and take into further step with my commitment to my family. And so, we moved to Long Island. I went with them. Commute started -- I was working at Warby -- retail at the time, and commute was an hour and a half one way, and so a three-hour commute every day. And it's not -- I don't drive, so it's not a thing, not for me, not someone who already doesn't have a lot of time for myself.

And so, to be plucked out of New Orleans for the first part -- I wanted to stay longer, but I couldn't for work -- and then to be placed in Long Island away from my friends, away from my family, away from my dates, away from my, like, social life and away from my gym, everything, I was just like, whoa. And, like, I would get out of work at 8:30, and there would be a train at Atlantic Terminal at 8:30. So, I'd miss that one and

have to wait until 9:30 to catch a train home, get home at, like, 10, 10:15, have to get picked up from the train station because I don't drive.

So, for a while I started biking from the train to the thing, so that gave me a little bit of agency. Also, really nice because the train would -- it was the Hempstead line that goes into Atlantic Terminal. So I would be dropped off at -- right by BAM. So, then I'd go to Bed-Stuy really easy. So, it was this really poetic thing, not like I was going to Penn Station every day. That would be really brutal. So, luckily, so I was able to kind of -- I'm good at finding silver linings in things. It was just so cold, and it was just a lot. So, biking around in March, like, every day, I was -- and so, it got to this point where I would work. I'd come home. I barely had no social life on the weekend. I wasn't going out. Or, I'd have to plan who I was staying with. And I started dating this person, and it was -- it just sucked to -- he had just, like, left an apartment, and then I lived in Long Island. And so, it was just -- and he was, like, crashing with friends while he found his next thing.

And it was just, like, the worst circumstance. I remember feeling really frustrated that, like, I really liked this person a lot. We're vibing hardcore. And I just can't -- we have no space. It felt like being, like, a teenager again. And I was 25, 26 at the time. So it was really frustrating. So I made the decision I was going to sublet in Bed-Stuy that summer. And then I was going to figure out what -- I was going to move out in the fall.

And so, when I left for the summer, my parents -- oh, so I was coming home from work, and I was -- this super-long commutes and stuff. And I would go straight to my room. And I had turned 17 again. I was slamming my door. Or I would come out to eat, and I would take my food to my room, and I would shut my room, and I would just eat in my room. And so, I was just so bratty and so -- and my parents' solution was like, learn how to drive. Learn how to drive. It'll be fine. And I was like, okay, but I'm not driving to work at 10 in the morning. And I'm not driving home every day.

And also, not being able to communicate, like, I can't go -- I can't drive to the bar and then drive home because I drink a lot. And so, or even I can't -- you know, I don't want to -- I just don't want to live like that. And so, that's, like, that stubborn side of me that has always been around. And so, I made the decision to sublet for the summer. When I subletted for the summer I picked a spot, and I told my parents, like, hey, starting May 1st I'll be in Bed-Stuy. I'm subletting my spot. My friend is going to Europe for the summer. And they're like, okay, cool. So then you'll be back after the summer. And I was like, yeah, for sure. Like, sounds good, knowing very well that wasn't the plan.

And so, I went. And I remember my first night unpacking in the sublet, really nice area with the backyard and stuff. And, I remember sitting there, and I remember being like, oh, like what the fuck am I doing? Like, why am I here? I don't want to be here. I wish I was at home. Why did I just Venmo this person \$800? Like, what am I doing? And I had the money. It was just, like, frustrating. I was like, what the hell am I doing? And then the next day was better and a little bit easier. And then, once I realized how close I was to my friends, how close I was to my favorite bars and how close I was to everything, I was like -- how close I was to work, work in 30 minutes door to door, I was like, oh, this is cute. I could do this.

So, it was really fun. So, that was May. June, July I subletted with my best friend Christian, best friend at the time, Christian. And, he -- also from Flushing, and he wanted to move out, too. And so, we lived together in this spot down the block from Oscar's house, two blocks away from Adam, a block away from where I live now, so super-central, really good location. And, that was really fun, too. My dating life was super-cute. Me and this guy were dating, and it was really, like -- we hit the stride I wanted to hit. And it was the summertime in New York, and Papi Juice had just moved to a new bar, I think. And so we were just at Baby's All Right in Williamsburg.

So, we were, like, really growing really quickly. I was biking around. It was just, like, really -- and I just turned 25. I was turning 26. And that's when you think you're grown. And, like, I was like, oh wow, like, this is it. This is my life. September, sublet was over. We started to look for another spot end of August, but we were just having trouble finding something. And so, I went back home for a month. Parents were elated. They were so happy.

And I went right back into miserable mode. And I was just like, damn, like, this is rough. I can't do this. Everything hit pause with that guy I was dating. And then, I was just like, no, I've got to go. So, I started asking around on Facebook. I started asking friends around. And then I found this spot through a friend. And, I posted a status. Someone tagged a friend. I clicked the friend's profile, and it was someone I was following on Instagram. We were following each other, this white person, David. And he was cool, very silly and stuff. And so, I interviewed at the house one day after work. And I didn't have a lot of time because I had to take the train back home, very Cinderella vibes. I always, I couldn't stay out too late. And, like, so I interviewed. I was, like, full-time at work. I guess I just interviewed well, and they texted me right as soon as I left the house. They're like, you're perfect. We would love for you to live here. And I was like, oh my God, amazing.

