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Oral History Interview with Alsarah Abunama-Elgadi
Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.13
Interview conducted by Zaheer Ali on August 31, 2018
at Brooklyn Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn

ALI: I'm Zaheer Ali, the Oral Historian for Brooklyn Historical Society, and we are here at Brooklyn Historical Society. I'm here with Alsarah, and this interview is for the Muslims in Brooklyn Project. Alsarah, if you could introduce yourself to the recording, giving your name and when and where you were born.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: My name is Alsarah Abunama-Elgadi. I was born in Khartoum, Sudan, in 19-- [date redacted for privacy], 1982.

ALI: And can you spell your name just so the transcriber has it?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Sure. A-L-S-A-R-A-H. My last name? A-B-U-N-A-M-A-hyphen-E-L-G-A-D-I. [laughter]

ALI: All right. Awesome. So tell me what it was like growing up in Khartoum.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I lived in Khartoum until I was eight, and I had a really happy childhood, I think, a really fairly typical middle-class happy kid. My parents -- well, I guess my parents weren't particularly typical. [laughter] My parents were political activists, grassroots activists, and they still are that. I almost feel like all their jobs that they do on the side to earn money is to just finance that. So I grew up in a very politically conscious household where both my parents worked and both my parents had educations. We lived in the capital. I was born in Khartoum, so the largest city in Sudan, and I was kind of a typical little city kid, played in the family courtyard, played out on the streets all the time, got into trouble, good stuff.

ALI: How -- do you remember how you learned about your parents' work, like what -- was there something or a moment where you were like, "Oh, this is what y'all are doing"?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, I'm -- one of my earliest memories is driving around in the car while my mom and my dad tried to convince people to register to vote. And, like, I grew up going to rallies, so I don't remember them not doing -- like, I don't remember

having to be introduced to their work because it was always not around, and, like, the lectures of, like, "You don't talk about what Mommy and Daddy do at home to anybody," were from a very young age. "You don't tell people who comes over ever, ever."

ALI: And why is that?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, because even at the time, in 1982, the [Gaafar al]-Nimeiry regime had already been, like, kind of squeezing in and becoming a lot more conservative. And my parents were very radically left and very much about secular rights and grassroots rights, and so even by the time I was four or five they were campaigning for one of the -- for a free election where there hadn't been one in a while. So it was the 1986 elections, and there were a lot of secret meetings and things like that because it's in Sudan. It's not -- it was not a politically free climate even then, even though then it was already better -- it was better than it was about to get. So I guess it's like -- yeah, when -- when -- it was always there. Yeah, it was just always there.

I just remember when we started becoming more fearful, when all of a sudden you weren't allowed to talk. And I do remember the first time my dad got picked up from the house by the secret police. I, like -- it was like -- we were standing outside, like, in front of the house, in front of the courtyard, and I was six, I think. I was six, and I was with my cousin and with him, and he, like -- he'd open the door to do something, and the police were just standing there. And they were just like -- they were like, "We need to talk to you." So he, like, shoved me inside. And I, of course, snuck my head out, and I was looking, and they were talking to him. And then, he just -- I don't know what was being said. They were murmuring to each other, and then they all got in the car and left. He just wanted to get them away from the house, I think. And he came back the next day.

ALI: The next day?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mm-hmm.

ALI: What was that evening like for you and your family?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: My mom tried to make it seem normal. Like, I remember, like, they always tried to make it seem normal, and -- and Sudanese households are very much loose. You know, like, I slept at my grandma's house for summers on end, you know what I mean, so it was just -- the idea of someone not sleeping in the house wasn't something that I noticed right away. It became super noticeable, though, after then because there was all -- like, a tension after that time when they came to the house. That wasn't there before. And a few years later, we left.

ALI: Tell me -- tell me about the circumstances of leaving.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was in 1991, and one of my dad's friends showed up in a body bag, so -- and, like, I remember my parents conversing about it and me hearing bits of that. And my dad was really, really worried, so my mom looked for a job anywhere in the region just until things blow over. So they ended up -- we ended -- my mom ended up taking my sister and I to Yemen with the idea that my dad would come right afterwards, so we went to Yemen to kind of wait for things to blow over before we'd come back. And my dad got arrested then, and he was in jail for, like -- in and out of jail for about a year.

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: And then, from there, we finally managed to get him out of the country, which was a really ballsy move on his part. He had -- it was -- he basically walked straight out of the airport with just a different name. [laughter]

ALI: Wow. Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Oh my God, I was -- "He's got balls." I was -- you know, they're always going to be my heroes for that. I was like -- any time I think things are scary, I'm just like, "No, they're not scary. They've got the -- look at what my parents did." So he came to Yemen, and I remember still when he arrived in Yemen. He came, like, in the middle of the night because -- and it was after me asking for a while, like, "Where's dad? When is he coming back?" And my mom was like, "He's going to come. He's just going to come. He's just finishing work. He's going to come."

Abunama-Elgadi, Alsarah, Oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, August 31, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.31; Brooklyn Historical Society.

And then, he showed up, and then he was completely different, of course, you know, after, because Sudan had established torture houses at that time. So they were arresting all the political prisoners in torture houses. So my dad had just spent a year being tortured, which no one talked about right away. And then, we needed to talk about it because it just -- he was having intense PTSD [Post-Tramatic Stress Disorder], like, really intense PTSD. And, you know, the idea of -- there really wasn't -- we didn't have the culture of therapy, so there wasn't that space for it and, like, how to talk about it.

ALI: We didn't even have the language of PTSD, so --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: No, I didn't even --

ALI: -- tell me -- because you said he was different. Tell me --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: -- tell me what you saw or experienced if you can.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was just -- he was just different. He was so much -- he was so jumpy. He was so jumpy, and he seemed so afraid all the time. Even as a kid I could feel it. Like, he felt afraid. And then, it was just -- it was -- you couldn't -- you couldn't drop, like, a glass of water on the ground. The noise would just -- he would fly into this rage. And, you know -- and that was -- it was just like I could see all of that in him and -- and just -- and the tension in the house. And it's just -- it's hard to explain in words.

ALI: Do you remember if it were -- if it was ever explained or, like -- you know, was it ever -- you said, like, there wasn't language for it. There wasn't therapy, but do you remember any conversations where there was an attempt to explain to you what -- what was happening?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. I think it was a year and a half later or two, because it's, like, I had gotten old enough to -- I was like, "I demand an explanation. I demand an explanation for why he's so crazy," because I was like, "If he's just like this, then I don't want to be around. Like, if there's a reason, someone -- someone tell it to me, because I can't live with this guy." And that's the reality of also, like, dealing with -- living with people who have gone through torture, because torture works. It breaks people. It absolutely fucking works. And my dad is a really resilient person, because he took that

experience, and from it he -- his way of empowering himself was to start a Sudanese victims of torture group.

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: He started one, and he started, you know, collecting stories from different people and started a chapter for Amnesty International to just deal with these things and basically documented and brought the ghost houses on the map, on the international map as something that's happening, that people need to be aware of. So that started -- he started that campaign in -- in, like, '94, '93, '94, when we first moved to the states.

ALI: So while you were -- before we get to the states, while you were in Yemen, was there a significant Sudanese population, or how -- how did you relate to the -- the -- at that time your adopted country?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, Yemen was a really interesting place, because Yemen was the first place I realized I wasn't an Arab. So for me, Yemen has a very important role in my life. [laughter] I was comfortable there. There was lots of Sudanese people but not that many. Sudanese people really didn't start to migrate in large ways until, like, the late '90s, didn't move like that. In the '80s, there was definitely a lot, so Yemen -- the population in Yemen that was Sudanese were all highly educated Sudanese people that were working as teachers, tech folks, like, that kind of stuff. So it was interesting to relate to that but also, at the same time, experienced incredible racism for the first time.

ALI: Because you said this is the first time you realized you were not Arab --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mm-hmm.

ALI: -- so prior to that, that was the identity that you --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was told. Yes, that's the identity I was told in school. That's the identity that was -- that was the whole identity of the regime that took over in the coup in '89. The idea was that Sudan is an Arab and Muslim country even though the majority of the population is neither Arabic or Muslim. [laughter] So that was the role we were supposed to be, and a huge part of North Sudan was, you know, Muslim, but most of them weren't Arabs, at least not as a native population. Yeah, we spoke Arabic,

but if you spend, like, a hundred years making other languages not allowed in schools we will all speak Arabic.

ALI: So do you -- do you remember the -- was there, like, a first moment or a moment in -- in Yemen that jarred your sense of -- of how you identified?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was a series of moments, but I think what captivated them was, like, a bunch of my schoolmates. We were walking back -- I was walking -- like, my mom put me in public school. I don't know why, but she decided that was a great idea for me. So she put me in public school. So I'm walking back home from school. It's, like, a 30-minute walk up the mountain, and some of my friends are -- well, my schoolmates at the time were walking with me because they lived up the mountain too. And they had seen my mom drop me off, and they saw my dad for the first time. And I'm darker than both my parents in skin tone, and the conversation the next day all through school was like, "Well, I met her mom, and I saw her dad and how -- you know, they're both such nice colors. How come you're such a bad color?"

And that was the -- that was, like, the cul-- the culmination of a lot of comments about my hair and my skin tone and my this. And not that there wasn't shadism in Sudan, because there is, and there is racism in Sudan, but I was part of the ruling group. So for the first time, I was coming into a situation where I'm not. I'm an immigrant, and I'm from somewhere else. And, yeah, I speak the language, and I thought we were the same, but you get there, and you realize you're not the same.

