

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**IZZY MUSTAFA**

**Interviewer:** Nadia Awad

**Date of Interview:** April 11, 2017

**Location of Interview:** Nadia's Apartment

**Transcribed by** Noreen Lai

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Awad: Okay. I'm with, um, Izzaddine Mustafa, recording an oral history for the Trans Oral History Project, which seeks to document the lives of trans New Yorker—trans and gender non-conforming New Yorkers. Um, it is April 11, 2017. I'm in my apartment with Izzaddine, and I think we—we're going to begin. If you could just tell me where you were born, and a little bit about your parents would be good.

Mustafa: Sure. Um, so I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the Southwest. And my parents—um, my mother was born in this town called Beeville, Texas, and she—so she's Texan. And my Dad was born in a small village in the occupied West Bank in Palestine called Jamma'in. And my father, he's—he comes from a Palestinian Muslim family, very conservative, and my mother comes from a very conservative Southern Baptist Christian family.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about, uh, what you mean by “conservative” in each context?

Mustafa: Um, so in the context of my mother, they come from—she comes from a family that's very conservative in the sense of, um, really holding on to political—conservative political beliefs, like they're die-hard Republicans, very much supporters of, like, the—what are they called?—the born-again Christian movement. They—they—basically, they're Trump supporters, and they also are very pro-Israel Christian Zionists, so they're very conservative in the political sense but also in the, like, religious sense. They are very much about, um—I guess when I say “conservative” they're—in that context, they're very much about protecting their way of life and their, uh, whiteness [chuckles], I guess, if that's like an academic term, but that's the best way I could describe it. And then on my father's side, they're very conservative in the sense that, you know, a lot of my family members don't have a college education, and they were born and raised in a small village. They—they're very religious, so they're very, like, into practicing Islam, and they are very, um—I don't want this to come off as like—you know, I hope it doesn't come off like insulting or whatever, but they live a very, like, simple life, like they do what they can to, you know, meet—to meet, like, what they need at the end of the week—I forgot the figure of speech—[chuckles] and they really just try to live the life the best way they can without being intruded by others. And also, they live under occupation, so a lot of it—a lot of their conservatism has to do with, like, them finding a place of, like, solace—or “solace”—amongst such brutal, like, yeah, madness around them.

Awad: Um, can you tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up in Albuquerque?

Mustafa: Yeah. Albuquerque is a really cool place. I guess if you were to ask me that two years ago before I made my move to New York, I wouldn't say that. But retrospectively, it's an amazing place to grow up because you are surrounded by nature and amazing, like, humble people. Um, Albuquerque is, I think, one of the most underrated cities or places on earth, because you have these mountains that literally surround you, and you have like—we call it a “small big city” because, you know, it's not really six degrees of separation there; it's like more like two. Like you know of somebody who knows of somebody who knows of somebody. So there's like that community feeling everywhere you go. And I grew up like in a pretty comfortable childhood. My

parents did their best to make sure that me and my brothers, you know, had what we could just to, like, get a good education and to be able to partake in recreational things like sports. And yeah, Albuquerque, you know, it's—there's also downfalls, of course, with, you know, having like everybody knowing each other. And that's part of the reason I moved to New York, is for the—to be anonymous in a lot of ways. Because in Albuquerque, it's like everyone knows your shit. [laughter]

Awad: What was it like for you, uh, given your family background, growing up in Albuquerque? If you could, like, tell us a story about that, that'd be cool.

Mustafa: Like in terms of my fam—like my mom and my—

Awad: Yeah. Yeah, your—uh, like were there a lot of Palestinians in Albuquerque?

