NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

NAZ

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Nadia Awad: Hi, I'm here in Prospect Park, on April 20th, 2017. I'm about to do an oral history with my friend here, and for The New York Trans Oral History Project; which seeks to record the stories of trans and gender non-conforming folks in New York as told in their own words. I guess one, the way I would like to start is if you could tell me where you were born and a little bit about that place.

Naz: I was born in Tehran, Iran. Which is a beautiful city, country; um that unfortunately somehow, [small laugh] through the long work of history um is seen as the axis of evil here. And also has its own, history that is complex and complicated, um especially for queer people.

Awad: And what was it like growing up in Iran, were you there throughout your childhood? Or...

Naz: No, I was actually, so the story of my migration slash immigration or whatever you want to call it um, when I was two or just before I was two, my father was accepted into a university in the states which is a big deal and especially for him because he didn't really come from that class that you know kinda sends out, especially from Iran, there's like a class that just sends their children out to, to European or um or American school or US schools. Um and he was, he didn't come from that class, so it was a big deal for him to get into this, to get into this program and to, to go and so he did, and it was in 1977. So, it was before the revolution, um and so he came to the United States, he came to Philadelphia and I; my mother and I followed not too long after that. And if anybody knows any history of Iran, two years after that, which was right in the midst of his uh program, there was a revolution that over turned the Shah and so there was a lot of unrest there, and then a, sort of shifting of power uh and then shortly thereafter [airplane flying by] there was a, a long, decade long war with Iraq. With our, the neighboring country Iraq. And that was a devastating war, for both sides. Um, and in Iran like in many countries in the world, as a, as a male, you have to; have voluntary mil, military uh—whatever it's called you—

Awad: Service—

Naz: Yeah service, thank you. And my father did have that, so there when he was done his program, it was uh, he wasn't really done his program, sorry, but when he was at a point where it looked like we could go back for him to finish his you know, dissertation or this or that. He would've had to serve, and so we were in this position, which was really lucky that we were in this position. Um where he could stay in the United States to finish this program um, and avoid going back and participating in the, in the war. Which was, like I said was really devastating it was about a million people on both sides, uh who were killed.

Awad: And um, if you can, you said your family didn't belong to sort of the affluent class that educates their children in the west. [airplane flying by] What, what sort of class, or what sort of um, background did your family have? If you could tell me a little bit about that.

Naz: Uh, it's interesting cause it's hard for me to even find that translation um, mostly because I don't know. Because I was so young when I came here that I understand class in a different
way. Um I understand it in terms of, of how it works within the US system. So, the only thing I can—the only way I can translate it to me this makes sense, is he was a, he came, my father came from a middle class, like the kind of middle class that was—you kind of stuck, stuck to home. And it was a big deal [car driving by] if you got into a big place and you got to leave.

**Awad:** Were they originally from Tehran, or did they come from a village or—

**Naz:** Um, as far as I know, they're long time uh city people. I think my grandfather, my father's side, came from a village. Now this is my father's side, um my mother's side, is a different story. They had, that, they come from a line of, I don't, I don't know any better [inaudible], I don't even know how to, to identify this class. But more affluent, um my uncles' all, it was a given they went to England to study. And so, they're, you know they're, both of my uncles on my mother's side live in the United States. And are very successful, lets say, whatever that means, but in a, in a, in the eyes, of, of, um how Americans see—[airplane flying by] success and in terms of, of immigration in particular they're very successful. So, one runs his own company, well actually both have, are very big players in some, in whatever companies. I don't keep track to be honest [laughter]. They're doing well.

**Awad:** So, your family came from, so they were, uh I mean in a way, the way I think of it, is like family that's been tied to the city for a long time, and that maybe they had property. But not, but weren't exactly like, they didn't have like farmers working for them and other places kind of thing.

**Naz:** Yeah exactly, so my grandfather was a, an accountant so he wasn't a, you know he wasn't um; uh poor, or didn't come from a small village although his lineage might have. And he might have been one of the ones who came to the city to, to earn a living or whatnot. But my mothers side no, they probably came from a merchant class, my guess would be a merchant class. [airplane flying by] But I don't know, I don't know and its really, it's, it's weird. But its uh, when you come to this country this, this need to assimilate is so strong that I sort of don't even really know because we don't talk about the past, and we don't talk about um cultural differences. It's just something that because I wanna explore that, and I wanna understand who I am and where I come from, and why I am the way I am. That I'm, I even think about things this way.

**Awad:** So, your family came to, you came to Philadelphia in 1977. Uh your father was in graduate school, and so you, you grew up in Philadelphia for the most part?

**Naz:** Yes, so we travelled around some apartments in Philadelphia while he was studying and then um, and then my mom got into a master's program—outside of Philadelphia, in Chester, Pennsylvania. So, then we started, um moving out to like uh first here suburbs. Working class suburbs of Philadelphia, in apartment, apartments, or apartment buildings in these, in these suburbs. And then—then, yeah. So, I grew up in Philadelphia; in Morton, Pennsylvania. And then in Chester, Pennsylvania, they bought a house and we lived there for a while. And then, in true immigrant fashion, when it was time for me to go to; this is a story I tell, I'm sure my mother would tell it a different way, and my father perhaps a different way. But when it was time for me to go to high school, they bought [sound of airplane flying by] the smallest house in Cherry
Hill, New Jersey. Which if, anybody knows this area, at all the tristate area, and southern, southern tristate area, Philadelphia anyway. It's a very affluent, predominantly Jewish—suburb; Philadelphia, in New Jersey. So, they bought the smallest house, so that I could go to a good high school to get a good college education to have a great life. And that's the story I tell anyway, so they uh, it was a big cultural shock. But, I so I went to high school in Cherry Hill, and then promptly left, in college and moved to Philadelphia and never looked back.

**Awad:** So, can I ask a little bit before high school, um, did you grow up around a lot of Iranians? Did you grow up speaking Farsi? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Naz:** What's weird is that my mom, so my mom spoke Farsi to me and so she was very much um, she wanted to make sure that I, knew the language; and so when I was growing up probably, nine, ten, eleven, twelve years old, up until teeny, early teenage maybe thirteen, fourteen, I went to Farsi classes. My father on the other hand, was very interested in assimilation; [small laugh] and would only speak English to me. Probably because when we first landed, when we first came that first year, I didn't know any English, I was a baby. You know, how do you teach, I spoke, I mean there are tapes of me speaking fluent Farsi at three, two, three. Um, telling elaborate stories about, you know princesses or whatever. And in other language—in Farsi—so back to the question about language. So, my mom really wanted to make sure that I knew Farsi, and I knew how to read. And uh, what was the question again actually?

**Awad:** Well did you grow up also around other Iranians? [airplane flying by]

**Naz:** No. Other Iranians, yeah sometimes. But sometimes not, so there's this thing [sound of airplane flying by] what, another thing that's interesting about Iran in particular and the revolution and the emigration pattern, or the ref, you know the refugee pattern that, that happened—in the late 70's [1970's], early 80's [1980's] is that uh a lot of, because the Shah, the king, was overturned a lot of people who ended up in the United States were sympathizers with the Shah, part of his regime, or somehow affiliated with him or, people that dislike, other movement—wanted out, so they, we didn't really, cause we didn't really fit in with them. So they, I didn't really grow up around a lot of Iranians, and in fact I remember this one that I thought was like my best friend—I really, I admired her, it was like she, her family was everything that you know, we could have hoped for, for ourselves, she was everything that I wished I could have been. Later, looking in hindsight, I realized that there was like a huge class thing there, they were like really the only people that we hung out with and would know outside of our own family and they, both the mother and the father, were doctors. None of my family, had that you know kind of access to money. And um, she had very little interest in me [small laugh]. I think like she would just hang out with me when we would go over to their house because she was sort of forced to. [airplane flying by] So we didn't really hang out with so many Iranians because they usually had a lot of money. And they escaped with money, or they—anyway even if they didn't have money, they aspired to that or they were doctors, or lawyers, or engineers. We just, we were very, we're different. So, we had some Iranian friends but not many. And actually, what I do want to say is that, there was a long time in this country where if you knew another Iranian they either, were very well educated or very successful, but my memories of being very, very young is knowing Iranians who were cab drivers for example. Or,
my mom when we first came to this country in the 70's, in the late 70's [1970's]; she worked at this like sort of factory that would sew sequins on dresses, on like wedding dresses, so it was like a very different mentality. And a very different kind of class of person that we knew, or that we, I don't know, that, that we, my parents would hang out with or knew and that sort of disappeared in the early 80's [1980's]. We just didn't hang out with Iranians, they were just too different than us.