ALI: So did you -- did you talk with your -- your parents to negotiate a new identity, or how did -- how did you then understand yourself?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, I didn't talk to my parents about it. I -- I don't know why. I remember I saw my dad's face though. My dad heard them, like, because they made the comment as we were walking up the hill. And then, the next day, when the conversation just exploded, you know, it was -- and my parents were -- my parents never identified as Arab. But it was never a conversation I was conscious of, because in Sudan it was just -- I just wasn't conscious of it. But in -- when we got to Yemen and I

just started to be like -- I started to say, "I'm not like them. I'm not one of them. I'm not like them." And I was just -- you know, that combined with, like, the daily dark [inaudible], like -- and my mom was just like, "You're right. We're not like them. We're better." [laughter]

So it was just like, "We're not like them." She's like, "We speak Arabic, but we're not Arabs. We're Sudanese. That's different. We're Africans. It's different." And I was like, "Well, why do we speak Arabic?" And then, you know, she would tell me a little bit about the history of arrival. And then, the story we were told about Islam arriving, you know, historically is, like, "Oh, Islam was welcomed into Sudan with loving arms and came through trade." And I'm just like, "Yeah, and then if you wanted a job or you wanted your kids to go to school or if you wanted any of that you needed to pretend to be Arab and Muslim. And if -- you know, and if you weren't Muslim, you needed to pay a tax for it, and that tax was in slaves and in gold. Let's talk about the history of the Ottoman occupation. Let's talk about the Anglo-Egyptian occupation." But that stuff never gets talked about inside that part of the world. We're still under the cultural veils of Arab colonization, a colonization we don't talk about at all.

ALI: So what was your family's religious background, and how -- how were you negotiating that in light of these emerging fissures that you were experiencing?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, my mom and my -- we're -- we're all raised Muslim. We were raised Muslim, but my dad does-- my dad is an atheist, and my mom is a socialist. Both of them are not very religious. I was raised -- my -- all of my extended family, though, is extremely religious, extremely religious. [laughter] So I was -- I was raised fully fluent in -- in the religious culture. I had to memorize the Qur'an in order to graduate from school year to school year, so it was mandatory religious studies. So I was -- very much grew up in the religion. It just wasn't enforced on me inside the house, which I think was good because it gave me room to question, only with my parents, of course.

The extended family was not very okay. But, you know, my parents always gave me a lot of freedom to kind of just come and go with it as -- as I want, and I think, honestly, maybe it would have been -- it might have been different if I had decided to become really religious. I wonder how my dad would have taken that, actually. [laughter] It might have been an awkward conversation. But -- but we were always raised with the idea that we're culturally Muslim. Like, I don't know. Like, for me, with Sudan, it's like you don't really know where cult-- where the culture and the religion -- where one starts and one ends.

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, they're so mushy.

ALI: Yeah, so -- so when people say "culturally Muslim," for you what does that mean?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: To me, it means, like, you're like me, you know. You grew up in the religion. You know about it, and -- but you don't necessarily practice it for whatever reason. My personal reason, I don't believe in the institution of organized religion. It turns it into an institution that's based on consumption and basically just, like, one step above capitalism. It's sad.

ALI: Are there things that you do -- again, because we don't know how to parse this, right, so are there things that --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. So it was like for me -- but I still identify --

ALI: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- as culturally Muslim, especially in this day and age.

ALI: Right. So are there --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: What -- at that time, because we'll -- we'll come up to the future, come up to the present -- but at that time, what were some of the things that you did that you think -- in addition to the education that you think were remnants of that cultural Islam?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, I mean, we celebrated every Ramadan and every Eid, and so to me that made me pretty, pretty -- you know, I went to Mawlid every year because I

loved the candy. [laughter] You know, it was just like, "That's our Muhammad's birthday party," [laughter] so --

ALI: What -- tell -- tell me what -- what that was. How did that manifest, that celebration in your community or your culture?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mawlid in Sudan is amazing. It's one of the largest Sufi gatherings, and so there's just nonstop singing and dancing and people just chanting and all the different ways of the Sufi paths, because Sudan has a huge Sufi community. Actually, the majority of the practitioners are Sufi -- of Islam in Sudan, which is, I think, why before the -- this particular regime, we had a very flexible relationship with the religion. You know, it's just like it goes with everything. And so -- and I think that's why for a lot of Muslims in Sudan it was like it was never an issue. It was like, "Oh, it's just not an issue." You practice. You practice all of your traditions along with Islam, and I don't think that's different than any other country. Every country has a different form of Islam because of that, not very, very different, but, like, you know, the magic of Islam is that it can -- it does leave room for interpretation.

ALI: Yes. Yes.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So that was part of the magic. But Mawlid in Sudan, especially, is like this big gathering of all the different Sufi heads, and there's all these people selling, like, different beads and little blessing hijabs, you know, if you need the sheikh to give you a little prayer pocket to ward off the evil eye, all kinds of also weird spiritual stuff as well as lots of candy, lots of brand-new clothes. So it's just a big party. It's a big party, and it's just like -- it's like the Christmas holiday market that happens here on 14th Street. You know, it's exactly like that --

ALI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- but with more dancing. [laughter]

ALI: Yeah. So tell me about your exposure to -- to music and dance as -- as a child, as a young person. What kind of music did you grow up with in your -- in your household, early household?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I grew up with a really big variety of music. My mom loves music and loves art, and, like, I grew up also with a lot of artists coming in and out of the house even though my parents weren't artists. But some of -- you know, I grew up listening to a lot of Mohamed Munir, who's, like, an Egyptian-Nubian pop singer, listening to a lot of Fairuz, who's a Lebanese singer, listening to a lot of Mostafa Sid Ahmed, a Sudanese singer and songwriter, a lot of Mohamed El Amin, a lot of aghani al-banat in general, girls music. Mum also loved Indian music, so I listened to a lot of Indian music. I listened to a lot of American, Americana folk music. My mom really liked Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and Miles Davis, so I just -- I grew up -- like, musically speaking, I had a really rich musical background but also a lot of political music.

Like, one of my earliest musical tapes that I remember stealing from the collection that was mine was this little underground tape that was being passed around by a collective of artists who were both writers, musicians, and -- and singers who had put together a choir in the music school. And they wrote all these songs and arranged them for the choir, and they were all anti-imperialism songs and pro-human rights songs that they were passing around, like, to kind of, to aid in this wanting to vote thing that was happening in 1986, which was, again, one of my earliest rally memories and all those things happening at the same -- 19-- I feel like 1986 is when my memories started, because I think I was four at that time. So I was, like, really finally conscious of things and remembering how excited they were about getting people to register to vote and getting people to understand what was happening and this tape being passed around because it was banned.

So it -- we weren't allowed to play it to other people, but I would -- so I wasn't allowed to play it outside. I had to only play it in my room or in their room, and I remember listening to it all the time in their room and listening to it and memorizing the whole tape front to back. And I still remember all those songs. I still remember them, and I remember after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in the -- in the 2000s

-- was it 2010? No, before, before that, 2006, when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was sign and the war between the North and the South. I did a remix or, like, a revamp of one of those songs, actually, and I did it with another Sudanese artist. His name is Oddisee. He produced it.

ALI: Was this the vote project?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: The vote song. Yeah, the vote project, exactly.

ALI: Yes, yes, yes.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: And that's from that cassette tape.

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah, I couldn't find all the names of the writers, obviously, but I gave -- you know, I gave credit to the collective and tried to talk about it in a few interviews. But because it was an underground tape, nobody wanted their name on it. It was a little hard to get all the names, but I wanted to do that as an ode to that. That tape to me is one of, like, my -- that was one of my earliest musical foundations, really, like, in terms of --

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- that was mine.

ALI: What -- did the tape have a -- a name or the collective have a name?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: No, it was just called -- it was called the Leftist Writers Collective.

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was every -- writers, musicians.

ALI: That's pretty awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was amazing. It was super radical, and my parents just hung out with -- like, with people like that, so it was just -- I grew up around really radical and enlightened and educated people.

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Not -- not financially very wealthy, but very education-wise.

ALI: I mean, what's so crazy is that -- to hear that this is happening in the mid- to late '80s, that a tape is circulating that's raising -- designed to raise the consciousness of the people. And then, you have, like, hip hop in the United States. There's a conscious movement among hip hop --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Happening at the same --

ALI: -- it's just wild to think about, the role that music plays, you know.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Has, because it's like --

ALI: And I think I -- we also have, like, an original -- like, the first political musical encounter that we hold onto or conscious-raising that we hold onto.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Exactly, as children especially. And when you realize the power of this medium -- like, because I remember that was the first time I realized, "This is a really powerful tool, this music thing. You can tell people stuff, and they listen to you. What?" [laughter]

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It just -- it was amazing to me, and it's -- so I'm still grateful for that tape. So I hope I get to meet some of those writers one day.

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: So tell me about the circumstances that led to you moving from Yemen to the United States.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So in 1994, there was a really brief, like, three-week war that broke out in Yemen, a civil war. And my mom and -- my mom was working for a US-based organization at the time, a nonprofit organization that worked on women's development. My mom's route is women's development, particularly rural to urban movement. So a brief war broke out, and they -- they just needed to -- they -- Yemen needed to shut down for a little bit as a country for a second, so they deported everybody that was not a citizen. And so we just kind of got -- we got evacuated, basically, out of Yemen, and we arrived in the Saudi Arabia airport. And they were like, "Pick a place to go."

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So we picked the place to go, because we couldn't go back to Sudan. My dad was still wanted. So was my mom at that point, and we couldn't -- we could have gone to Egypt, but no -- my parents -- none of us wanted to go to Egypt for some reason. My mom still had six months left on her contract with this job, and she was just like, "Why don't we just go to the states and then, you know, go to school and wait for things to blow over?" Again, the "Wait for things to blow over, and we'll come back." So we went, and, you know, she was -- as -- when we got there, my mom decided she didn't want to go back to Yemen. Going back to Sudan wasn't an option, so both my parents went back to school. So we ended up in the states with my mom, my dad, me, and my sister all in school at the same time.

ALI: And where in the United States were you?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: We first moved to Boston for four months, and then we ended up in Amherst, Massachusetts.

ALI: So do you remember -- was there a point where your family decided, like, "This is now going to be our permanent place"?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. I remember that, because I remember not knowing what was happen-- like, remember deciding we're going to stay in America?

ALI: Mm-hmm.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Oh, yeah, that happened only, like, six years ago.