Mustafa: Yeah. Um, so in Albuquerque, it was interesting because growing up, I didn't—like up until I was 9, I didn't really have a full understanding of my background. My parents were very much, you know, uh... My dad really wanted us to be Muslim, and my mom really wanted us to be Christian, and—even though they both weren't religious—that religious themselves. Um, and so it was just this constant confusion of, like, I would be in Sunday School at church, at my grandmother's church, learning about Jesus Christ, and then on Friday I'd be at the mosque at like some youth program learning about Muhammad. And then I would just confuse the two, and you know, I didn't really—I—when people asked me what my ethnicity was, I would be like, "I'm half Christian and half Muslim," because I honestly had no idea what was going on. But then as I started going into middle school, my mom started backing away, I think, from the Christian kind of mentality and faith. I mean, a lot of that had to do after 9/11. My mom started to open up her eyes a lot more about the Islamophobia that was going on and the anti-Arab prejudice, like, that was my dad—my dad was really affected by, with his employment and everything. And so my—so I started becoming more in—or I started going into more like Arab/Muslim spaces. So like, a lot of my friends were Arab and Muslim. Even up at my school I hung out with a lot of the kids that would come over during the weekend to visit my parents. And so it was like this weird balance of, you know, starting to identify with my Arab roots but also still being like a very—an American kid. I guess—I don't know, I'm trying to think like in re—there are so many things that it's in relation to, like when you asked that question, "What was it like?" it's like, how do I pinpoint a certain thing? But basically, I remember—I'm trying to think of a good story. Um, okay.

Awad: All right, I just wanted to pick up on, um, what we were talking about with life in Albuquerque. Um, are you the oldest?

Mustafa: No, I'm actually the middle child. I have an older brother, um, who is now 30 and a younger brother who is 22.

Awad: So, um, what was that like, having two brothers?

Mustafa: [chuckles]

Awad: And, you know, being someone who, um, you know—what was your experience of gender like with that, I guess, would be...

Mustafa: [chuckles] Yeah.

Awad: I mean, that's a big question, but...

Mustafa: No, I mean, having two brothers definitely—you know, sometimes it was awesome, sometimes it wasn't. No. I guess [laughter] um, for me, you know, I was really close with my brothers, especially my younger brother, growing up. We're only two and a half years apart. So, um, we did everything together, up until like college, even. So I spent a lot of good—I spent a lot of time with him and then my cousin Bilal. And we used to skateboard. So I skated a lot with my brother and my cousin Bilal, and we would skateboard, we would go to net cafés and play "Counter-Strike," we would—[laughter] we would do a lot of things that, you know, typical boys would do, but the only difference is that, you know, I wasn't born, quote-unquote, "a man" or a boy or whatever. So like, gender definitely defined a lot of, like, you know, obstacles for me growing up, in terms of the circles that I ran in. I remember vividly—actually, this is an anecdote that I found out that I was actually a girl, was, um, I was at a skate park with my brother and my cousin Bilal. We were just skating. It was like a typical Saturday, and all of the sudden, you know, these boys, they start saying, "You have blood on your jeans." And I'm like, "Wait, what do you mean I have blood on my jeans?" I'm like, "I didn't fall or anything. Where's the blood?" Like, I was looking all around. I was maybe 12. And I was like, "What do you mean I have blood on my jeans?" They're like, "On your butt. You have blood on your butt." And I'm like, "What do you mean I have blood on my butt?" So then I, like, go to my brother and I'm like, "Jadd! They say I have blood on my butt and I didn't even fall. Like, am I in—am I just, like, bleeding? Am I dying?" And he's like, "Yo, come here. Let's call Mom." So I called my mom, and my mom came, and I started—I was crying. I was like, "Mom, I have blood on my butt. Am I dying? We should go to the hospital. I don't know what's going on." And my mom was like, "All right, let's go. I have something to tell you. Let's talk about this." And she's like, "So I'm sure you learned in health class about, you know, um, menstrual cycles." And I'm like, "Oh shit." I was like, "What is—what, Mom?" And she's like, "You have your period." And I was so embarrassed. And I was like, "Oh my gosh!" Like, "I have menstrual cycles? What?" And then I asked my brother—I was like, "Why do we have to go through this, and you don't? This is the most embarrassing thing of my life." And like, that—at that moment, like, it kind of changed the course of a lot for me, because I was like, "Ah, now I really..." You know, that's when I started, like, growing boobs and I started getting the curves, and I really hated it. And you know, it kind of changed how my brother and my cousin looked at me too. They started making like dumb sexist jokes every time I would hang out with them. They would say like, "Oh, you should make us a sandwich," and like all these dumb things. But I still hung out with them because I was like, "This is what's interesting to me." And like, in relation to my older brother, our relationship is more like, we didn't really hang out a lot, but he's like—he gives—he instills a lot of wisdom in me. So we have like a really good relationship because we're like—I don't know. My older brother, he really looks out for me, and it's always been like that, growing up. But yeah, the gender stuff was like real. Like I remember in high