**Awad:** Can you tell me a little bit, did your family, so it sounds like you hung out with people that were more working class, middle class, etcetera. And then obviously the, the revolution had, had effects on um emigration patterns etcetera. Can you tell me little bit, did your family feel pressured to align themselves with a certain politic? At that point, was there that pressure living in the US, then? Did you, I mean I know you were a kid but I'm just curious if they felt that at all or align themselves with a certain way of like being Iranian in this country.

**Naz:** Uh, in terms of like the American political climate or Iranian, or both or either—

**Awad:** Or both—

**Naz:** Yeah, I mean I don't know, it's hard, its really hard with my family to get any, I don't know, the other byproduct of maybe this is particular to my family only, or maybe this is a byproduct of a certain class, I really don't know. But my, my family doesn't really talk about that so much, but I do know there's, there was a lot of Marxist books in my, on the, my father's bookshelves uh growing up, [airplane flying by] um and, um I know that he—would have aligned himself with the, like a certain leaning would've been more of a like a...

**Awad:** Tudeh party—

**Naz:** Socialist, not Tudeh actually, he was probably wouldn't have been, but he really was, he, I know his father really believed in the tenants of the revolution and, and the, in particular like the, the sort of Marxist reasoning behind it, um and he would have too. Although, I don't know. Once the war happened, it was a lot of, uh in my house, in the household that I grew up in there was a lot of shortwave radios, there was a lot of don't talk they're talking about the war. There was a lot of focus on that, on the war and what was happening um, and a lot less, I, maybe it was because I was too young, at the time to really understand uh, the, the byproduct of the revolution and the sort of vacuum of power that happened and this, and the, you know the Ayatollah coming in and taking over, I, I don't know if I was too young to really understand that impact on my family but we didn't really talk about that as much. [Airplane flying by] And the way it ended up looking was there's a lot of, you know, um, sadly there was, although we lived in the city, lived in [siren] Philadelphia proper, then lived in these suburbs [siren] then lived in apartments much less. Within these suburbs, and then Chester Pennsylvania, which is a very uh—it's a—polarized city, and racially divided city with unbelievable poverty tied to race and class obviously. That, they had some kind of way, thinking especially my father who's a little, you know, the one who talks more about politics, but he could talk about politics and sort of egalitarianism and, but in a day to day living in action, you know, really couldn't be that person that he talked about you know, so he ended up, so you know he, he's got, definitely has
a lot of classism, racism, less classism more racism. I grew up with a lot of that, and it was like right at my doorstep, so while they might have some political leaning, the way it manifested with me wasn't [airplane flying by] like go play with your friends outside in this apartment complex. It was like, you can't play with that person who lives across the, across, literally the, downstairs and one over because of whatever reason, because their class/race. I don't know why, what their reasoning was, but it was, you know that's the way it looked when I was growing up. Does that sort of answer your question?

**Awad:** Yeah—

**Naz:** I feel like I meandered a bit. [laugh]

**Awad:** No, I, I remember um, in college a professor saying um, how do you turn a middle eastern immigrant in the 70's [1970's] from a socialist to a republican and the answer was a flight [small laugh].

**Naz:** Yeah—

**Awad:** Um [laugh]—

**Naz:** Yeah.

**Awad:** Um—

**Naz:** Yeah basically. Although my, my parents would you know, they vote, they're citizens, and they vote democrat, they're you know, they're like that, its so complex its like the kind of racism that is never ever addressed and classism that runs so deep. Um, that's, you know—runs so deep, that in this kind of particular situation, they left when they were in their twenties. And so, we, I've had all of this time to, to, in, within the same culture to reflect upon my own, you know privilege, or upbringing, or you know um, or oppression, or, you know I've had all of this time to be able to reflect upon it, to have conversations about it, to understand it's complexity, to read about it, within the same culture. And they were never, they didn't have that, so they had their experiences until they were in their mid-twenties and then, at a time where I think in our culture now, you really start talking about it and you're really engaged then they left and came to this completely different culture with a total different set of rules, [airplane flying by] and never really got to process who they are, who they are, and why they believe in what they believe in, and you know how that manifests in this world, you know.

**Awad:** Thanks, um, thanks for that. That's I think that's a really poignant reflection on our generation of you know refugees, immigrants, etcetera. Um, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little about what it was like going to school, um, and, if, if you, if you could tell me like a story or give me, give me a sense of the atmosphere of what it was like going to school at least before high school then I can ask you about high school later [small laugh].

**Naz:** Yeah, high school was awful. Um,
Awad: [small laugh]

Naz: Maybe we don't talk about it [Awad small laugh] no we can talk about it. It might be triggering, I'm kidding. [Awad small laugh] Um, so it, it two different ways at look, two different ways to before, in Philadelphia it was in the 70's [1970’s], it was Montessori school. And there was some of the [Awad gasp], Yes! Some of the best memories of my life. I can't even believe I remember some of the things like up until I was five. I remember, um through that Montessori school. One of my earliest memories around, around anything, friendship, language, uh actually happened in that Montessori school and that was I just remember like going down in this area to want to play with this kid. And I must have been three years old, and uh, I must have been two actually. I must have been somewhere between two and three at this Montessori nursery school. And um—the kid, just I was [car drives by] like so eager to play with him and then he just like, had this like, sort of foam [sirens], in my imagination now it's a foam long tube thing and he just started hitting me with it and I started crying. And then I, you know this very nice person picked me up and I got to be held for the rest of the day. But when I think back about it, I probably couldn't speak a lick of English [laugh] and he was like [inaudible] had his thing about that at a very early age. And, [sirens] and that's the way it looked. Um, so there's two sides of it, there's you know schooling as a young up until, up until ninth grade, I was in a suburban Springfield, elementary school, there was, it was just, you know there was a lot of racism, I had this one, I had teachers who just hated me for no other reason than I was Iranian. I mean also, at that point it's the early 80s [1980's], there's—