ALI: Oh, really?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Honey, denial is real. [laughter] It's so real. [laughter]

ALI: Well, you -- because it's very common for immigrants to plan to go back and --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah, they were planning. [laughter] It was all planned. And my mom was like -- would continue to go back every -- every vacation we would go to Sudan, and she would go chasing after some paperwork or some other paperwork so we could set ourselves up, so that we could get the house sorted, that when we moved back we can build a house on the land that she owns that, you know, she was supposed to get

because she worked for the agriculture department. And she can't find it now, and then you've got to go -- you know, like, we spent the entire holiday --

ALI: Yeah. Yeah. [laughter]

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- chasing paperwork. [laughter] And then, finally, like -- finally, like, seven years ago, I was just like, "Mom, you can't still be going back to Sudan. Dad, convince her," because my dad, like -- about 10 years ago, my dad was like, "Nope, deuces." [laughter] And I was like, "I'm not doing this. I went back for a visit. These people are terrible still." [laughter] So, you know, my dad let go of it a bit earlier, and my mom is just like, "No, we can still go back." But my dad was just like -- my dad let go of it earlier because he was -- he was -- he saw the change in -- in the generation. I mean, right now, you have a whole generation that grew up under only one regime that knows nothing about the history of Sudan prior to eighteen seventy-something and thinks before that everything we know is about the Arab Peninsula and the Muslim empire. What about us? Why don't we know anything about that? You know, and you have a whole generation that grew up thinking that there has never been anything but this, you know, and -- and you really -- I can't -- like, you cannot strip a people more efficiently than when you take away their history.

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It's the most efficient --

ALI: Because the -- it controls the political imagination and everything. Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Completely. Completely. It's like taking words out of their vocabulary.

ALI: Yeah. Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, they can't even think of the concept because the word is not there, you know, and so -- and that's just, like, case in point in Sudan. It's so, so easy to see, you know, and you've raised a whole confused generation of people that are just confused about what's happening and who they are and where they fit into this entire paradigm and why they feel things but no-- nobody is giving them the words to reinforce what they're feeling. And I felt that way kind of like when I -- that's how I felt when I went to Yemen, and I was just like, "I thought -- I feel these things, and I don't

know how to explain them. And now I realize it's because I'm Black, and you think that makes me not one of you," which is good, because that forced me to read my history and be like, "Oh, shoot, you owe me mad stuff." [laughter] So my new thing is about reparations on the other side. [laughter]

ALI: Yeah. Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know? I'm just like -- because we don't talk about it. You know, like, there was this really, really long and strong history of slavery going from East Africa into the Arab Peninsula and a taking of -- of resources and things like that that I -- if I hadn't left Sudan I would have never read about. I would have just never read about it. It wouldn't have come across my mind.

ALI: So when -- you're about 12 years old when you come to the United States.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: Twelve years old is already, like, a crazy year for any child or any young adult to be going through those kinds of changes. To have to move to a completely different land, tell me what it was like for you to encounter the United States in Boston and Amherst and Massachusetts as a -- as a young person who had lived in Sudan, was born in Sudan, lived in Sudan, lived in Yemen, and now -- now here, with the United States's own kind of way of organizing people. Tell me what that was like for you.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was really confusing, especially because it's -- understanding American racism takes a second, especially in the Northeast, because it's very polite. So you're -- it takes you a second to notice where you're standing, especially if English isn't your first language. It takes -- you don't underst-- and sarcasm is very much a Northeastern thing only. Like, the rest of the world doesn't practice it the same way. Like, they practice it, but in other ways. [laughter] So it was really difficult for me to understand where I fit in. I -- I had a very different experience. I had a really different experience than -- than -- I don't know.

There were -- we -- we moved to, first of all, the most, like, provincial, just country-ass place ever. Like, we moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, and I was between a cow farm

and a corn farm. I was livid with my parents. I was just like, "I am from the city. What am I supposed to do in this country place? What am I supposed to do here? What are these people doing? What are all these cows here? I've never seen a cow this close." [laughter] Like, I just -- I mean, I had, but still, like, why are they just everywhere? So I was a little taken aback by America, to be honest, when I first arrived. I was not impressed. I was not impressed at all. And then, we went to school, and people were aggressively unfriendly in middle school, aggressively unfriendly.

ALI: How did you work through that, or did you? Were you able to --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I withdrew into myself. I did not deal with -- I just -- I became completely antisocial, so it had, like -- I went through, like, six years of not dealing with people and just kind of retreating into music and into my books. I just -- I read a lot. I was an avid reader, and I -- once I discovered the listening section of the public library, "What?" Book in hand, headphones on, "I hope you all burn down." [laughter] I was silent and extremely angry, like, [laughter] not a happy kid and not a happy teenager, like, in that sense. And I didn't fit in anywhere. I didn't fit in in -- here I am, I -- I have an accent. I sound funny, but I'm clearly Black and I'm from Africa. And so now I'm not just Black. I'm just, like, a worse kind of Black somehow. I don't know how, because I'm an immigrant and, you know -- and I'm Black. You know, and it's clear-- it's clearly all based on just ignorance. They also thought that we swung like monkeys from the trees. But I also, like -- with that, I just ran with it. I convinced someone I had a pet tiger in the house, and if they fucked with me I would kill them. Like, people are so stupid. [laughter]

ALI: Were you able to develop a group of -- a social network or social friends or a group of friends or activities that you did --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: -- beyond the books and the music?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. I got -- you know, by the time I was in ninth grade, my mom, I think, had begun to notice my extreme withdrawal. And she transferred me to this new, like, experimental school. It was a performing arts charter high school, and so she

transferred me there, mostly because I was cutting school a lot by that point. But I was going to the library, so it was really hard to punish me, because it was like -- I was at the library. I didn't stay in class. No, I didn't want to be there, so I left. So she transferred me to the school, and with that school just -- it just -- it allowed me to really run with myself. It was like, basically, a school of freaks and geeks. So all of a sudden, the fact that I stuck out like a sore thumb no matter where I went, all the time, was okay, because everybody else stuck out here. So it was really cool to be around performers, because with performers nothing was too weird. And when I discovered the joy of that, if people are looking, give them a show.

That took -- that really liberated me, you know, and taking that whole thing of, like, feeling really, like, shy because people are constantly staring at me, whether I want to or not, because I just -- from Yemen to here, a small town, everyone is constantly looking at you. And when I -- when we first moved to the states, there was really nobody in the north-- the closest people from Sudan were in Boston, and it was -- and they weren't a family. It was, like, a -- it was just one family, and then the other nearest center where there might be some Sudanese was in the DC, Virginia area. So we were really isolated. So, like, a lot of the people around me didn't even know where Sudan was, and they didn't know -- they were like -- they didn't know where Sudan was. They hadn't met any Ethiopians. It was just, like, a confusing time from Amer-- for Americans before YouTube, [laughter] before they could look things up so they could seem smarter.

ALI: Right, right, right, right, right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: But so -- [laughter] so we were alone, and I was just -- you know, once I went to that school, it made it -- it made it easier. I found -- I found that the easiest place to hide is in plain sight. So it was -- it's that -- that kind of took me down another path of discovering music and then discovering "world" music, quote-unquote, big quotes around the word "world."

ALI: So tell me about that, that discovery, or maybe it was a rediscovery, of music in your high school experience.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I mean, it was a rediscovery because it turned out at that -- what I discovered -- what I discovered at that point, even though I thought I was listening to pop, is that I was listening to, according to them, "world" music. [laughter] I was like, "I'm listening to pop in another language." [laughter] So that was the first come-to-Jesus we had. [laughter] And they were like, "You listen to world music?" I was like, "What? I don't." I was like, "I listen to pop just like you. Pop, look. See. It's got synthesizers in it." [laughter] They were like, "No, it's not -- it's not pop. It's in another language." I was like, "That's all it takes? Okay." [laughter]

But then, I met my biology teacher, who was also the world -- who specialized in Balkan music. She was an amazing fiddler and really loved Balkan music and taught us a whole bunch of old folk-timey music, and the biology teacher started a choir where she taught us songs from the Balkans and from different parts of the world, the Appalachians Mountains. And I loved the fact that America -- for a long time I didn't know the Appalachian Mountains weren't some faraway worldly place. They were just in America.

But -- and then just kind of started learning, learning about the idea that you can -- you put a -- you can put a sound to a culture and a sound to a time period and a sound to a people, you know, and a sound to a mood, and the idea of dividing it like that. And it's like all of a sudden we went from "world" music to -- there's the Balkans. Why are the Balkans called the Balkans? They're called the Balkans because they include these many countries, because back in the day in history the Balkan Belt was this. And then, the idea of just looking at the world as a circle instead of a line, I came to that through music. And so for me, it was just like with the music -- and that was music and dance, so I was dancing and singing, because they go with each other in my head. Music, singing, and eating go together.

Abunama-Elgadi, Alsarah, Oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, August 31, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.31; Brooklyn Historical Society.

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: They all go together. To me, they, like -- they light up the same spot in my brain. So I did a lot of that, and that school was -- while I didn't feel like I belonged in terms of actual friendships and social media, that was the first time I felt like I could flourish. I really felt -- I felt that, and for that I will always be grateful to that school.

ALI: What was the biology teacher's name?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: [laughter] The biology teacher's name, her name was Mary. I'm not going to give you her real name --

ALI: Okay.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- just in case she doesn't want me to give her real name outside.

ALI: Right. Well, shout-out to Mary the biology teacher.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Shout-out to Mary the biology teacher.

ALI: I always -- as a -- as someone who taught in the school system for a little bit, I always -- any opportunity we have to highlight the role of educators in transforming these -- in intervening in our lives is always good, so shout-out to your biology teacher.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Shout-out to the bio teacher. I just -- I was like, "I don't know if she's public about her life."

ALI: Yeah. No, no, it's fine. So tell me, as your high school years were winding down and your family certainly had been -- you know, came from an educated background, so what were you thinking about what your choices were or your options were, and how did you then make that choice?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I knew I wanted to study music. I just wasn't sure I wanted to be a musician. I thought at the time I wanted to be an ethnomusicologist at that time, so there were only two programs in the states. So I applied to both schools, and -- well, actually, I lied. I applied to only one because I missed the deadline for the other one. [laughter] I was really -- I'm really bad at paperwork, like, horrifyingly bad. I also am just bad at testing. I'm a terrible student, [laughter] just --

ALI: Well, no, you're an artist, so maybe your --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- I slept through it. Yeah. I think different--

ALI: -- thinking is channeled in a different way.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah, I think differently --

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- which is why I'm really happy about that performing arts school, because in that school they taught me the fact that I learn differently. So they gave me the tools for teaching myself stuff. But I wanted to -- I honestly didn't want to go to college at all, but that was super not optional with my parents, super not optional.

ALI: What did -- did you know what you wanted to do, or you just did not -- you know, what were you offering them --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I just didn't --

ALI: -- to do?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I didn't have an alternative.