school, I would go through these phases where I'd be like—I was very much into skater, like, culture, and so I would like wear like, you know, all the skate—like Vans, like Vans shirts with the—Vans skate shoes and all these things. And then I remember I was hanging out with this group of girls, and they were like, “You can't dress like that if you hang out with us. You have to wear Hollister,” or, you know, dumb shit. So I remember for a good like year I pretended to be super femme, and every single day I was so uncomfortable with my life. I hated myself, I wanted to go home and, like... I—you know, I would constantly tell my brother, like, “Yo, can I just hang out with you?” Like, because my younger brother, he just wanted to be cool, so he thought hanging out with his sister wouldn't be as cool in high school. But, like, during the weekends if it was just us three—me, my cousin Bilal, and Jadd—then it would be fine. But I don't know. I remember in middle school and high school, it was like pretty rough after, you know, the menstrual-cycle period. Um—[laughter] and I was always—I don't know. And then in terms of gender stuff, of my whole family—I know you didn't really bring up my whole family, just my brothers, but my whole family, that was an interesting thing too, because my parents, they didn't had an inkling about my questions of gender because—and I would constantly get, like—I would get my parents really annoyed because I would wear, like, my brother's clothing, and my dad would just be like, “You cannot wear that. You have to be a young lady.” Like, “You have to, you know, conduct yourself like a young woman.” Um, and my mother was the same way. And every time we'd go shopping as a family, I'd always go to the men's section, and my dad used to get, like, pissed. He'd be like, “You cannot wear this.” Like, “You're not allowed to wear this. This is just for your brothers, not for you.” But I would always figure out ways to sneak in, like, masculine clothing. And I think, you know, the question, too, of dating was a weird thing, because my broth—well, both of my brothers dated a lot, sec—though secretly, pretty secretly, especially with my dad. My dad, like, would—he's, you know, very anti-dating. But with my dad, you know, he would always tell me, like, “You cannot hang out with boys. You cannot do all these things.” And then I remember there was a switch in high school where he was like, “This is weird. You're, like—you hang out with boys, but you don't talk about boys. You don't act like you have a crush on boys. What's going on?” So then he started getting weird with me hanging out with women. [laughter] So like, he did this thing where he was like, “You can't sleep over at any of your friends' houses,” because he was so confused. He was like, “My—” He was like, “My daughter isn't—like, I'm here being like, ‘You should get married to a Muslim man or an Arab man,’ and you're not excited about marrying any man? Like, I'm so confused.” And so like, even me, growing up, in high school, I was confused about my sexuality in the sense of like, I would try really hard to like a guy. I'd be like, “I think I have a crush on you.” And then I would talk to my friends and be like, “So, what does a crush feel like? Like, do you just—it's nothing, right? It's like you don't have any attraction. You just, like, pretend like you do, right?” And they'd be like, “No, like you get butterflies in your stomach.” And I'm like, “I've never gotten that with any of these guys that I'd try to, like, have a crush on.” And—but then, like, I realized that I started liking girls because I worked at this pizza place, and there was this—I'm not going to say her name, just in case she might listen to this.”

Awad: [laughter]

Mustafa: But, um, I remember we worked at this pizza place, and like every time I talked to her, I would get butterflies; I would daydream about her; all these things. And then I was like, “Ahh. Is this—am I lesbian?” You know, all these—and then I, like—there was a lot of internalized homophobia that went on during that period, so then I really tried to repress that, along with my gender stuff, so... That was a long-winded answer to gender dynamics.

Awad: That’s cool.