Awad: The hostage crisis—

Naz: The hostage crisis has happened, there's you know there, there's—[inaudible] in this country people didn't really like Iranians. Um, so I, you know I remember things like uh, you know being really good at math because it was trained in me [small laugh] from my engineer mother and my architect father that you, you had to be good in math, and so they practiced math with me, and I'm not even nine year, I mean at nine we left and moved somewhere else so I must have been seven or eight years old and doing math. And um, there's a day where it was my turn to go up and you know do the math assignment up on the board and I, there were three people, so the game was, there are three of you, and whoever answers this math thing, quiz or whatever the fastest up on the board gets a lollypop. So, I finish first of course because I've been trained and because every minute of every second of every day and every toy that I had was around math, um, [Awad chuckle] I finish first. And, that teacher said you're cheating and I'm not gonna give it to you, I saw you counting with your fingers. And so, you know, 41-year-old me turns around and is like, I don't care if I was using my fingers, like I finished first. That was the rule, and I wasn't using my fingers, I know what seven plus three is you know? Without using my fingers. So, it goes from that and then after um, she seemed one min [minute]. She dumped out my desk, she hated me, she made life really, really hard. So that was, that was hard, I sort of maybe disengaged from school at that point a little bit, and then after that we moved to Chester, and then this is; I talked about um sort of the racist structure in our family. So, Chester Pennsylvania is a very racially divided city, there's literally a highway that divides the black part of town from the working class Irish part of town and it really is that and
its really poor um in the African American side. And devastated, so my parents took me to, when we moved there they took me to a catholic school, so here's a Muslim [chuckle] middle eastern Iranian in 1980 I was in, I was in, I'm trying to think of what grade I was in when we moved cause I was in ninth grade when we moved to New Jersey to this affluent suburb so and I lived there for four years, so it must have been fourth grade, though nine year old. Here's this nine-year-old, who is, going to this catholic school, and it's an Irish, it's a white Italian Irish catholic school that this was the first year they let people from outside the parish go to the catholic school probably because they needed money. To get taught by like the likes of Sister Agnus. [airplane flying by] So it was me, and a group of African American kids and we're nine years old. So, there's already, so then that's I think the very first place where I understood what it kind of felt like to be in between these races and the racial dynamics. Um, that, because the white people didn't like me, or the Irish Italians didn't like me; the black folk didn't really like me, or it's not like they did like me or didn't like me, there's just, they had their own group going and uh, but there wasn't that hatred like the, there were, there definitely was a hatred that was coming from these like these [child whining] white, Irish Catholics and yea. Italian and Irish Catholics definitely felt the hatred [chuckle] there. Um, and the first like first or second week I got some kind of a suspension because I was apparently apart of a fight. I had nothing to do with the fight, I was no where near the fight, I mean the entire school was there looking at this fight. And, I think I must have been like what's the commotion, and right away I got a suspension and, I, you know, it was just, it was challenging, but at the same time here I am every single day in a catholic school, being taught by, like I said the likes of Sister Agnus, whom, uh, who would, [bicycle riding by] when she would teach about like whatever I think it was religion, she would put her crotch up against the desk and push in, so here I am I'm nine years old and I'm looking at this nun who's teaching us about religion and I don't know, it, that really, honestly was the first time I think I thought about sexuality is when I was looking at what she was doing, that I'm sure everybody who was nine in that room was like what is she doing and [Awad chuckle] and like knowing what that felt like to push the corner of a desk right into your crotch as a sis—you know like someone who has female parts, uh or cis-gendered, well it's not even that just anyone that has female parts and [metal jingling] just thinking holy shit [someone walking by] what the, what's happening here—so that presented its own challenges, I'm sitting here and I'm thinking about religion, and I'm thinking about these things that you know come, these Catholics are like you know, kinda of like pushing down your, your throat going to church part of going to a catholic school that I went to for four years was going to church, and so, you know you want to at, in this church you want to be, you know like, like a kid would want to like a nine, ten, eleven year old would want to, would want to be one of the people who's chosen to, to like read a sermon or something. Um, it's really wild. I don't think I've ever talked about this to anyone, it's really kind of wild to talk about that that young person [airplane flying by] and what that young person must have been thinking or going through [metal jingling] both you know, as far as sexuality was concerned, I have another story around gender that I, was like that time was just such a rich time and for any young person, and here it was happening in, within this place, Chester in this like you know very divided city and this, this catholic school [chuckle] with Sister Agnus leaning against her desk. Um—so, that was a hard place also because, you know, hard and not hard I mean I feel like that's really where I understood who I was I think, within this American, political, racial landscape. I think that was the place where it was the most evident and the most clear because the working class suburb that I lived in before
just I was, you know, I was like, who, maybe I was too young to really understand what, what all that was all about and all the hatred and all that was about. Definitely, in the upper middle class, Jew, predominantly Jewish neighborhood it was more like ‘oh you know we’re tolerant people, so we accept you’ kind of mentality but this was really the place I, I saw what, what it really is, this, what this country really is about, and it was, it’s just, just a yeah.

Awad: So were you ever invited to read a homily at the—


Awad: Dude, I went to catholic school too.

Naz: Yeah, right? Aww man, I forgot all those words. Yeah I mean I, I think once a year I was able to you know because I, I asked, I think I actually asked I can’t remember but I think I actually asked because it wasn’t fair that I wasn’t able to [airplane flying by] So the other thing that happened around then is my um, at nine, so really young, my uncle who was also you know one of the ones who was sent off. My mom’s brother was one of the ones who was sent off to the, to England to go to school and then continued his studies in the United States despite the revolution despite the war you know all that stuff, with all that access to, that part of the family had. Lived with us in this house, and one day my mom said, ‘why don’t,’ when he first moved in; ‘why don’t you take me[Naz] to,’ She didn’t say me ‘why don’t you take me’ but she offered to him or asked him ‘to take me[Naz] to the salon to get my hair cut.’ [laughter] and as a nine-year-old, and I remembered distinctly I was nine, I was so excited because that meant I could ask for whatever haircut I wanted. So, I walked in, and this is, when I’m nine, lets see nine, it was like; I was in fourth grade it’s 1984. I, I was like ‘can I have a buzzcut with a tail’ to like this five-dollar haircutting place. And that, woman who was cutting my hair, was like, refused to do it. My uncle could care less, he’s like nineteen years old, or when I’m nine yeah, he’s was like twenty-one years old. He’s a kid, all he knows is he’s like you know, reading newspapers, he’s so checked out and in his own world in his early twenties. And so, what she did, is gave me a really short clipped cut and a tail. And my mom was so mad [laugh] but I didn’t get my tomboy buzzcut like I wanted. I had to wait later in life for that. Um... So, then Ch...do you want me to talk about New Jersey and Cherry Hill and high school and all that?

Awad: If, if you would like to yeah.

Naz: Yeah, I mean it’s just, it is, it was what it was. It’s like, I think that’s really what defined me as a human being. Is people just ignore you, kind of, but then don’t really ignore you they just, you’re there but you’re not really apart of the group. Um, I went from Chester, where you know it really was at the time was one of the most oppressed cities, like a full city in the United States. Um, to a really affluent neighborhood, and with people who had so much money I can’t even imagine. Um, [airplane noise] anyway so [bike riding] yeah, I, yeah it was hard. I think in the very beginning it was really hard. Cause that’s, I was going through puberty and I wasn’t gracefully going through puberty. Also, I was always more boy identified than not. And that was, kind of you know, in a; in a, in that kind of environment in an upper middle-class environment it’s like your kind of, it's a, there gender binaries. [chuckle]
Awad: Did you play sports?

Naz: Well the thing with playing sports. I would've liked to, yeah, I tried, I tried to play um, field hockey. And uh—

Awad: I was gonna guess lacrosse. [laugh]

Naz: Well the thing is though, you have to be accepted to play those team sports.

Awad: yeah.

Naz: And um, I was so not accepted. Like I came, I mean I was coming from up until I was twelve, [airplane flying by] I was wearing a uniform to school. And then, I didn't really have, you know my parents aren't very fashionable people, you know they're not, they're not going to, they're not going to like you know Nordstrom's or whatever to buy their clothes or wherever people go to buy their clothes in, in the suburbs there. They just, they never had their eye on that ever, so I didn't either. I didn't understand that, and so all I had was like 80's [1980's] television to inform me, [man talking/walking by] which is kind of scary. [jingling] Um, and then my own need and want to, to like be a boy. And that was definitely not accepted at that time. Not in any of the places I went to go buy clothes. Or not in my household, it was just, it was yeah. So, I had no idea how to dress so people didn't really accept me in the very beginning. They just, I was just there, and then after a few years you know, you're just there, and you're not offensive and so then people like, they don't even really like you they're just, you're just there, you just exist, and then I found a few friends, and they were, they were the punks usually. Or the, then turned into being like from the punks to the ravers to the people who didn't really have an identity. And they, but they knew they were in that subculture. [airplane flying by] And mostly like people who were working class, in fact one of my favorite people Jen, she, in hindsight looking back, you know, she, she drove her grandmother's car, that like didn't have a muffler, was really loud, didn't have a radio, she would have the Walkman, sometimes she would drive me, we'd go to the diner. And we'd listen to um, oh my god, Heaven or Las Vegas, who is it?

Awad: The Cocteau Twins.

Naz: Cocteau Twins. We'd listen to the Cocteau Twins, [Awad chuckle] with, she'd have you know how on the headphones you could take your, the ear things off, she'd put one ear in hers and I would put the other one, and we'd be driving in this car that was like: [vroom sound]. And it was like a grandmother car, it was painted white, it was like half falling apart, you'd expect the tires to come flying off, um but she had to use her grandmothers address because she didn't live [car honk] in that area, she lived in an area which would have taken her to another school. That you know, her mom didn't want her to go to. And so, she had an in, to get into this like very prestigious Cherry Hill [car driving by] public school system. Which is also the reason I was there, so she had to drive herself to school, and that was, that was a big deal. So yeah, I had these friends that were sort of these outsiders, um and I found my way through them and through that, but otherwise I didn't, I couldn't play lacrosse, I had to play a solo sport. Like I
played one-year field hockey and it was really apparent that I was, I did not belong so then I had to play tennis cause it's a solo sport. You don't have to play, I mean you have to find somebody but if you're on the team, you play against someone, but you don't have to interact with anyone ever. Um, and I played that until I started shaving my head and becoming a little more you know punk. And uh then I said fuck that shit.