ALI: Oh. [laughter]

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: That's why they were just like -- my mom's response was like, "Do you think you're White?" [laughter] She was -- that is just like, "I don't know who you're hanging out with, but you're not like them." She's like, "You are an immigrant with a funny name and an accent, and I need you to go to school and make money because I need to retire." And I was just like -- she was like, "And also, because if you can't give me a real plan for what you're going to do with yourself, it's just not optional. Your sister is exactly four years younger than you, and she's going to school, because one of you is going to make sure I retire." [laughter]

So, you know, it was just like -- that was that. So just -- I had to come up with something to do, so I was like, "Okay, I'll study music." And my parents were like, "Really? Can't you study something real, like something with a job like computer sciences?" And at that point, it was laughable, because I was like, "Mom, I don't even own a computer, [laughter] and I can't even drive. What are you talking about? I'm not good with equipment." But I decided to do music with a concentration in ethnomusicology, because then I could tell them that I was going to be a teacher, even though one year

into that university I knew I did not want to be a teacher and I did not want to study ethnomusicology and I did not want to be in school. I just wanted to drop out and move to New York City and start my real life.

ALI: And so what school was this?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was at Wesleyan University.

ALI: Which is in Connecticut.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mm-hmm.

ALI: Did you get to come visit New York while you were in college?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I did. I got to come visit a few times, but my love affair with New York started when I was 16. We were coming to visit a friend of my mom's, and I remember looking out the window and being like, "This is the most majestic place I have ever been in my whole life," and just being blown away by it. And at that time, for some reason, we went with my mom to meet her friend, and there was this big Sudani diaspora gathering. They were having an Eid party, so we went to the Eid party. And at the Eid party, I met a girl who was my age who was Sudanese, first time since I moved to the states, brain exploded. "Mommy, Mommy, please, can I hang out with her tomorrow? Please, can I hang out with her?"

So she takes me -- she's two years older than me at this point, and she was born and raised in New York. So she's been taking the subway since she was eight, so we just took the subway everywhere. And it was just, like, seeing people from everywhere, all kinds of differences. Nobody looked the same. Everybody had a funny accent. Everybody was just -- everything, it was everything. It was the whole universe in one place, and it was just -- it was -- no two people were alike. It was so -- I can't explain it. It was really like falling in love for the first time. I was just -- and I knew I was going to move here. I knew it. I just knew it in every bone in my body. I was like, "I'm going to end up here. It's going to be my home for ever and ever and ever." And I just kind of worked my way north -- like, south. I worked my way south slowly, Connecticut first, and then I got to Massa-- and then I got to New York.

ALI: Do you remember what part of New York that was?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was in Brooklyn.

ALI: Oh, this was in Brooklyn.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: This was in Brooklyn. That's why I was like, "I moved to New York to move to Brooklyn." I knew exactly where I was going to be. I moved here. I was like -- I remember walking around Fulton Street and then going all the way down towards almost East New York and then going out towards, like, Ditmas Park. I just went with this girl everywhere. We'd hop on the bus and hop off and just, like, went to the Arabic neighborhoods in Bay Ridge, and then she'd just -- and I was like, "How do you know all this stuff?" She was like, "Well, I go with my parents." And I was just like, "This is amazing."

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: And I felt so free, because, you know, you take the subway, and I was just like, "It doesn't matter how late it is, how early it is, whatever." And just that fou-- like, that feeling of profound freedom and access to people, that's what it takes to find a way to my heart. [laughter]

ALI: That's awesome. So tell me a little bit about your experiences as a student at Wesleyan. What kind of activities were you involved in? How was your relationship, if you had one, with the Muslim -- other Muslim students? Were there -- I don't know if there were other Sudanese or African students. What -- who did you begin gravitating towards while you were at Wesleyan?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, Wesleyan was a fairly diverse place for, like, a liberal arts private school because it was need-blind at the time. So it was fairly diverse, I would say. There was definitely a Muslim Student Association. There was an African Student Association. I was a part of all of them, but I was also a music and dance major, and I had two full-time jobs. So I was just a really -- college for me just is like a hazy, super stressful four years, just -- I was extremely stressed out all the time. I could not wait to finish, could not wait to finish it. So my relationship with people was casual. Like, I was always very -- I was always very conscious of the fact that I'm culturally Muslim and I

like to be out in people's faces as "This is another look for Islam," because I was constantly surrounded, I think, by hijabis, especially the Muslim Student Association. It was very conservative and pretending not to be, and I had an issue with that. So I would join just to be like, "Yeah, also Muslim. What's up? [laughter] Miniskirt on. What's up?" Because I was just like --

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- I was like, "There needs to be a space for the spectrum of this. Like, this isn't one thing. Being Muslim isn't one thing. It's like being a person. It just doesn't look one way." So I was a part of that, but I was also, again, so busy, so busy. And then --

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- so I just -- I hung out with people at parties or I didn't see them.

ALI: During -- during the time while you were in school, 9/11 happened.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mm-hmm.

ALI: So do you remember that day, that moment, or what -- how did you think?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yes. I --

ALI: What was going on? Tell me about that experience.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I overslept that morning, and I didn't turn on any -- like, I didn't have news or anything, so I just, like, overslept that morning, and I just ran out of my room. I remember running out of my room to make it to dance composition class and just getting there panting, 20 minutes late. And then, I got there, and everyone was crying, and, like, half the class wasn't there, and the three people that were there were crying. And I was like, "What happened?" And everyone was just like, "Didn't you hear?" And I was like, "No, what happened?" And they were like, "There was an attack in New York."

So I just ran out of the classroom and went back to my room and turned it on, and, like, I remember, like, just seeing this, and I was just like, "Oh, my God, what's happening? Is this real? Is this real?" And then, the first thought I remember having was like, "Oh, dear God, please don't let it be anyone -- anyone related to anywhere I'm from. Please, dear God." And then, they're like, "It's terrorist Muslims," and I was just like, "Fuck.

We're fucked." I was just like, "We're dead. We're totally dead." That's how I felt at the time. I was just like, "We're dead. The rest of us here are dead." And then, it was just like -- I didn't know what was going on, like, in terms of, like, "Is this real? Is this not real?"

And that's when I really began really trying to assert my space and my existence as a Muslim person in terms of just, like, A, for the completely Islamophobic crazies that are acting like you could act crazy because someone has a particular religious background, and me being like, "I don't care where I disagree with my hijabi sister on. If you touch her, I will kill you." You know, and also having a space to educate people about the spectrum of this and, you know, differentiating between political jihadis and people who practice the religion. I was just like, "That would be like calling all Christians KKK members."

And at the same time, also, having a, like -- before that, it was me. I pulled back against the conservatives, and now it's a -- you know, it was a pullback against the Islamophobes, but at the same time balancing what was happening inside the Muslim community in terms -- because there was also a need inside -- a reaction in the Muslim community to, like, shut down, just close off, make sure you protect yourself. And that was not going to be the way we survived this. We couldn't isolate ourselves into a ghetto. We had to stay inside the community, the larger community, or it would have just -- it happened anyways. It's still happening. Look where we are anyways in terms of the levels of Islamophobia, in terms of the levels of just what people are doing on the streets. It's just --

ALI: Did you have any particular kind of personal experiences where people maybe asked you things or said things to you that made assumptions about where you fit into this story that you had to, like, respond to?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, until that point, a lot of people weren't even aware I was Muslim, I think, because I'm not visibly Muslim, you know. So they just didn't know what I was,

but -- so there was a lot of nonsense that was spoken around me at first, and I had to assert myself in terms of like, "I'm Muslim. And if you keep this up, you're going to meet my fist." [laughter] So it was just one of those. And then, eventually, it was just like -- yeah, people just kind of didn't know at first. And then, all of a sudden, I think people became more conscious of the fact that there is a spectrum of Islam, even though not really that much. Really, we're talking about urban centers where people understand the idea of a spectrum of anything. As soon as you leave cosmopolitan places --

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- it's a little harder.

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: But over the last 10 years I feel like there has been a big movement of -- at least for me, with East African Muslims that are moving towards smaller centers and smaller towns, so there seems to be more of a conscious -- a rising of consciousness in general.

ALI: Did you have any conversations with your family, you know, around this time? You're coming from a family history of political persecution. Was there --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: By the Muslim Brotherhood.

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: And the state.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: Was there a fear or was there preparation? Was there, like -- what do you remember those conversations with your family being like?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: My dad's fear of the Muslim Brotherhood is more real than any American, and he is not -- he is completely -- and I -- and I am right there with him because we saw the ramifications of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political faction. And the Muslim Brotherhood is a political faction. It's nothing but a political faction, and it is one that is willing to use any means necessary. And we saw what that does to the --

we saw what that does to a nation, to a people. It's like every time I go to Sudan, like, wearing a hijab is mandatory, you know what I mean, and Sharia law is a mandatory thing. And I'm just like -- I don't agree with the idea, Sharia -- and people -- and the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to convince humans that Sharia law is God's law when it's indeed a manmade law based on a series of rules read in God's book. But this is a manmade, non-sacred thing, and I will step on it if I want to. So it becomes -- there was a lot of conversation about it in our household because, you know, before this my dad just wanted nothing to do with that. But after September 11th, we had to be all hands on deck about how we negotiate being Muslims, especially because our house got egged after September --

ALI: Really?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yes, our house got egged. Our house, like, in tiny, liberal Amherst, Massachusetts --

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- you know, which is, like, a small college town. And just like -- after -- for the next month after September 11th, lots of weird things like that kept happening. So we needed to figure out what we wanted to do about it. For my dad, it was really all about reclaiming Islam from a radical perspective, so he started -- he was -- he started this thing or he joined this thing called Progressive Muslim Initiative, and it's just a collective of Muslims who are extremely progressive and trying to have different voices. And it's all about reclaiming your faith so that you can become a part of the Muslim conversation so that you can push against it, being one way or the other, but also in the states, for us, all about our identity. Like, we are culturally Muslim, even what we practice. What our institutional religious practice may be is different. But, you know, if it's going to be banned and people are going into camps, we're going to the camp. [laughter] Hopefully never, but --

ALI: Yeah. Did you -- similar to your father, did you get involved in any kind of formal activities yourself, or was it -- for you, it was more interpersonal, informal exchanges with people?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was interpersonal and informal exchanges with people. At college, I was part of a bunch of different initiatives and after college, but I grew up an activist. Like, I attended mandatory meetings twice a week since I was six, mandatory, with, like, all the political groups. I was the official typist for the Sudan Victims of Torture Group. I was also the official typist for the Amnesty International chapter in Amherst that my dad started and headed. Like, I had a lot of jobs growing up with activist parents, [laughter] so I left the activism world when I was 21. I quit. I was just like, "I quit. I think we have a lot of things to work on outside of regime change like human change."