Mustafa: But definitely gender, like, played a huge role in a lot of my understanding. And actually, like, if I really wanted to go deep about how gender really affected me and how I started to get an idea about, you know, me not really identifying as a woman or as a feminine person, um, something that, you know, I did growing up—and I can’t believe I’m publicly saying this, but I think it really sets the context of, like, my relation to me being trans—was that growing up, like, um, I would say, so when I was 13 up into 18, I spent a lot of time on the computer. I was like—I was one of those kids who just was constantly just on, like, dumb shit all day. So like, I would go on Neopets, and then I would go to these chat rooms, and like, I eventually, uh... Yeah, I was just constantly on chat rooms, and what I would do is like—this is so embarrassing to say, but you know that show *Catfish*? So I used to catfish people and pretend that I was, um, a guy. So like, I would chat with people as if I was a guy. And that was like a sense for me and my way of being able to fully express myself the way I wanted to, and like nobody knew who I was. So I got pretty good at it. Like, you know, people would call me on the phone, and I’d really lower my voice and I would, you know, act as if I was a guy. And when I would dream, I would dream as if I was a guy, and I would really, like—I don’t know. It was—it was like really weird. I got caught like a lot—numerous times by my parents. And my parents were very confused about it. One time this one girl called my parents’ house, or the home line, and told my dad about it, and my dad was furious. He was like, “Why would you do this? This doesn’t even make sense. Why are you pretending to be a guy? You’re—why aren’t you happy with who you are?” Like—and then I would just be like, “I don’t know!” And then so they sent me to therapy to, like, sort it out, and then therapy didn’t help because all the therapist really wanted to focus in on was that I was a Muslim and, like, queer-ish, you know? And so—so for a long time I was just like, I didn’t really know what was going on. I had no idea, really, what being trans was about. I never met a trans person in my life during that time. I never really heard trans stories. I wasn’t surrounded by, like—I was surrounded by queers, but we never—like, we were the queer high school kids that didn’t come out as queer up until like the end of college. Because, like, we knew there was something interesting about us, but we didn’t know exactly what, so we never talked about queer things. So I just—I had no understanding of it. So actually, it’s interesting, because when I came out—so first I came out to my dad as, like, a queer woman when I was like 21. [sirens wailing]

Awad: Oh, can you wait just one sec because of the fire engine?

Mustafa: Yeah. [chuckles]

Awad: Sorry.

Mustafa: No, it's cool. [sirens fade]

Awad: Okay, please continue.

Mustafa: All right. [chuckles]

Awad: I think it's far away enough now, you know.

Mustafa: All right. Cool. So when I was 21, I came out—or like 20. I was 20, actually. When I was 20, I came out to my dad as, like, a queer woman or whatever. And my dad, it was a funny way, because he gave me the marriage talk, and he was like, “You have to start thinking about marriage.” Like, “You know, you—you know, I have to find a husband for you,” all these things. And I was like, “Listen, like, I don't ever want to get married.” [laughter] And my dad was like, “Okay, there's two reasons why.” He's like, “The first one is because—the first reason is like, you don't want to get married now. You want to wait until you're 30. You want to travel, you want to find yourself, all these things. And the second one is you have no desire for men.” And I was like, “Yeah, the second one. I have no desire for men. You hit it on the nose.” And then my dad was like, “Okay, interesting. Um, I guess it makes sense, a little bit.” So like, I came out—when I came out as queer to my dad, he was accepting but still very wary about things. And then a year later, I came out to him as a trans man, and that's when he was like, “I knew this all along.” And I'm like, “Why—why do you say that? How did you know that all along?” And he was like, “Because of all of the behaviors you, like, had as a child and as an adolescent in high school and stuff.” He's like, “Your whole life, you basically fought to be your brothers, or you fought to be a boy. And—you know, from the clothing you wanted to wear, the constant fights we'd have, to you pretending to be a guy online and like, you know, how that was like such a thing.” And for me, like, I didn't make that connection until my dad said that. I was like, “Oh yeah. I guess I did all of that online stuff just because, like—not just because, but a lot of it had to do with, like, me not being comfortable with who I was and me wanting to just express myself in the way that I thought I—or I am. Not—I mean, I am not those people that I pretended to be online, but like, I still—I still, like—I understand my 14-year-old brain much more now that I came out as trans. So...

Awad: How did you feel when your father said that to you?

Mustafa: At first I was like really embarrassed. Um, but then I was like relieved.

Awad: Did it surprise you that he had that insight?