**Awad:** When, when did that happen?

**Naz:** Junior, when I was a late sophomore, junior, early junior, yeah somewhere around then—in high school, yeah.

**Awad:** So, can you tell me a little bit about like coming to terms with your sexuality then and...

**Naz:** Yeah actually, I have a beautiful story about this, about sexuality, gender, [airplane flying by] you know gender identity was different I think that's something that was so much more organic, um, that like I just, I, I just felt like there was a point, and I don't even remember when it was but there was a point in which I said I don't feel comfortable in women's underwear. Like I just won't, and my mom is the only one who ever had to interact with me on that level, and thank, thank God. She is, my mother is amazing, she has, whatever she has around sexuality, like you know through her, just through her upbringing or through her own awareness, uh her own...what is it um, her own, dislike of, of non-conformity, but through me she had, she kind of had no choice and just I think understood and saw it as so organic that, it just was, what it was and so she would buy me boxer shorts. Because I could not wear women's anything and then I was sort of—I just want to talk about gender because I think that was a, I have a beautiful story about sexuality and high school and all that, but gender really happened before that. Um, and it was so, looking back I, I just, it was so beautiful. I'm so lucky that I had that experience, my father didn't understand and definitely at a certain point stopped engaging with me because I, just was turning more into a boy than I was his like you know beautiful young daughter. [airplane flying by] Which is fine by me because he was awkward and really hard to deal with, and a hard person to talk to. Have you met him?

**Awad:** No.

**Naz:** Okay, yeah, he's a very, yeah strange awkward person. Other Iranians, it's funny, other Iranians who grew up in Iran and just have, lived in the United States for only several years say he's like a typical Iranian male. Yeah, which to me I'm like, he's this compared to the other Iranian men that I knew which was not so many growing up, and of them, they were very assimilated. And also, very, quote unquote like you know, affluent, successful, you know whatever you want to call it. He was a lot stricter, and a lot more conservative, um anyway, I digress. I'm sorry, I'm digressing.

**Awad:** It's okay you were talking about, gender.

**Naz:** And underwear, yeah um, so I had a lot of freedom around that, I didn't have to, I didn't, I never had to wear a dress if I didn't want to, we'd go to weddings and, and I would refuse to
wear, and this is as a young teeny, like thirteen years old I would refuse to wear a dress and then just not want to go to these weddings, but my, my mom would, she's like wear whatever you feel comfortable with and I'd go wearing pants and a nice shirt and, I don't know I was really lucky in that way. Sexuality, I had no idea what it was to be gay [airplane flying by] I had no idea, what it was to be, you know to have these desires for the same sex and I did, and I had no idea what that meant. I didn't, I didn't know what the word, I didn't, that word was not in my vocabulary. Not in Farsi, not in English it just wasn't. Um, and then when it was in my vocabulary, certainly not about me just because that's how I was raised. Then in my soph—and, and I would have like hard crushes on these women, like hard, like obsessive hard crushes, and not understanding what's going on and then I'm having this budding you know sexual awakening. And not, especially after Sister Agnus, and not knowing what to do about it. Or where, you know how it was directed. And just knowing I was whatever, just... not even normal, not normal, because normal was never apart of who I was, ever. I was never normal, I was never accepted. I was never, you know, it's like I never knew what that meant, so of course, around sexuality I wasn't normal either, and it just, but I didn't even know that, [women talking] so around sophomore year, or junior year of high school [airplane flying by] I went, my father, his, somebody he knew was getting his, it was a celebration of his PhD. It was mid-year, so it was probably November, December and my father had a lot of respect for this person and so we went to his house in the middle of Pennsylvania near, near state college near, near um, near Penn State University. [Jingling] And at this time, let me Date myself here, this is 90, this must have been 1990, 1990 or 91. The bands that were, I don't know, I was listening to the Indigo girls. I was listening to, I can't even remember some of the other bands I was listening too, Indigo girls were a big one. Probably Michelle Shocked, and other sort of postmodern whatever music.

Awad: Dar Williams?

Naz: Oh my gosh! No, this is even before Dar Williams, even before. Oh my gosh, taking me back. So anyway, I go out there for this person, whoever he was, his party, and there's this older girl there, so I must have been fifteen or sixteen years old [airplane flying by] so she must have been just finishing high school. She must've been eighteen, so of course they were like 'oh yeah my daughter's just finishing high school, you guys should talk or hang out or do whatever' and a cousin of mine was there too, and um, oh I know what it was, it was my father's relative was getting his PhD, here I talk about you know class, and all this stuff and I'm talking about people who are getting their PhD's, [airplane flying by] we can talk more about that later but, anyway, [Awad chuckle] that was the world that I grew up in. So it must have been his advisor's house that we went to, so anyways, so here's this like person, she's got the Indigo girls on her refrigerator, and it's instantly something we can talk about, and these hiking boots that I had my eye on but could never buy, they were like Nike hiking boots, and they were really freaking awesome and nobody wore hiking boots then, and she was like yeah my friend's gonna come pick, pick us up, and then we're just, why don't we just go grab a bite to eat while these guys all party. All these young kids, so it was her, her, what I later figured was her girlfriend [chuckle], my cousin who's this of course very typical Iranian male going, you know on track to being an Engineer, or, or some Doctor or something stupid and a very conservative and dumb, [airplane flying by] and like kind of; not conservative and dumb, but very jock sporty type. I, I didn't mean conservative I, just more jock sporty and sort of clueless, and me. So, the girl, played bass in a
band, she was nineteen, she was, she lived around there, she hung out this, you know the Penn State parties but didn’t, you know, wasn’t in college, and I, I was like soaking all of it in, at the time as this young kid who had no idea that I was just hanging out with like, this, this queer couple. [chuckle] They were, they must have been gay, so anyway the next day we leave and I’m in the backseat of the car crying sixteen years old, crying, why are you crying? Just depressed, because I’d never seen a reflection of myself in my surroundings. And that, in Cherry Hill, in anywhere I just never felt connected to people. Like they were into music, I was into music, they had hiking boots, I liked hiking boots, like they were queer, I, you know they liked each other, they loved each other, they had a lot of respect for each other [airplane flying by]. And I had those feelings as well, towards other women, so I think it’s after that, that I um, that’s the very first time that I walked away, and I was like, there was something there that I’m not getting in my life anywhere else, that, that’s, that was the first time I felt like I belonged is really what it is. I felt like I belonged, and I could be who I was, I didn’t have to feel the pressure of going to college or any of the things that I sort of didn’t really organically want to do or feel like I was into... my God I talk a lot about my life story, huh? I, it’s like you get me started, [Awad chuckle] and uh you can’t shut me up.

Awad: So, did it, no, it’s, that’s good, [Naz chuckle] that’s good, it’s an oral history. So, did this, shape how you, you know how did you imagine your future a little bit after that? You know did it, did you have you know ways of imagining your future, envisioning it?

Naz: I think it was so influential to who I am today, like it’s unreal. I don’t think, I think, you know, you take steps forward because you see yourself reflected somewhere or I mean that for me anyway that’s the way it is and maybe that’s because I, from two years old on, was trained to try to assimilate as much as possible so, [airplane flying by] you see what you want to be reflected in that world and then that’s what you strive for, and I don’t know if that is others people’s experience of assimilation. Or what. But it’s uh, and I don’t know how other people move forward in this world, but I feel like, that experience allowed me to have a little bit more confidence in who I was in being this like kind of other person. And how I presented myself, which was totally weird at the time, in a gender non-conforming, what would now be called gender nonconforming way or androgynous way then. Because afterwards I still didn’t put two and two together about queerness and about sexuality, because later in high school, my junior year for example and, I had a friend who was like ‘you’re so gay, you’re so gay, I can’t believe you’re not out of the closet, you’re not out of the closet that’s crazy you’re so gay, look at your locker [Awad chuckle]. It’s full of women, [chuckle] like you are so gay, look at how you dress, you’re so gay,’ you know she just kept, you know and then and I was never opposed to it and that started becoming a part of my vocabulary. And then I came out [airplane flying by] And then in high sch—in my senior year I came out. And I did through this one girl who was, this is after I had these like heart wrenching crushes and then kind of finally figured out I must be gay. Something must you know, like I can’t stop thinking about this one person, and uh, dreaming about this person and thinking about them constantly, so then yeah, this girl had this crush on me and I sort of had a crush on her, she was a lot younger and we ended up hooking up and she’s like ‘oh this is it, this is how it’s supposed to be, I understand now, I’m queer, that’s what this is, that’s what all this is about. All this now makes sense.’ My, you know all of the feelings that had of belonging and not belonging was it because I was Iranian or was it because I was
queer or was it because I was gender non-conforming. And it’s a bit of all of it, but coming out as queer I think put a lot of in perspective and then later on, you know very early on in my life as a queer person I was surrounded by trans people, I mean, trans women and men were all very close, I mean a part of my circle, and a close part of my circle and I thought a lot about it in my early college days about transition, and what that meant, and my identity as, as what, at that point, you know there was the hot books of the time, were like the third sex [chuckle] and um, [airplane flying by] I remember writing a paper around what now we would you know call, we would talk about, what now we would call gender non-conformity, but there was just nothing about it really, not in the libraries that I went to. So that really happened later on in college, and that sort of awareness and, and even then, I think, when I think about gender, I think the most liberating time for me personally around my own gender has been in recent times with this sort of more accepted pronoun use of They/Them, and you know kind of getting away from this binary and allowing for, more fluid and more self-defining, gender identity, yeah.