I was like, "I have more problems with some of these activists that I'm working with than with the regime I'm in. I have more problems with these people. They are stifling, and they are just as oppressive but from a different angle." You know, and we spent, I think, a lot of time -- and also, for me, like -- because once I got to college, when I got to university, I did my field research for my senior thesis. I decided to do a senior thesis, which is what you do for a graduate degree, but I decided to do it for a BA because I wanted to get the credentials for the ethnomusicology program, which is a graduate program. So I decided to go to Sudan and do research. So this was my first adult trip without my parents. I started going to Sudan without my parents --

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- like, and I'm running around. I'm trying to get paperwork done. I'm trying to get, like -- I'm trying to visit zar [spiritual] houses. I'm going to places that are illegal and trying to do these things. And I went home, and I did that for two weeks -- for two months and to come back and write my field. So that for me, when I got to Sudan, is when I began my personal relationship with Sudan, you know what I mean, finally, as an adult. I was visiting before then.

You know, when -- we spent nine years not able to go back when we first moved to the states, but after that we would go back every year and a half, two years to visit, but,

again, always under the mentorship and the wing of my family. So to go back and start my own relationship at, like -- I was -- I think when I went to do the research I was 20. It was the first time. I just -- I got into fights with the police on the streets for not covering my hair. I got arrested for the first time because I got into a fight with a police officer on the street for not covering my hair, and I wouldn't back down. And then, [laughter] you know -- and then, it's just like trying to figure out who you -- how you get paperwork done in Sudan, which is impossible, figuring out when you need to put on the hijab and take it off because you just need to get things done, you know, figuring out really the reality of navigating as a Sudani in Sudan, even temporarily.

And after that, I started coming back on my own, and that's actually when I quit being an activist, because I was like, "I'm much more interested in changing people," because that visit I had was the first time I was meeting and discussing things with young people my age. And I was just like, "You're 20. You've never seen anything but this, and what you're saying is more dangerous than this regime can ever be because you are so just in a bubble of miseducation combined with, like -- with oppression, combined with a policed regime for 20-something years, combined with oppressive poverty. Like, you know, it's like -- and I'm having conversations with these people at university, because it's like I had to get my paperwork through the University of Khartoum --

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- there, so I'm talking about educated people --

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- that I'm having conversations with where it was like, "We can -- are unable to have conclusive conversations about anything because deductive reasoning wasn't taught."

ALI: And for you, what would human change or changing people look like, or what is that -- you know, as distinguished from the kind of work that, say, activists would do or people who see themselves as activists?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Sometimes, you know -- Edward Said once said, "To exist is to resist," and I think what he meant is like, you know, sometimes you just -- for me, I think he meant that sometimes your very existence is its own resistance, especially when you deliberately exist in a way that is radical and is against a norm and you're doing it in a way where you connect people to one another. So for me, it became, "I want to see people change. I want to say things." Music is the fastest way in my opinion to make someone hear, because when someone walks in and listens they become -- words are inherently reductionist, right? You know, you're reducing huge concepts and feelings and thoughts into, like, a single word that's made up of a couple of letters, whereas music, it's -- it's waves. It's pictures. It's vibrations. It's a lot of communication happening on multi-sensories and beyond words, with words and beyond words.

And so people are in a space, I think, of clarity when they listen to music, at least a place of openness that allows for clarity to exist. And so, for me, what I want is -- what I hope to do with my music is make the kind of art that vibrates with people in such an honest space and in such an honest way that it allows for the space that people are attending to be a place of connecting, to create the space for you to connect and change one another, you know, to connect the global network. The world is a network, and the magic of globalization -- we all talk about the bad things, but the magic of globalization is you're not alone. And just, you know, when you used to just be one tiny voice barking in a small little room, you could just join a thousand little, tiny voices and just become a huge shout.

And a lot of times, if you're in a space that doesn't allow for your physical safety for that, having music or having -- having the politi-- the digital access to an outside world gives you that. So for me, the whole point of the art is to sing songs about things that maybe other people won't necessarily sing songs about, and that started with my own story, sing songs about me. So --

Abunama-Elgadi, Alsarah, Oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, August 31, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.31; Brooklyn Historical Society.

ALI: So you were doing this work and doing this project and coming to this point where you -- you are, like -- music is going to be the way for you, so let's talk about how that happens. You graduated from college, and then you moved in 2004 to --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: New York City, Brooklyn! Brooklyn. I moved to Ditmas Park.

ALI: -- [laughter] to Ditmas Park. What was -- what was Ditmas Park like when you first moved there?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Oh, my God, it was so -- it felt like it was not in New York City. Back then, it was just like -- Ditmas Park was, like, the end of Brooklyn, you know. It was just like where -- when people went to retire. [laughter] You know, I lived in a large, lovely Victorian house, you know, with a porch next to Coney Island Avenue. It was like -- so it was just, like, right there, and I spent my first couple of years just, like -- the closest thing to me was Brighton Beach. [laughter] You know what I mean? Like, my hangout was Brighton Beach, so my Brooklyn experiences, my first two years, was very immigrant-y, because that area is heavy immigrants.

It's like one block Bangladeshi, one block Pakistani, one block Hasidic Jewish, one block Russian, one block Georgians, one block Ukrainians, one -- and all these people don't like each other, [laughter] and they all live right next to each other and shop at each other's houses, you know. And so it was just like -- it was that but very much the home, because Ditmas Park is -- it's, like -- a lot of families still live there because it's big, big, so it's just really diverse, extremely diverse, but still very country-like and so green and lush. Now, you can't get a place there ever, but that's where I first moved. I moved there, and I worked in the city in the Meatpacking District as a waitress.

ALI: What was that like? What was that experience like, working in the service industry in Manhattan?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, Manhattan was a different beast than -- because I had done it before as a teenager and in college. That's, like -- I was a waitress in college and, you know, in between, in the summers before that and, like, leading to college, so it was my -- but in New York it was different because it's like -- New York is one of the few cities

where you can become a professional server. Like, it's a job. It's a real, legit job where you can make money and savings and put your kids in college and, like, have a house.

And so you meet really interesting kinds of people. Like, you know, these are people who don't want a nine-to-five, but you have to be really smart to be, like, a really good server in New York, like at a high-end place. You need to memorize so much about wine, about food, and, like -- and so I got into that food world like that. And at the same time, it's filled with, like, actors and musicians and artists, so I was, like, hanging out with all kinds of creatives at work. And we just waited on people, and, like -- but I was working, like -- but the Meatpacking District right then was just like -- it had just turned over from being really scary to, like, being the hot new party spot, like, right before it turned into Euro-trashy, [laughter] you know, that -- that magical place in between. So it was cool. It was really interesting, and it was like work-- you know, I worked at a place right by the dock, you know, so it was just like walking past the sex workers every day and getting to know them. [laughter]

ALI: So it is around -- was it around this time that you met Haig [Manoukian]?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah, I met Haig --

ALI: Tell me -- tell me about your -- how you met Haig and -- and how that relationship grew.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I met Haig six months before I moved to New York.

ALI: Okay.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So I moved to New York in November. I met Haig in June of 2004, and I -- it was my first professional gig, paying gig. I had gotten hired to -- I had gotten hired by this woman named Beth Cohen, who plays violin, who met me while I was at Wesleyan. She lived in Boston, and she had gotten hired to put together a little orchestra, a live orchestra for a Greek dance company. And this Greek dance company wanted people who could -- they wanted a singer who can do Arabic Mwashahat and a couple of classic Arabic pieces, which I could do. So I was like, "I can do that." And Beth knew I could do that, so she hired me for the gig, but I had never really worked with an orchestra or, like -- or with anything like that in that kind of a setting, so it was

not necessarily my shining moment. [laughter] I did all right, but it was not my best moment.

But I met Haig then, and we had a couple of rehearsals together. And I was like, "Hey, I'm moving to New York in a couple of months full-time," because back then I was just driving back and forth from Massachusetts all the way to New York and back again. And I was just like, "I'm going to move full-time," and he's like, "Oh, yeah, duh, duh, duh. You know, hit me up." He gave me his number, and he only had a landline. Until he died he only had a landline. And so I called him. I just called him. He's much older than me, and I was just like -- and he was just like, "You know, you --" you know, he was like, "You've got a really great voice. You know, you've just got to -- you've just got to work a little. You've got to practice a little bit though." And I was just like, "Yeah, you know, I get really nervous. You know, I just get really nervous. I can't sing in front of people," because it was like I had, like, crippling stage fright at that point.

And he was just -- he just -- he was working with some other musicians who were putting together a project called the Sounds of Taarab. And it was doing cover songs in Swahili, love songs from Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam and Mombasa. And it's a style of music that was really about the mixing of -- it was about the meaning of taarab classical musical from the Arab Peninsula with traditional sounds from Zanzibar and from -- and from Kenya. And tarabu, the history of tarabu, started out as a kind of music that was being played -- because Zanzibar was a part -- was a colony of Omani -- alsultana elomania, Omani Sultanate. Yeah, Omani Sultanate. Yeah, the Omani Sultanate, so it was a part of that. And so in the courts, you know, the sultan only wanted to hear Arabic classical music, and so he had -- they trained some of the musicians in Zanzibar to play this music for him. And so they would play only in the royal court, and eventually the music trickled down into these social clubs in Zanzibar itself. And it started being played around, and that's around the -- like, because it's --

yeah, around the 1920s and '30s it started to trickle down and out of the courts and into the streets.