So, the month after that, I moved out. And I told my mom what was happening, and she was home. She was on the phone when I was, like, packing up and stuff. My friend Cristobal came, helped me pack my bed, everything. And then, when I got home, my new home that day, I was unpacking and stuff. It was really sweet. My roommate at the time, Andreas, really cool person, vegan, like, really nice chef and stuff. He was telling me how, like -- he was like, hey listen, like, you live here now. Like, this is your home. Don't feel like you need to warm up, or don't be on eggshells. Like, this is your home. Like, feel comfortable. And that was so sweet.

So, that was a really beautiful, like -- because it wasn't a sublet. It was -- I had, like, signed a lease to live there, so tiny, little room. And, it was nice because -- it wasn't great because my dad called me that night frantically. I didn't pick up. I was just, like, oh, shoot, like, I can't do this. And so -- because we just don't move out, you know? So, he was really upset. But then I started going home more often and stuff, and they were chill.

So, he kept saying, like, why move out? Like, learn how to drive. Move back home. We'll make an apartment for you in the basement. We'll, like, hook you up. My sister, too, was like, why don't you find a job at home? You don't have to move out -- all this stuff, hidden from, like, most of my immediate family until probably a year in. They were just like, he's never home when we're here. And they started to realize, like, oh, he doesn't live here anymore. And I got a lot of shit for that.

But, honestly, I don't have to explain myself to anyone. Like, living at home was really torturing my relationship with my parents. And, after all that work and that good spot we had gotten to, and moving out brought me closer. At that apartment, it was a ten-minute walk from the train to the A/C at Utica. And I made it a habit of calling my mom every day. So we were talking every day for ten minutes a day, so an hour a week. And then, when I would go home every other week on, like, Sundays, either to see my niece and stuff or just be around my family, like, we had already caught up that week. So we weren't like, how's work? How's school? Like, you know, how's all this stuff?

It was just like we can just jump into it. And so, like, my mom is my best friend now. We're going to India together in December, my first time in 20 years, which is really exciting. And so, and that couldn't have happened if I was living in Long Island. I would have been like, hell no I'm not going. Like, I want to go on my own, you know, like, craving independence and stuff. And so, from that apartment, I moved to another

room in that apartment and just -- you know, I love to cook. And I didn't know that until I moved out.

And, I love having friends over, and I love just, like, chatting over a bottle of wine or just chatting over, like, a TV show or cooking for, like, people, like a lot of people. My 26th birthday I had, like, 10 people over, and I cooked for everyone. And it was, like, incred-- great. It was so nice.

ALI: What kind of food do you cook?

FAYAZ: So, I started cooking because I wanted to work out and be on a really clean diet. So, I started making chicken and kale. And that's just like a really simple, like, okay, I'm just going to make this. And then, I learned dal from my mom. And I literally had to sit there one day in Long Island with my -- oh, also, like, I love going home now. It's so nice. Like, they have a huge house. It gets great light. Like, we sit on the porch -- we sit on the back porch. Like, I'm, like, in my room sometimes over there, or they have a huge TV. And so, I just get to, like, kick back.

Mom, like, keeps feeding me, sends me home with all these groceries. Basically everything she wants to get out of her freezer she's sending me home with, which is really nice. I'll be, like, stacked for a month, which is really good. But, I'll try -- I like to try new recipes. So, tonight -- maybe not tonight, but I did salmon burgers a few weeks ago. I love doing -- I get, like, ground chicken or ground turkey. I'll make, like, a few meals out of that. Like, meatballs and, like, pasta or sliders or, like, anything that catches my eyes. My salmon's really good now. I, like, pan-sear it for a little bit, and then I bake the rest of it, which is really great.

Yeah, I'm having fun. I just saw this new show on Netflix by that Persian woman -- *Salt, Acid, Fat, Heat*. And it's like this Persian chef. And she just travels the world and is breaking it down. And it's making me want to cook again, which is exciting. But I love cooking. And I feel like it's the best way to get with people. If we're at a bar, I only

really want to be at a bar for happy hour or if we're, like -- if we're going out to dance. Like, if I really just want to dance as, like, a mode of expression or just, like, a night out, like I really am craving.

But if we're just going to a bar to hang out, I'd rather we get a six-pack or we get a bottle, and we go to my house, and we put on some music, maybe a little YouTube party, and just, like, talk. And that's all I want to do is just, like, talk to my friends and talk to my peers and just get to that same, like -- as earlier, just get to that nitty gritty and get ugly and cry and talk about it and just be real with each other. That's the soft spot for me with my relationships.

And so, it's really nice to have the space to do that. And I moved just at the top of October to this beautiful -- to Bed-Stuy in a beautiful duplex. And my room is huge, apartment's huge. Everything is beautiful. And I live with the same roommates as the last apartment, so it's like really nice family vibes. Everyone's, like, family-oriented, a block away from Oscar, a block away from Adam. We took a cab home from Papi Juice the other night, like, together instead of having two stops. Like, these little things.

And always growing up, maybe growing up in that house together with all my family, I've always dreamt of living across the street from my friend's house and stuff. And so, I probably won't cook tonight but it's getting late. But I know Oscar's cooking, so I'm probably just going to pop by very conveniently. So that's the kinda -- that's the vibe. That's my community vibe lately.

ALI: Well, thank you very much.

FAYAZ: Yeah.

ALI: If there's anything else you want to mention that you think we've missed, I think we've covered everything that I wanted to.

FAYAZ: Yeah, I think so, too.

ALI: Thank you for sharing your oral history with us for this project.

FAYAZ: Yeah, thanks for having me. It's cool to kind of uncover things I forgot I've been sitting on, sitting with.

ALI: Okay.