Awad: So, I just want to back up a little bit, so you were exposed to a lot of Trans men, Trans women in college? Or was it through the punk scene or—

Naz: It was mostly I think through this like sort of rag tag punk scene, definitely more trans men, less trans women. [airplane flying by] But, trans folk yeah, I mean, you just, yeah and being a part of the BDSM community in college. So, later on after college, like going to, there's this place in Philadelphia, I went to college in Philadelphia, and there a place you went to called the Truck Stop, and that’s, that’s just where we went, like they'll let people who you know were into leather, you ended up at the Truck Stop—Bike Stop, that's what it was called, the Bike Stop its where you ended up, and it was, it was a place that was open too, it was a leather bar mostly for men but it was open to trans men. And people like myself, I felt very comfortable there.

Awad: And how old were you when you started hanging out, or getting into that scene? Naz: I was pr...that scene, [airplane flying by] Bike Stop, and bar hopping I was definitely twenty-one. I wasn’t so good at, doing any of that kind of stuff before I was twenty-one I never had a like a fake license or any of that. [Awad chuckle] Also in Philadelphia there um, there are parties that were, like you could go to the, I grew up basically in the clubs of Philadelphia, and you could go to a club before you were twenty-one you just couldn't enter the bar. So, there was like a lot of access to being queer and being gay and being like, being like you know, club kid or whatever.

Awad: Did you uh, in college when you were doing this exploration and you kind of returned to Philly and out of this, you know, other setting did you come into conflict at all with sort of your family expectations, or was that happening at that time, or?

Naz: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. Um, yeah, and it was also wrapped in, in like drugs and alcohol too. So, it was a, it was a very hard time for, it was a very strange dynamic, but then on the other end of it um so, here's the situation was you know my family kind of didn't, couldn't look at these communities that I was involved in and apart of, were incredibly homophobic, um homophobic and a...but then at the same time I'm not, I'm not a citizen so I can't actually go out
and support myself like I can't get a job at, at eighteen years old. Because I can't, and I never really understood that, that's something that I didn't quite understand, I just had a certain amount of money that I was given. Which was all I was given, and I had to figure out how to make it work. And then like, [men talking and walking by] you know, little later on like when I was twenty, nineteen, twenty years old, I would, I would do like under the table jobs. I would do house painter or whatever because you know they couldn't give me enough, or a lot or I wanted to you know, do more drugs than, than that budget could allow for, [chuckle] so, um I found other ways, [airplane flying by]... but they definitely stopped, when I came out to my, well when I came out to my father, oh yeah here's the other part oh yeah I totally forgot about this one part of my life. So, I had to leave, they couldn't afford me to, to live in the dorms and so I had to live at home for a year at eighteen or nineteen or something like eighteen. And I was out at that point, and my fa—I couldn't, I couldn't talk to my father, when I came out to my father, or when I came out to my mother, my father stopped talking to me, and I stopped talking to him. [men talking] And we just didn't get along, we just, you know like I had no choice but to live there because I couldn't, get a job to live. You know get a job, go to college, and live on my own. I just, didn't have that access, and I didn't really know, I wasn't savvy enough to get a, an under the table job. You know, I just wasn't that smart or savvy, [chuckle] or I didn't have those friends, and I didn't have that access, whatever the situation was, so I had to live at home for a year and it was really awful. And when I, I think that also is the reason why when I left, and they gave me a certain amount of money per month to live [chuckle] is because they couldn't take my queerness at all [airplane flying by] and they were like just get Them out of the house, and here's money, and go, and whatever, good luck. Which again, is a very, in hindsight I got to say, it was like my mom did everything she could to support me, you know? Cause they didn't have to do any of that [someone walking by] and I know other people that they didn't, so I'm so, like I look back and even with everything that all of the homophobia that my mom or my parents had they still supported me you know, and that's amazing, it is amazing, or my mom did anyway I don't know about my father I'm sure he whatever, but my mother for sure stood by my side, didn't talk to me, didn't want to have anything to do with me. Had a very very hard time with it for several years but eventually turned around and is one of my, like one [inaudible] I just, I wish I could bottle up what it means to be a parent through my mother. [airplane flying by] Like I wish she could tell her story because she one hundred percent supports you know, my gender identity and does what she can to, to just to like you know, publicly when she's introducing me, introduces me as her child instead of as you know some genderizing it somehow, and that's amazing to me. It is absolutely amazing, makes me—I'm going to cry now actually thinking about it, because she's, she's an incredible human being. Anyway, so yeah it was hard, but was it really hard? I don't know, or was I like an angsty, you know teen, late teen, early twenties person, you know who was like: 'oh, all these people they can work, and I can't work and that's fucked up.' [chuckle] Yeah, in some ways its fucked up, it's fucked up that I couldn't work and that I had no way of understanding what that meant, but you know, I kinda was taken care of, so it was all right.

Awad: So, um, after you got out of school, tell me a little about, what you know, what that was like and, and you know what you, what you were doing then? [airplane flying by]
Naz: Well, when I left school, it wasn't clear that I was going to finish college. Um, I just really didn't do well with school, I hated school, I hated college, I hated all the stuff, that I actually had no other choice—I mean I couldn’t, I did have a choice, I always had a choice, could always have left and figured something else out. Is just you know, I didn't understand and didn't know, and didn't um, that was what was in front of me, so why not. So, it wasn't clear that I was going to finish, uh but then I suddenly finished with an incomplete, and so then I had to go on with my life.

Awad: What were you studying?

Naz: I started out studying physics, and uh from [chuckle] from the uh, [chuckle] from the pressure of my family. Cause I didn’t—I wanted to be the radical that didn't, you know, like the renegade I should say that didn't do engineering, or actually everyone in my family did engineering or some sort of computer programing and I wanted to be the one that did physics. But anyway, I was failing out of that, so one day, again another testament to how much my mom supported me even though it made her really angry and she didn't understand and didn't like what I was doing. One day I just got up and, I walked into the film program at Drexel University my sophomore year when it was clear I was failing out of college, and I said I think I want to be in the film program I don't like, [airplane flying by] I don't think I'm doing well in physics, didn't tell my parents, and just did it. And they had no other choice, maybe that’s eventually you know the reason why they forced me to leave that place and you know whatever. They didn't force me, they couldn't afford it anymore. But, so I studied film after that...so after that, I just beelined it out of, I spent the summer in Philadelphia and made some friends in Philadelphia through you know, just through the queer community that were working in the film world in New York and got—landed a job on a film. And in Park Slope, I lived in Park Slope, walked—found this apartment drove to New York, knocked on this person's door. There was like a listing, a craigs—not craigslist, it was at the time it was in the Village Voice there was an add and I responded, and I went all the way there, which was two hours away, and knocked on this person's door, and turns out she's Iranian. So, [airplane flying by] and she's living with her boyfriend in this apartment, in Park Slope on 13th street, between 4th and 5th avenues or 3rd and 4th avenues, I don't remember, and the apartment was 300 bucks a month. [chuckle] So I saved up, and my parents also helped me, and I stayed in that apartment for a month or two and worked on this film and then at that point it was done. Like I was able to get a job after that and find another sublet, and another sublet and so on. And then, moved to New York and start working the film industry.

Awad: What did you start doing when you moved to New York?

Naz: I started being a camera assistant, which is really cool. Which is what I do today.