And after that, the language in it changed from Arabic to being sung in Swahili, and the instrumentation changed just a little bit. And they started adding a lot, you know, so you still have this big Arabic orchestra with the qanun and the violins and the riq and the doumbek, and, you know, once in a while you'll have, like, an ngoma drum in the back, rarely, but once in a while. And then, so -- it just eventually kind of evolved from being something that only high-end, upper-class men played to something that, all of a sudden, women were leading this, voices in the front. And that was this huge, radical thing in the '40s when it started to happen. And, you know, eventually it became the -- the sounds of, like, the streets, of weddings. People played at weddings. It, like, became just popular music.

And so for -- when they started this, they just started this project, and they wanted to do these songs, like, covering from the '40s to the '80s. And they were looking for a female singer who could do it, and Haig called me. And he was like, I think you'd be great for this project. I was like, "Well, I don't speak Swahili though." He was like, "But you could teach yourself." I was like, "Yeah." [laughter] So it was like -- because Swahili is like a combination of Bantu languages and Arabic, so for me learning the Zanzibari accent wasn't hard. I didn't learn Swahili at all, but I taught myself how to sing it, which was where, actually, my ethnomusicology training had come in handy, because it's like -- I just spent all this time teaching -- just learning about the history of the area and teaching myself about the songs and learning and just, like, playing things over and over and over and over in my ears until I really got the hang of it and could memorize all the songs.

And from there, actually, kind of for me came another turning point in my interest in East Africa in general and in Sudan specifically, looking at Zanzibar, a place where it

was colonized by the Arabs so clearly until so recently. You can still see where the slave market was, and having that as a place to start a conversation about Sudan for myself and where I come from and how I want to relate to myself and really reclaiming my history from another perspective and from -- from a fuller perspective, a more big-picture perspective, and coming back to our music from that perspective. And so, for me, that naturally -- there, after meeting Haig in that band, I also met Rami, who I started the Nubatones with, this --

ALI: We should give last names, full names, so --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Oh, right.

ALI: -- Haig's full name is --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Haig Manoukian. Rami's full name is Rami El-Aasser, and --

ALI: And what were their -- what were their backgrounds? What was Haig's background?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Haig, Haig is Armenian. His family fled to the states after the Armenian genocide, so he -- his dad was a preacher with an intense case of PTSD. So Haig ran away from home to the big, bad city of New York when he was 17, and music saved his life. He taught him-- you know, he grew up listening to the oud and taught himself the oud. So he moved to New York in the '70s and was living and playing music here since then.

And then, Rami, Rami El-Aasser, Rami is half-Egyptian, half-Quebecan, grew up in Pennsylvania. And Rami, Rami's interest -- so Rami and I would have all these -- we became good friends outside of just music. We became very good friends, and Rami and I would have these conversations about the relationship between movement and music, specifically about the Nubian songs of return, mostly -- we would talk about that mostly because he was working on his PhD at the time. PhD or master's? Master's, sorry, his master's at the time, his master's thesis, which was really about the correlation and the intersection of food development, political climates, and identity, and specifically in Upper Egypt, where the Aswan area was and the High Dam was built.

And as a musician, also, for him it became his interest in the music, how -- the music before the dam and after the dam, and we would talk about that. And he was like, "Yes," and me listening to this music, growing up with it and now relating to it -- the music before the dam, different than after the dam, the whole genre of music about returning to a home that doesn't exist, so relating to that as immigrants in a whole different time period, a whole different kind of diaspora, me growing up in it, him coming back at it as, like, the descendant of another person. You know what I mean?

Just all of us coming to these stories about movement through music and how we relate to them from different angles, and we can all see the commonality in that. And he was just like, "Yeah, it'd be cool to do a concert just about, you know, Nubian music before and after." And I was like, "It would be great to do a whole band about movement and music." [laughter] So the band when it first started was just going to be, like, just -- Nubian songs of return was the idea when we first did it. And then, from there -- but that would have just made it a cover band, and I didn't want that. I was like -- I was like, "I think we can be more. We can be a lot more, and, in fact, I'll write some songs to make that happen." So I started writing songs for the band.

ALI: Who were the other members of the band?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: At the time when we started, it was Haig Manoukian, Rami El-Aasser, myself, and Mawuena Kodjovi. That was -- that was just the four, and Karine Fluerima was with us in the beginning. She played keys on four tracks on the first album. Korin Florima left the group before we made our first album and moved to California, and Haig passed away one month after the release of our first album. Haig was replaced with Brandon Terzic, who's another oud player, originally from Ohio, but another person who was saved by music and who is a chronic nomad. He's kind of moved around his whole life. He was just living in Egypt for a little while, and I don't think he has a real place right now. He's a nomad.

ALI: What was the process like for you to have to write new music and record it? What was that like for you and -- and the band?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, it was -- it's a learning curve, you know. Writing music is a learning curve. For me, in the beginning the process was very unsure. I didn't really know how to do this, especially because I don't play an instrument. I sing. I sing, and I write songs that way. I sing the song, and, like, I have an idea of what I want the soundscape to be like, but I'm not going to play it out for you. So I need to be with a band who's going to arrange with me but who's also willing to hear me, because I have a really clear idea of where we want to move with this. But I also wanted to be around people who I trusted musically and I like their sound, because music at the end of the day is a communal experience. So in the beginning, you know, like -- in the beginning, we had a lot more covers, and then I brought in one song that I wrote. I was like, "Guys, I wrote this one song. Would -- would you want to arrange it? Maybe we can play it together. You know, maybe you guys like it." And they liked it.

ALI: Tell me where you -- I want to hear more about this, because this -- I would be scared.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was so nervous.

ALI: I would be scared.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was so scared. You don't know.

ALI: Tell me about that. Tell me about this.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was so nervous. I was so nervous because I had been trying to make my songs happen for a long time, and I wasn't -- I didn't know how. And the music world is really competitive, and it's full of a lot of people that want to shit on you. And if you don't play an instrument like a guitar or the piano, even though I know my way around the piano -- I'm not going to play it though. Like, I'm not good enough. [laughter]

ALI: Right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I just, like -- I had been with a lot of people who were like, "Oh, no, you don't know what you're doing. No, let me do it. No, you -- you wrote the song, but you wrote it wrong. It's not supposed to go like this. It's supposed to go like that." And in

the beginning, you let people tell you you're wrong about what you write, and then eventually you realize that, no, they just don't want to count complicated, because the way I count is complicated and when -- because I write in a really not necessarily straightforward way. They're pop songs, but they've got a little eh to them, so there's always, like, an extra bar here, an extra beat there. We're going to modulate now, change the rhythm now, you know what I mean, and it makes it not a straightforward kind of song. And it means that people who want to work with me on it need to be not straightforward kind of people, people who are willing to commit to the work. It's a lot more work than, like, "Here's the sheet music. Just play three chords, and let's move on."

So in the beginning, I was really nervous about that, and I was just like, "I don't know how this is going to go." I was nervous about singing the songs in front of people. I wasn't sure how that was going to go, but then that was really the whole point of starting the Nubatones for me. I was -- and I knew that that was the whole point, that I wanted to move towards original material. So we ended up -- the first song we actually recorded was my song, so, like, "Rennat" was the first song we ever recorded as a group, because I didn't want the first song we recorded to be traditional, because from the day we started the group and I decided it was going to be a group, not just a concert, I was just like, "Okay, what is my five-year vision?"

And I was like, "In five years, I want to have my own repertoire, and that starts with the first building stone." So I wanted the first album to have a nice combination of both, but I also wanted to make sure it had traditional songs in it so people understood the music world we came from, because I knew no one knew what we were talking about, especially in New York. And I -- I mean, I recorded every-- I paid for everything out of pocket, so it was just like -- until we get, like, to the distribution, then we got a label to come and distribute it and market it, Wonderwheel Recordings, a tiny label also based here in Brooklyn. But I didn't think the album was going to make it really far outside

New York. Like, so I thought I would just have to explain where Sudan is and how Nubia used to be this place between Sudan and Egypt, and it is both in Sudan and Egypt at the same time. [laughter] And people were like, "What? It cannot be. The borders." I was like, "It's a border. It's imaginary." It's just it.

ALI: So to your process, was there -- so I'm interested -- was there a time lag between the point where you were like, "The song is ready," or, "It's done," and then bringing it to the group, or were you just like -- was it just, like, ready, and, "I'm going to bring it to the group"? I want to kind of get into that. [laughter]

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: There was definitely a time lag. There was definitely a time lag. There was, like, a goo--

ALI: Like, how long did you sit with it where you felt like --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: That -- I mean, honestly, with "Rennat", I sat on that bad boy for three years.

ALI: Wow.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I was just like -- because I started writing songs, like, way before I had a band.

ALI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I had been writing songs since I was 16 and just not doing anything with them. I'd just, like -- just write them for fun because it feels good. It's therapeutic, you know? It's like --

ALI: How -- how -- when you write a song, what -- how do you -- do you record your vocal or --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Mm-hmm.

ALI: Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah, I record my vocals on my laptop. And then, if I have, like, any vocal harmony ideas, I'll record them underneath them.

ALI: Oh, okay.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Sometimes I'll have an idea even for, like, how I want, like, a bass line to go, and I do it. But now that I work with, like, a group all the time, I try not to tell them what to play. You know, like, I try not to. Like, I'll -- I'll steer, but I really believe in

this idea -- I genuinely believe that it's important for everyone in a band to be involved in what they're putting out. Otherwise, you have -- it's not a band. It's a bunch of session musicians, and I want the community of a band. I really want that family vibe, you know, and, like, I always like to think of, like, a band is -- a band is like a hand, yeah? You need -- and, oh, my sister joined the group, by the way, three years after we started the band.

ALI: Okay. Awesome. All right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I forgot to mention that, my sister Nahid, Nahid Abunama-Elgadi. She joined the group after Korin left. A year after Korin left, she joined the group full-time, because that was when we could finally afford to bring her on full-time. And -- yeah, and she -- she does backing vocals, additional percussion, and we just got her a little mini-keyboard. We're taking a little -- we took our -- a creative sabbatical this last May, and we're going to take another one, have her work on that too. And now we take creative sabbaticals. Now we're -- we finished our second album. We have a process.

ALI: All right. All right.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know? Sorry, I know I'm jumping all over the place. [laughter]

ALI: No, it's good. It's good. It's good. While you were doing this, so while you were working on this album, the first album, and doing recording on the side or you were doing some freelancing, what kind of conversations were you having with your parents given their dreams, you know --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: For me?