Awad: Um, can you tell a little about what—how long did you, were you working in New York and what was New York was like when you, when you were there shooting these, these films?

Naz: New York was awesome. I was, it was really great a little thing before is that I was really wrapped up in Philadelphia before I left for New York with, with a, you know, I was a club kid
and so there’s a lot of cocaine. And it’s just, I needed, I knew I had a problem, and I knew that I was in a real f—you know, fucked up situation and fucked up situations [airplane flying by] wherever I was living and the friends that I was with, and so I didn’t know how to get out of that other than to just leave. And also, there was no film scene here, and I was like you know, I was a film person I loved film and cinema! And it was like the budding hay day of independent films then, I mean it was like the time of, of spike lee’s early films then, and…and like go fish and others, sort of like gay films, it was just a hay day for all that. So, I sort of left in order to—I was still drinking but I wanted to sober up from drugs. So, the film scene was awesome, I kind of bloomed into who I am, I always felt like Philadelphia, I mean this is just my perspective and I know Philadelphia’s changed a lot, but Philadelphia to me was partly miserable all the time and every time I would come to New York it was, people were just itching for life and were living. [airplane flying by] And there was just a spring in the step. And it didn’t matter where I was, I felt that, even although I never really travelled too far around New York, it was always a certain, you know, you went to the meat packing, you know meat packing neighborhood or the East Village. So, it was, it was definitely fun, it was very indie, I was a, I worked on, I worked, I made like very little money working on Indie films. In fact, my first job, I remember I wasn’t getting paid but then halfway through the job I was like dude, you have to pay me, I like, it was insane they had me loading, it was just really crazy. It was a crazy job, I was driving the truck and I was loading the film and I was the first one there and the last one out. And wasn’t sleeping much, and it was six days weeks, and [chuckle] you know, it’s like everything that you imagine a young, young person you know, first job in the film industry being it was that. So, I felt the full glamour when I was 22 years old. It was, it was fun I had a really good time, [jingling and someone walking by] I would go from, I, one of my sublets was in the, the Upper East Side with this Irish, this person from Ireland, and it turns out that building on the Upper East Side was historically a place where [airplane flying by] Irish folk, when they came from Ireland would, they, you know, it’s like, it was all Irish people, from Ireland. And so, Grania, her name was, and she needed, she needed a roommate, so I again for like 300 bucks a month, rented a room in her apartment. And I remember there were days I didn’t have enough money to go from the Upper East Side down to the Lower East Side, which was where I’d hang out at Meow Mix. So, I would walk, [chuckle] that, ninety blocks, or sometimes like cab drivers just pull over and be like here, you got five bucks? I’ll take you down there for five bucks, and it was, it would’ve cost more than that in the cab at the time. It was fun, but it was also wrapped around a lot of like, drugs and drinking and at a certain point, I think when I was probably 23 years old, I was, had this mentor person, who, I had a relapse back into, like you know, I was working on this film, and films also very drug induced business, and I remember this guy, I don’t know, I just, I had a relapse, and I was really upset about that with myself, and she was like you need to just stop drinking. And so, I went sober, at 23 or 24 years old, and that, it was very interesting. [airplane flying by] Being a former club kid, being sober, and going to like Meow Mix, and Henrietta Hudson’s, and what were some of the other ones? Um, that one dance, the one like club that was, it’ll come to me, and some of the other parties that would happen.

**Awad:** There were a lot more like, bars catering to women then too, then there are now.

**Naz:** Yeah, women, women of color. I mean it was awesome, and it was great going to all those places. I came from this punk background, so I tended to just stick to Meow Mix, and being a
Virgo, and someone’s who like more into like you know stability I would go to the same place all the time. It was interesting being a person who went to Meow Mix as someone who's sober, it was interesting being sober going to Meow Mix [heels], because they had—they respected that. People respected that and I, found a niche there and people who, like I was, you know, I don't know, it was just, I was a familiar person there, so that was cool. It was fun.

**Awad:** What was the scene like at Meow Mix? Cause that was way before my time in New York.

**Naz:** It was awesome. It was raucous, it was mean, it was—

**Awad:** What kind of music did they play?

**Naz:** They had, aww man, they had all sorts of, punk band come in, rock, um [airplane flying by], you know it was a, it was diverse, it was racially diverse somewhat. But it was like, punk, and that was, that was this sort of era of punk dikes, and the queer punk time, you know the time when that music was just coming about. It was fun [bicycle riding by] it was a lot of fun. I had a, I had a really good time hanging out, I had a core group of friends, we would just hang out, I don't even remember, I mean it was so organic, I don't remember, because we didn't have phones, actually, I did have a pager because I was in the film business and you needed to have a pager and then eventually a cell phone. So, we would page each other [chuckle] and meet up. But you just hung out more, you just, hung out with people you just relaxed more, it wasn't [someone walking by] I was on the go a lot and busy often, it just was a, I don't know, it was a, more connected way of having friends and friendship... yeah.

**Awad:** So,

**Naz:** Nannies, crazy nannies. [Jogger passing by]

**Awad:** So, when you were in—so how long were you doing this, this kind of camera assistance stuff, before you, you decided to go to graduate school, right?

**Naz:** [affirmation] I was doing it until after 9/11, so 9/11 happened [women talking] and I was couch surfing at the time [airplane flying by] and, I was couch surfing because I was looking for an apartment, I didn't find one, that's just what you did you know, especially when you're in your twenties. I guess people do it now, I'm just, I'm like, God I can't believe I was just couch surfing. Anyway, so after that happened, it became really, it was really really challenging to be anywhere on set in New York City. I remember I was working between two of my main gigs; one was Third Watch, where it's a T.V. show about—I should say I was the union, I was a union camera assistant, and I was working in television, which is a very coveted position at the time, because there wasn't a lot of T.V. then and it good, it was good money. It was the salary, not the salary, I should say the wage was good. And the work was Network work, so it was nine months out of the year, so you knew you were working. Unlike other kinds of freelance, where you kind of were always on the hustle. So, I fell into these people, so Third Watch was a television show about the NYPD, FDNY, and [airplane flying by] ... what is it the ambulance, what're they called?
Awad: Paramedics.

Naz: Paramedics, [airplane flying by] who were on the Third Watch. So, from 6pm until midnight, it's sort of like their relationships to each other, and to the world, and to the city, and to the people that they were of course you know, policing and whatnot. So, being on that kind of a job I think before 9/11 I could just blindly go into that work, and that job and not have to think about what I was doing and what I was a part of, but then after 9/11 it just was like, you know I remember 9/11. I always had a, you know, I was never really, you know, I had a good understanding that I was just a part of this machine and that I was making money and that's what I was doing, that's—this wasn't, part of me thought that this could be a career path but I came out of the world of film where I believed in film as an art. You know, and as an art practice and a way of you have a message and this is a way of bringing that message out. I'm not also very verbal, so it's sometimes it's hard for me to find the right words, so it's not very eloquent what I'm saying. But, so I remember distinctly after 9/11 and this is, I'll come back to why I left [airplane flying by] but, the next, that day or the next day, this African American guy walking down the street being like you know: 'They're saying it's terrorists, well I get terrorized by the police everyday you know' And I remember how that, I remember being like I'm, I feel so, I am so glad I heard what he had to say on his cell phone, cause you know there was a lot of, in this city, there was, it was just so fanatical, I mean it was an insane thing that happened.

Awad: Where, where were you when it happened?

Naz: It was, I was in a café on 5th avenue in Park Slope when the first plane hit, and I was supposed to look at apartments with the person that I was going to move in with. And my cellphone stopped working, and I called her from a payphone, and she said, 'a plane just crashed into the world trade center'. And I, so anyways I was in Park Slope, anyways I remember thinking a plane, like it didn't make any sense to me. Oh, she means a helicopter, you know missed its target and hit the Met life building, like in my head that's what I thought. And I remember it was a crystal-clear day, I remember looking up and there was a plume of smoke and I didn't know—

Awad: Okay so let me. Okay so, I'm just continuing the interview, or sorry, the oral history right now, [airplane flying by] I just had to change the card. So, just going to pick up where we. So, um, we were talking a little bit about 9/11, and you were explaining that the people on the show Third Watch, the show that you worked on, were, some of them were Firefighters, Paramedics, etcetera, who did consulting on the show and actually died in the twin towers and that's what we were starting to talk about, so if you could just pick up there [Men yelling in background].

Naz: So, there was some of that, that was happening. So, I was working on the show that was like, you know pretty much, very police oriented and what not [men yelling] and [back-up beeper] and [woman talking] the show after September 11th, [Man speaking] you know after a couple of weeks the show picked up again, because this is entertainment and the show must go on no matter what. [Beeping vehicle driving past] And I was also working on another, so that was the first show I was working on to give you a sense of it, and the other one was called The
Education Max Bickford with Marcia Gay Harden and, oh my God what's the guy's name, he was in um, Richard, Richard... [Richard Dreyfuss]. I can't remember, anyway, I'll think of it later. On one hand, there's like the 9/11 show that they did on Third Watch [jogger running by] where they're just dealing with September 11th as people who are responding to what's happening and then there's the other show, Max Bickford who's dealing with 9/11 [airplane flying by] in this sort of quote on quote, neoliberal way, where the—so the whole context of the show Max Bickford also ties into gender by the way. Is that, this, this faculty person working with this guy Richard [Richard Dreyfuss], what's his name? Oh my God...

Awad: What, what movies was he in? [airplane flying by]

Naz: Um, the, it's going to come to me. Words are very hard for me... oh my God—

Awad: It's okay.

Naz: Close Encounters.

Awad: Um—

Naz: He was Close Encounters.

Awad: Um, I don't think I've seen that movie, actually, sadly.

Naz: Um... [birds chirping] anyway, so he's at this all girls school and he's a faculty member, and it's like sort of, one of the professors, or one of the other professors at this all girls' school is a trans woman played by a cis gender woman. Which was its own sort of fucked up ness. So that show dealt with 9/11 like, a character on the show who's a student, a young girl student goes to learn Arabic [airplane flying by] so that she can go to Afghanistan and help. So here I am on the show, and we're filming it and I'm turning to, you know at the time I was really young, so I'm turning to different people and I'm like do they know that they don't speak Arabic in Afghanistan. Does anybody know that? You're saying something that's inaccurate, and so it just became really uncomfortable, and then also everybody after 9/11 was a, everybody, everyone became a hawk, it didn't matter who you were, very few people were anti-war. And both my partner and I at the time were super, you know, we were going to demonstrations and we were you know, we went to DC [Washington DC], we went to the demonstrations here. We were, her more than me, was part of this, before 9/11 apart of like the anti-world bank movement that was happening all throughout the United States and the world, and so she was a little more tapped into all these demos. So, it just became really hard cause everyone on the film set was super hawkish and I, I'll never forget being on, on Max Bickford, this T.V. show Max Bickford, and something must have happened before the Iraq war and the stand in for Richard Dreyfuss, that's his name, Richard Dreyfuss. The stand in for Richard Dreyfuss was just like 'we should nuke the shit out of them' and that's where I was like, I have to get out of here. [airplane flying by] Like this is kill—this is killing me, it's eating me up inside. So, working in an anti-Muslim environment, and just being Iranian and anti-war and you know leftist, in that kind of environment where I couldn't talk about my politics at all. And I was surrounded by people who
were just wanted anybody like myself to not exist, was just eating me up inside, it was really hard. Coupled with the sexism and overall misogyny that is, that was—is for sure still in the industry as a camera assistant. As someone who, I thought, that I, really my intention was to continue being a camera assistant, and work up and be, you know move up in, in the world of assisting, in the world of, of, of cinema, to shooting, to being a director of photography. And it just became super apparent after, you know, five, six years in the industry that that was not gonna happen. And in fact, there was so much misogyny, is like the glass ceiling, is like everything that in college when I was taking my feminist classes, like everything you read about is, it was textbook in the industry. The glass ceiling, the like, you know, like very polite people that sort of push you aside. Just the buddy-buddy, guy, you know, the guy's just like really, you can't do the job, but this guy can [airplane flying by]. Anyway, it was really eating me up inside, and I was still an artist, I was in my late twenties, I was like you know, I'm an artist I can't do my art, I'm working all the time, I'm working on these shows with people who hate me. And I don't like what they're saying, it's eating me up inside, I don't want to be around it, I just—I need to take care of myself. So, I wanted to leave New York, so I told my partner, 'let's leave New York' and she said 'okay I'll do it' even though her career was just sort of launching as a High School teacher. I shouldn't say career cause it's not a career path [chuckle], but she was in schools that she like, that she liked the curriculum and the style of teaching, but still thought that yeah, she needed to get out of the city for a minute as well, so that's what lead me to leave it was really, I think in hindsight it was, I left in 2003, it was two years of post 9/11 trauma and not really having anywhere, or anybody to work it out with. So yeah.

Awad: Did you not find people in the queer community that you could talk to about this stuff? [airplane flying by]

Naz: I mean not, not really. I think my group, my group—yeah maybe we would talk about it, but it just, I didn't—again, it was like until you see you really—have other middle eastern folks that you're talking to that really understand. You know I had one friend, whom if, people may recognize this story, but she, [person walking by] because of her last name even though she had grown up, around her—you know, one side of her family that was all Jewish, and she identified as Jewish. And definitely felt culturally like that way to me when I knew her, after 9/11 she had a very Muslim last name because her father's side was not Jewish. Anyway, so she would get phone call after phone call after phone call, after phone—she's really the only one that I could talk to, and we didn't really, you there was something

Awad: What do you mean, phone call after phone call?

Naz: Oh, hate, hate, hatred phone calls and hate and just like you know, 'your people should die, you're all awful, you're terrible' like she had to, she, I can't remember, but it was—I can't remember what she had to do in order to stop that, but she eventually left New York, she couldn't take it anymore. She took her name off of the—out of the phone book. Yeah, I mean I guess she was really the only one.

Awad: [car driving by] Did you get involved at all in activism at that time, or did you just leave?
**Naz:** Yeah but because of my work I couldn't really get involved with any organizations, and I'm sure there were some pretty incredible ones at the time, definitely a lot of activity happening and some pretty freaking awesome things, but I had to make a living, so I yeah. So, I didn't, and I couldn't, so I left. And I left thinking I wanna you know make films, or maybe I could leave and try to figure out what else I could do in life, and ended up applying to Grad school, [airplane flying by] and got into a Grad school in Canada and went. And yeah.

**Awad:** So how were things there in, in Canada? When you, uh, post 9/11.

**Naz:** Canada was amazing, I mean it's, it's like uh, being in another country where they speak English but culturally have—are similar but also a little bit different. With an analysis of the United States, [men yelling] um, that yeah. It was, it was really, it was wonderful during the Bush era to be outside of the United States and not—and to be in, in a country where you know, being an artist is right. You know, it's not something where you to like, write. You have to um, you know it's not like a very decadent thing that only certain, very privileged people do. You know...

**Awad:** What years were you in, in Canada?

**Naz:** I was in Canada from 2006 to 2008. And I was in Minneapolis from 2004 to 2006. And Minneapolis is its own sort of, sort of insanity because it's one of the—you know it's a very—Minnesota, Midwest, very white, protestant, um it's Scandinavian. [men yelling] Deep socialist roots because um, it's like the Scandinavian [airplane flying by] people who landed there, you know they were farmers and they were socialist farmers. Anyway, so it's interesting there were a lot of collective and co-ops, and that's the way it sort of looked an manifested. But it also, was [girl laughing] a racially divided city. And it had, at the time one of the largest populations of um, of Somali and Ethiopian refugees, [man laughing] and it's 2006. And so, I started working with them [jingling], in these different youth media organizations. That was freaking, it was amazing [men yelling] it was also a, a total, eye opening experience on you know just as refugees what these folks had to deal with, and you know they were young, they were young people. So, they lived most of their lives in camps, in refugee camps. And I don't know, it just [airplane flying by] you know how they, what they had to do, you know how they lived. Grew up in these camps and then came to the United States to like you know, quote on quote, live their lives. And their—and then they're just like you know [hand clap] their experience of, of racism and otherness is, is, it's just like they're [hand clapping] I can only gesture to this, like they're slammed [hand clapping] against the wall of racism [men yelling]. You know in the United States with no opportunities and no chances of, of you know any kind of, [men yelling] of life. Or—wow they're really yelling to each other over there. [chuckle] Like across the park. [men yelling]

**Awad:** So, what brought you to Minneapolis. Why Minneapolis before Toronto?

**Naz:** My partner's family is from Minnesota, and so she said, “If we're going to leave New York I want to be around my family. So, let's go there.” I wanted to go to Santa Fe, I was like you know, let's go somewhere warm, that's a dream, and I don't know. I hear Taos [New Mexico] is
really good, I have a savings account let's just go. And she's like no I'm going to go to Minnesota. So again, no Iranians, [chuckle] my interactions with other people [airplane flying by] who are Muslim was these very devout [laugh] you know, Somali and um people and Ethiopian. I don’t know it’s just very, it was different…and a lot of white liberal crusty punks, like a lot of white liberal people, a lot of them. Some of them are awesome, and two of them are some of like my favorite people on the planet too, and the rest is like, I don't know, whatever. Yeah.