ALI: -- parents' dreams for their children and then --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: -- having to negotiate what the children decide they want to do? Tell me a little bit about that.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, I told my parents when I moved to New York. I was like, "I'm moving to New York to become a musician, and that's what I'm going to do." And they were like, "You're not --" they laughed. [laughter] They're like, "You're not going to survive this," and I was like, "Yes, I will. Watch. I'm going to prove it." And my parents

were like, "We're not going to support you. We're not paying your rent, you know. Like, you're going to have to find a way to do this by yourself." I was just like, "I know. I'm going to do this by myself. I don't want any help, not that you can help me anyways. I don't want any help, and I'm going to do this." And they're like, "How? Are you going -- " and I was like, "I don't know. I will figure it out, though, when I get there."

And then, they were like, "Well, are you going to sing in English?" I was like, "No, I'm not going to sing in English, actually. I just don't know why not right now." [laughter] I just didn't want to sing in English right away. I just didn't. I would ra-- I had all these songs that I wrote in English, and they were -- and they still are around, and they're probably going to get revamped maybe on the next album. But I knew I wanted to make music that I can -- I can take home to Sudan with me and have people maybe relate to it a little bit, just a little bit. I wanted my aunts to be involved in the story that I'm creating here, you know. I wanted to be the bridge.

ALI: What were some of the themes that you explored in your first album?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Well, the first album was a combination of love songs and love -- I mean, kind of -- they're all what you could call traditional songs that were love songs and then original songs that were slightly political, slightly political. Yeah, like, "Fugu" was a fairly political song. "Rennat" was -- it's much more esoteric and about an ambience and an atmosphere. I also like to write songs in ways that are about a mood or a moment that -- that I feel after having a series of thoughts, because I really believe in the fact that music and songs are -- need to leave room for the listener, because outside of what I'm doing with my song, once I write the song and record it, it's not mine anymore. It's gone from me now. It's yours, however you experience it as a listener, and so it doesn't matter what I think beforehand. It should have room for you and how you feel. I want you to feel a mood that I'm feeling. I want you to feel a space that I'm feeling. But if you want to know exactly what I'm talking about, you need to come to my concert and be in my experience. But this -- the songs themselves are for you to do with as you please.

ALI: When -- when did you feel like you had completed, like -- in this process, what was the moment where you were like, "This is it. This is -- we have what we need for an album"?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was -- when was it? It was after Haig did his solo piece, because it was like -- after he did that solo piece, I was like, "We're done with this album. This is finished."

ALI: And when did you learn about Haig's -- his -- his health, because you said he passed a year -- a month after --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: After.

ALI: -- the album came out? So how was that process, working on that, and did you know that -- that, you know, it was possible that he may pass?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, he -- it's like he told us he had cancer a few years before he passed, but he said it in a way -- you know, like, he said it in a way that made it seem very manageable, like it's being managed. And then, I realized it really wasn't being managed. Like, I guess, he told me as early as 2007 -- no, 2008, I'm sorry, as early as 2008, and I remember just being -- and he was like, "No, but it's really fine. It's totally treatable. I'm fine. I'm fine." So -- and then he never brought it up. And then, four years later he brings it up again, and he's like, "Yeah, I'm going in for treatments now." I was like, "I thought you had taken care of that already." And then, after that, just -- we all just kept it moving. He was so hopeful about everything, but I do remember when he started going to the treatments.

There was a certain moment where I just knew that he wasn't going to get better. And if we were going to have Haig on our first album, we needed to get our first album together now, like now-now. So I recorded the album in two-thousand-- we started recording in 2011 -- '12, 2012 is when I was just like -- I borrowed money. I scraped together money, and I was just like, "Let's go. Let's fix this. Let's finish this." So we finished it, mixing it, by the end -- like, in 2013, and -- yeah, in 2013 we finished mixing it and mastering it. But then, I had nowhere to take it. I didn't know what to do with the album after that. I was like, "I have an album and nowhere to take it." So I hit up this

friend of mine, Eric -- DJ Eric the Red, and he -- he and I used to work in this company called Giant Step. He was -- yeah, remember Giant Step?

ALI: Mm-hmm.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So I was, like -- I was an assistant at Giant Step for a couple of -- for, like, two years before I got fired. [laughter] Eh. Hey, getting fired when you're young is really good for you because it's like -- you become fearless about failure after that. You're like, "Psh, I've failed before. I could do it again." [laughter] But I hit up Eric, and I was like, "Eric, I don't -- I finished an album. I made an album, and I'm -- do you know any small labels that might be interested in putting it out? Can you help me in any way?" And he introduced me to his friend Aaron and Nickodemus who owned this label called Wonderwheel Recordings. And Wonderwheel Recordings wanted the album right away. They were like, "We love it," especially because I gave it to them as, like -- it was finished. It was mixed, mastered, with a photo in the front and everything. So -- and then, a friend of mine did the artwork for us. You know, it was like one of those -- it's a DIY project. So with release dates and stuff like that, it took, like, another six months to release the album after, like, the couple of months it took to, like, negotiate and talk to the label. So the album didn't really come out until -- yeah, just until 2014.

ALI: And this was *Silt*.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: This was *Silt*. That was our first album.

ALI: What was -- what was it like to have -- was it -- I guess you had a release party. Tell me what it was like the first time that you could present yourself and your band with an album that people could get their hands on.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was amazing and scary. It was really scary, like, because I wasn't sure anyone was going to come. You know what I mean? Like, you just -- it was a concert with just us, and it was my band, and it was all my responsibility to make sure --

ALI: Where was the concert?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: It was at Baby's All Right in Williamsburg.

ALI: Okay. Okay.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: The place had just opened, and so we played there, and it was -- it was excellent in terms of, like -- the turnout was great. People came. People were really excited. I couldn't believe people came. I was so excited that people came for that show. So I -- I remember just feeling kind of surreal, especially because that whole year was really surreal. That year I had just -- what happened that year? Oh, my God, I had just joined the Nile Project and was like -- I did a residency in Aswan, in southern Egypt, for, like, three weeks and then worked with all these amazing musicians from up and down the Nile. I had gone to Somalia for the first time, to Mogadishu, to do this little, tiny festival, this -- this open-air festival. It was, like -- it was just -- but it was the first one in a really long time and the last one in a really long time. And it was a really weird, weird experience to do that in Mogadishu. And then, yeah, so it was just like a lot was happening.

So by the time I landed in the show, I was just like, "What's going on?" And I was talking so much, like, during the show. I was just, like, a chatterbox, to the point where, like, Rami at one point just started playing the song over me. [laughter] He was just like, "Stop talking." And it even got to a point where I was like, "I don't care. I know I'm talking a lot, but I have the mic." [laughter] And it was just like -- oh, gosh, but, no it was really cool, now that I think about it. It was like -- I had never paused to think about that moment. I went to visit Haig the day of that show, because he couldn't -- by that point, he was too sick to play with us. And so I went to visit him and showed him the album, and I was like, "Look, we're going to play all of this tonight. We're going to play all the lines you had." So it was good. It was a really good thing. It felt complete.

ALI: So as your, now, profile is increasing as a -- as an artist, as a band, some of the special performances you had, one was the first time you got to play in Sudan in 2015. Tell me how that came about and what that experience was like for you.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: That came about really interestingly. There's this woman named Nahid Toubia. Nahid is a retired doctor. She was the head of the pediatric surgery, blah, blah, blah, blah, so she's just, like, a regular lady. And she loves the arts and

supporting the arts, and she came to New York to visit some friends of hers here and came to my show at Joe's Pub. I had a show at Joe's Pub as part of Toshi Reagon's GoodFolk. She did a show at, like, a mini-festival called, I think, GoodFolk. GoodFolk, that was what it was called. It was called GoodFolk, and it was in April. It was in April, I mean, of that -- the year before or two years before that. Anyways, I'll send you the link to that show.

So she came to that show, and she saw me, and she was just like, "Would you want to play in Sudan?" I was like, "I'd love to play in Sudan, but how, and who would want to bring me to Sudan?" [laughter] I was just like, "How would you bring this whole band to Sudan?" And she was like, "Do you want to put together a band in Sudan?" I was like, "No, I do not. I want to bring my band with me as oppose to spending three months training random people." And she was just like, "Well, I would love to have you," and I was like, "I would love that." And I thought she was just talking, but then two and a half years later she was just like, "Are -- are you still interested in coming?" I was like, "Yeah." And by that point I had spoken to Nahid a few times and, like, had put her in touch with some other friends of mine for some other things, so we had -- we had a rapport.

And she was just like, "I really would love for you to come. You know, we have an opportunity here at an international private school to be able to put on a concert without -- you know, and get you the permit without anyone stopping you." And I was just like, "That would be great to be able to do that," because getting permits is a real big deal, and I would not be able to get a permit on my own. My stuff is too radical. I'm not covered. It's just -- it's too radical. So I -- she organized all of that and did it inside the grounds of this private school, which has this huge amphitheater in it that they let people use.

So we did a show there, which was a fundraiser for a youth organization that she had started called Ana Lan, which means "I will not." And it's an organization started by Sudanese youth for Sudanese youth against female genital mutilation, and it's about raising consciousness, because Sudan has really high, high female genital mutilation rates. And so this whole idea of this initiative was about having young people educated about it and educating other young people about it with zero outside funding and zero outside influences, especially foreign organizations. So we did a concert to raise funds for them. All the proceeds went to that after they covered our tickets.

ALI: So how -- how was this experience for you, because here you are, the daughter of a family, of parents who -- basically, your family had to flee Sudan for their public engagement work, their activism, and here you are returning to do a public engagement in a very different way? What was that like for you?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, is it selfish to say I didn't think about my parents? [laughter] I know it's selfish, but I'm going to say it. I didn't think about them at all. [laughter]

ALI: Anyway, here you were -- as a little girl, you were, like, hiding this tape away of this music that's so transformative, and here you get to come perform. Tell me what that was like.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: That was amazing, because it was like -- we did that show, and we did a show the night before too. It was -- you know what was amazing? It was the first time I've been -- I had my music received like that. So for me it did not feel about public work. It felt about, like, coming home. It was about coming home for me and knowing that there is room for me there, like, because it's like a lot of my story with Sudan is, you know -- I've been like this my whole life, and it has not been okay. It's more acceptable now that I'm more public, actually, because for -- I don't know why. For some reason, people find that -- maybe they just talk less. Maybe I'm older, and they just -- people talk less because I shut it down real fast. But I'm not sure.

So a lot of my relationship with Sudan had -- was very much based in rejection not by me with Sudan but both ways, feeling like I'm being really rejected by it and then -- and also rejecting it in -- in response, almost in reaction, and feeling like you can't be fully yourself and be this and be that and be this, and then realizing that all of this is just delusions in my own mind. I was born Sudanese. I'm going to die Sudanese, but I'm not limited to just one thing. I'm -- being Sudanese is not one small way of being. It's such a huge way of being, so multifaceted, as multifaceted as the number of languages we have, cultures we have, musics we have. So it's okay that I want to write my own songs in this way. It's okay. There is room for all the ways. So for me, it was a really, really important and healing experience.

ALI: You've mentioned your extended family is more conservative than your immediate family. Have they been to your performances, or maybe were they at your performances when you were there? Like, did you have -- have you had responses from -- from people in your family in that respect?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. You know, they came to our show. They all came to the show in Sudan, and they were super supportive. They're super supportive of it, but, you know -- and they've -- and they've always been -- my mother's family really loves art, and my father's family has always just been much more, you know, like, square about that, like judges and doctors and pharmacists kind of thing. So for my mom's family, even though -- even with the religious tension and all, they love music. It's not a problem, you know. So they were happy that I did -- there were issues with the fact that I'm a public person and I get out there and I'm in front of people, but they seemed all right with it. They all came to the show, and they were super supportive, so that's all that mattered, and my father's family too. They came to the show, and they were super supportive. But, you know, like, real talk, when it comes to this stuff, it's like -- by the time they came to the show I had been doing professional music for 10 years. So I was really happy that they were coming and super supportive, but I didn't need it then. [laughter] You know what I mean?

ALI: Yes. Yes. One of the collaborations that I wanted to ask you about, but it's not -- we didn't talk about, actually, is your work with Wazina Zondon and Coming Out Muslim.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah. Yes.

ALI: We've also interviewed -- I also did an interview with her.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: She is amazing.

ALI: And she talked a little bit about it, but I'd be interested in hearing from your perspective how that collaboration came about.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: So I find Wazina to be an incredibly inspiring human being, like really, really inspiring human being. And watching -- so I'm friends with Laura Marie. Laura Marie is -- was the director for the Coming Out Muslim show, and so she's the one who introduced me to Wazina in the first place. And I came to a reading, just, like, a reading of the Coming Out Muslim --

ALI: Not as an intended performer but just as --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: No, just -- just --

ALI: -- an audience. Yeah.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: -- just as an audience. It was right when they had just finished the workshop phases of, like, writing the monologues, and it was still, like, nine hours long. And they had just done the photos. Were you involved in the photos?

ALI: No. No.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Okay. They had just done the photo exhibit, and it was just like -- I balled in that reading. I cried hysterically, because it was the first time I had heard -- I really felt my story echoed back at me in terms of just, like, feeling like you can't be you inside of all the other things you grew up in that you love and feeling like you need to live a dual life, like another part of you that's out there, you know. And then, in order to be -- to be Muslim or to be Afghan or to be Sudani or to be whatever, you know, you have to only have one side of you, and the other wasn't allowed to be a part of that. And then, to hear that conversation being said back so eloquently the way Wazina was saying it, and, like -- I literally -- it just felt so familiar. I couldn't stop crying.

And I just -- I knew right then and there that I was like -- I was like, "I want to help. I don't know how to help you guys. How can I help? Just tell me what to do." And they were like, "We could use some music." So I just kind of opened my laptop, and I gave them a bunch of songs. I recorded a bunch of songs for them, you know, certain sections that needed a nasheed [chant song] for, like -- there's a section where Terna is reading about the -- the Prophet Muhammad going from Mecca to Medina. And there's a really old nasheed I -- I remember learning, [singing] "Tala al badru alaina" in religion class. And I remember singing that for them to go with it and doing the azaan [adhan] and doing all these things where I was just like -- I was really nervous about doing those before because I was always told that the voice of the woman is a shame, you know. And so we were not allowed anywhere near the azaan [adhan] and that kind of stuff. And then -- or the tartil [Qur'anic recitation] -- and then -- so after doing that with Wazina and all of that, I started digging in and realizing that a lot of the old classical female singers in the Arabic world were all religiously trained readers. Umm Kulthum, the most famous singer in Egypt, she started out her career as a professional Qur'anic reader.

ALI: What do you think is the relationship between the styles of recitation that people are taught, because reading the Qur'an is not like reading a book?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: Like, there -- there are certain inflections you have to have. There are certain sounds you need to elongate. There's -- there's a musicality to it, so tell --

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Absolutely.

ALI: -- and you certainly had this as a -- as a child. Tell me what you now, having had that experience -- because I was going to ask you about the experience of a woman doing sacred -- Islamic sacred sound. What do you think is the relationship between that, that training in Qur'anic recitation and then -- generally or for you as a vocalist?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know, I think a lot of that training -- I mean, that training is really crucial for, like -- for you as a singer in terms of breathing control, in terms of also learning the classical scales that you're working with. So the actual training of

recitation, there are two sections of it. There's learning the actual musical modality, and then there's learning the enunciation, and especially because in Arabic there are no -- there's no many vowels. All the vowels are accentuated above the letters with these little tanweens, and so learning when to close your mouth and when to open your mouth, when to open, like, the palate at the back and vers-- you know, these things are really important.

But -- and knowing that a lot of the famous classical singers would get most of their training from the Qur'an first because it's, like -- it makes sense, because it's like -- the Qur'anic trainers would teach you the music, the scales, and it would teach you the enunciation. But that also then takes you down the path of why it sounds so different from country to country. The -- the call to prayer is supposed to sound local, and that's something we don't talk about enough because we're in this, like, Wahhabi, everything Saudi kind of world right now, you know. And all kinds of Muslims need to go back to the Wahhabi Saudi way, whereas it used to be so beautiful and different and varied and sounded different from different places. And then, after doing the Coming Out Muslim and realizing that so many female singers used to read the Qur'an and it's such a brand-new thing that I'm not supposed to actually recite the Qur'an back at you, crazy town. I was like, "What? That's not even that long ago. Kulthum just died." That's not even that long ago. How quickly you can make us forget. It was just -- it was great. So Wazina introduced me to that. [laughter]

ALI: That's awesome. Another meaningful performance or milestone performance for you was at the Apollo.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Yeah.

ALI: Tell me what that was like, or how that came about and what that was like.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I mean, who didn't watch *Open Mic at the Apollo*? [laughter] I watched *Open Mic at the Apollo*. I wanted to be at the Apollo so bad. I went to see shows at the Apollo. The Apollo is, like -- it's a historical monument. And just to be able to be in it, I was like -- for me, I was just like, "I'm officially an American singer.

[laughter] It's official." I was so proud. I was like, "I'm going to go into the Apollo and sing to them in Arabic." [laughter] And it was, like, the most American I've ever felt, really. I felt just super American, and I was so proud. I felt good.

ALI: So in 2016, you released your second album, *Manara*. How was working on that album different than working on the first album?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: This one had much more of a process. There was a plan of action before the songs were even written, you know, like a plan of how we're releasing it, how we're doing it, the timelines, when we do this for, and then there's also another, like -- and we had -- I had more of a process for writing. Like, we took a creative sabbatical as a band, and we went to Morocco for two weeks and, like, spent every day cooking and eating and -- and making music together.

So it was much more structured as a creative process, you know, and I -- and then finished the album a few months after that, finished the -- the motif had already been created in "Asilah" and the vision completed after that, I remember. I remember figuring out the last com-- song to complete it while I was, like -- I went to Mexico, and I was laying in the sea. And I was just like -- and that's when the song "Albahr" came to my mind, and it was, like, one of the last songs to bring the album together as, like -- because it was, like, the sea is the connection in this album. And that -- I remember that. That was good. So that was -- it was a much more shortened space but much more stressful, to be really honest. I don't know if I'm going to repeat that process. It was a really stressful process. I've never worked against a deadline creatively speaking. I normally, like -- I just finish writing, and then -- and then I set a deadline. So that was a bit stressful, but we're doing it again, creative sabbaticals and all, but over a longer period, so, instead of one creative sabbatical, three creative sabbaticals, you know. Instead of doing everything within six months, do it over a year. Breathe into the process. So I'm trying to do that, but, you know, I want to -- I'm hoping that we're going to be, like, a 30-album band, and I'm hoping that I get to know myself and audiences get to know me through those 30 albums, that it doesn't complete itself now.

ALI: We've covered a lot, and I guess I want to come back to Brooklyn. So now where do you live in Brooklyn? You started in Ditmas Park. Where are you in Brooklyn now?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Crown Heights, hey.

ALI: So tell me how Brooklyn has figured in your life either just in your life or in your creative life or as you work. How -- how do you feel Brooklyn has figured as a part of that?

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: I mean, Brooklyn is the -- Brooklyn is the core for why I went back to Sudanese music. Like, it was really coming -- the Brooklyn pride is showing off the pride of who you are, including where you come from. That's parts of what makes you dope in Brooklyn. And so, for me, like, Brooklyn is when, like, my pride flags went up. [laughter] Like, I just felt so good here, felt like the other -- the rest of me is what completes me here. It's what makes me a richer citizen in Brooklyn. It's what's -- what's important in my story, too, and there is room for all the different parts. You know, you could still be a Brooklynite and be from all these places and have equal room for them in the forefront of your personality. So for me, Brooklyn is a huge part of my sound. It's a -- it's the reason the sound is the way it sounds. The only difference is the language, but so many people speak Arabic in Brooklyn, really. [laughter]

ALI: That's awesome. Is there anything else you want to add or -- because I -- I think I've covered everything that I wanted to.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You know what I'm hoping for? I'm hoping to live in Brooklyn until a time where we can say, you know -- I can put out an album that's mostly not in English and people will be like, "One of the greatest American albums came out in Brooklyn." [laughter]

ALI: That's awesome.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: That'd be one day, a good day.

ALI: That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: Thank you for being so patient and listening to be jabber for so long.

ALI: No, it's wonderful. It's wonderful. It's wonderful. Okay.

ABUNAMA-ELGADI: You are a patient man. [laughter]