**Awad:** So [Naz chuckle] when you came to New York, um when you returned to New York after that time away can you tell me a little about what brought you back?

**Naz:** Yeah, I mean I think at the end of the day, however, I feel; however, I felt about New York when I left, I knew that the East coast was a part of my system. And Philadelphia still made me feel miserable, and just [sniffles] uh, there were a lot of beautiful things about New York and a lot of, what you would think would be opportunity here. [airplane flying by] so I really wanted to come back here and I. I, I mean, wanted to be an artist yeah here. I mean I didn't want to actually, to be perfectly honest, I didn't want to come back. I wanted to stay in Canada. Cause I knew coming back to the United States meant I'd have to engaged in this very capitalist mindset artworld. And that's not—I felt really liberated in, in Toronto in Canada, being an Artist. I didn't have to make anything other than what, from the inside was screaming to come out. I didn’t have to shape and mold it any way unless I want to. And the—the art that I was surrounded by there blew my mind. You know it—they were in artist run centers, they were not, or what's called artist run centers, they were not a part of any gallery sort of corporate gallery or any kind of gallery that sold art. The buying and selling of art was something that, it's funny, artist's there were like I dream of that, what a wonderful way to, you know you get to sell your art. But I was like oh my God you got what residency? You just got 5,000 dollars from the government. Um, there were faculty who got 100,000 grants from the Canadian government to make their art pieces. [airplane flying by] And it's like, that's, that was incredible. I was not looking forward to coming back, to be honest. Um, because I had a feeling that I wouldn't be able to make the art that I wanted to make. I'd be you know locked in to this sort of gallery world and I—yeah. So—but my partner was back, and she couldn't live in Toronto. She had a very hard time finding a job as a high school teacher, and a particular one that works with an alternative Pedagogy, and young people who’ve been sort of disenfranchised from the public-school system. That's, those are the people that she's the most, that she you know, feels the most passionate about, and enjoys working with. And there, there's no—you can't take that kind of way into Canada without understanding the cultural nuances in Canada, around you know the history and how, and why, you know that particular situation came to be. Whereas in, in the United States, she can, or in particular in New York, she, you know has a very firm understanding of that, and so she wanted to come back. So here we are, we're back here and I, that's really what it was, that's what brought me back is her, that's what took me to Minnesota is her. [airplane flying by]

**Awad:** So, can you tell me a little bit about um, about what kinds of art you make and what you, you know what your, or what you're interested in making I guess? [Bicyclist riding by]
Naz: Um, I don’t know, I think it’s, I do work around, around these, like in between spaces where you know things aren’t very clear. I do work around identity, what I call identity—I mean the easy way to describe it, is its instillation work, a lot of it is film based. I love motion picture film, like analogue film, both in still photography and in [men yelling] the moving imagery motion picture. I come from an experimental background, so non-linear narratives, and then what Grad school gave me access to was to bring that into an installation space. So, it ends up looking like imagery that is, and objects that you engage with that allude to a certain feeling, it depends on what it is, sometimes it’s a nostalgic feeling, sometimes it’s a feeling of, of like a jittery sort of feeling of unknowing. So, the work that I’m trying to do now [airplane flying by] is more sculptural and film based. Uh two channels or multiple channels and the—the very process oriented, so process is almost as important as the final, quote on quote product. I don’t know, it’s hard to describe, because I want to do more work with wood and with sculpture, but I can never put down a camera I love. And I just love film, I love shooting. So, the pieces that I want to make now are more about I think, [person walking by] um, I don’t know, being 41 in the queer community. Being, you know, what that looks like as far as community is concerned, queerness is concerned, gender non-conformity is concerned, being an immigrant, being—being Muslim, or being born Muslim I should say [airplane flying by]. And—about these identities of inbetweeness. I think that’s really the thing. Yeah, I think I just rambled, I don’t think I came to any—

Awad: I mean I have an idea of what you’re talking about, [laugh] so hopefully the people who listen to it will too. I guess my final, my final question is uh, is... what, what do you—what do you envision like; well what do I want to say... what do I want to say, hold on let me think about it for one sec—[airplane flying by]

[Naz and Awad’s voice in the background]

Naz: Oh yeah, totally.

Awad: maybe that's a good one?

Naz: Sure.

[Return to interview]

Awad: Okay, I finally figured out, [chuckle] now I'm going to ask this question. Okay um, given that you've just said, you know much of your art practice and the issues you're concerned about, concern—are involved with this notion of inbetweeness, and you are you know, 41. You are gender non-conforming and this sort of thing, and I'm just wondering what do you, what do you envision as being you know, um the future for your work and, and what are some challenges do you—you see to, you know to your life given your subject position and also the way that you know our communities are structured in New York right now? [airplane flying by]

Naz: Yeah, I mean I, it's a, I really fight this for all that I've never felt like I've belonged or have never felt like normal, or what does normal mean, or, you know I hate that word anyway. But
felt like I belong—belonging and conforming I feel like as I grow older each year, my life looks more and more normalized and I really, my hope is to disrupt that because it becomes really easy especially being in a long term relationship with a partner for many, many, many—for over a decade, you just fit into this way, and you sort of disengage from the community and or from any kind of a community, and my hopes for my own work moving forward and for my life moving forward is to not give into [airplane flying by] that and to be a part of a communities and community or to create—I don’t want to say be a part of community because community is a, is a you know very questionable word anyway. What is community, and what is that? Who defines community? But to, to create everywhere I am to create that community or to be a part of the creation of a community whether it’s you and I here talking together, or when I walk down the street, um to just be aware of that and to just, I don’t know, to hold that more, to disengage less, to, to make sure, and this has been, this is also why, this next thing is I think one of the most important elements that I have always hoped for and that I’ve wanted to be an intervention within quote on quote, queer community, and I can’t thank you enough for this opportunity. I hope it’s whatever, it’s okay is that, my—through this queer community, it’s been a lot of, you know when I came back to New York there was a lot of sort of contention within queerness and queer community and there’s a lot of conforming and it became this sort of clique in this group. And this idea of community is, is—is like this homogenous thing, that I’ve resist and don’t, don’t believe in and I found especially within the quote on quote, queer arts world, that I was sort of because I was someone who believes certain things, and was I don’t know why, I don’t know why, maybe it’s my own cultural upbringing, maybe it’s my sensitivity, I don’t know but I sort of pushed out and so other peoples stories get told. You know kind of people who are more dominant or who have this sort of rhetoric and I just wanted to make sure that people, not just me, but just, there is space for everyone's story to be memorialized let’s say, or, or be written in the history books, you know, when we talk about a certain time in the queer art world it; I know it’s going to be certain people’s names who are foregrounded. And I was there, I was a part of that show, I was a part of like the mixed film festival for example, but I couldn't stomach some of the things that were happening, so I disengaged from it because I was never the kind of person because of how I was raised or who I was throughout my upbringing, or throughout my childhood. I was never the person to say you need to accept me and to hear my voice. [men talking] I was never that person, I was always the person to say I don’t belong here I’m going to leave. [men walking] So I want to make sure that as I grow older, and you know wiser, I have more confidence in my self [airplane flying by] I have more, I have a, I, hopefully I’m able to see situations in a more complex way than I was a decade ago or two decades ago. I want to just be able to make sure that, you know, peoples' histories be told, and peoples voices be heard. Queer, not queer, trans, non-trans, doesn’t, just certain people are silenced in this society, in the United States, and, um and I just want to make sure that that doesn't happen so collaboration is a really important part of the work that I want to bring into the world, and like honest collaboration and, I don’t know just yeah. Community and collaboration. [men talking]

Awad: I think that’s a good note to end [Naz chuckle] Thank you—

Naz: Thank you—
Awad: So much, thank you—

Naz: No, thank you!