Mustafa: Yeah. It surprised me a lot, because when I came out as trans to my dad and to my family, honestly, I thought it was like—I don't know. When I, um—when I first started exploring the idea of being trans, I talked to like numerous trans people before I was like, “Okay, I'm definitely trans.” And I had conversations with a lot of them, and I remember this one trans woman was like, “Before you come out to anybody, just prepare to sacrifice everything in your life just to be who you are.” And that really freaked me out, like—but I understood it. But it freaked me out, so, like—because I didn't really have, like, the context of how some folks, that

would apply to more than others. But I was like, “Okay.” I went into coming out as trans in this way of like, “I’m prepared to sacrifice everything I have just so I can be myself.” So I kind of went in with that mentality of like, I told my dad I was trans, and I was ready to be like, “I’m trans and I don’t care what you say and I’m just going to peace out.” But like, my dad was like, “Okay, yeah. It makes sense,” like—and also, my dad, he said it in this super Arab way too, which I think is a little messed up, because he was like, “Oh, yeah, of course you’re—you like women, so of course you’re trans rather than being a queer woman.” Anyway, [laughter] but that’s like another issue, but like, this—when he came—when he first talked to me about like, “I knew you were like this for a while,” I was relieved, honestly. I was like, “Oh, this isn’t going to be a bigger fight than I thought it was.”

Awad: So was it—would you say that it was easier for him to accept you as a trans man than as a queer woman?

Mustafa: Yeah, way easier. Um, and actually, for my mom, it’s—it was easier for her to accept me as a queer woman than a trans man. So like, that was like an interesting thing to navigate. But now both of my parents are like both understanding either way. But yeah, like my dad, he was really hesitant with me coming out as a queer woman, or being a queer woman, because he—I think a lot of it had to do with just his, like, fucked—already fucked-up ideas about, like, queerness and homosexuality and stuff. But I also think that a lot of it had to do with him being like, “Yeah, but like, I—there’s something more there than you just being like—a sexuality thing.” I think my dad had a very nuanced idea about, like, sexual orientation and gender than I thought he did. Because he knew how to separate the two in a much easier way, so I think—yeah, I don’t know.

Awad: So how—in terms of dealing with your extended family, how was that?

Mustafa: Yeah.

Awad: Can you talk a lit—or are you willing to talk a little bit about that and—you know, given the differences that your parents had in their reaction to...

Mustafa: Yeah. So like, coming out as trans, like, I already had the notion in my head. I was like, “Okay, I’m not going to be able to go to Palestine.” So like, I went to Palestine a lot, like almost every summer growing up. Um, I’m very close to my—

Awad: To Jamma’in?

Mustafa: To Jamma’in, yeah.

Awad: Okay.

Mustafa: To my dad’s village. Um, and so I’m—I have a very close relationship with my grandmother and my cousins and my uncles and my aunts there. And I was like, “Okay, if I come

out, like—” It was like, I honestly cried for like a week because—before I came out, because I was like, “This is going to—like, screw the Israelis. Like, you know, I don’t even—it doesn’t even matter if they’re going to let me in again or not. I—I’m probably not going to be able to see them again because they’re going to, you know, not accept me as being trans.” So like, when I came out to my dad, I like—that was one of the first things I said. I was like, “Listen, I know that this is going to ruin my relationship forever with the family back home, and I understand that, and I fully, you know, accept that sacrifice or whatever.” And my dad was like, “Yeah, this is going to be hard to navigate.” Like, my dad was also like, “Yeah, this isn’t going to be easy. We shouldn’t tell them. Don’t post anything on Facebook. Don’t post anything anywhere.” And so it wasn’t until two weeks—so like, I posted something on Instagram about—like a picture and, like, of me, saying something about being trans. I didn’t take my dad’s advice. So [chuckles] somebody—so one of my cousins, like my third cousin in my village or something, saw it and then went straight to my grandmother and told everybody.

Awad: Which means everyone saw it. [laughter]

Mustafa: Which means everyone saw it. It was the talk—it was the talk of the whole village. Like everyone knew I was trans. So then my dad gets a call from my grandmother, and, um, my dad—and then she was like, “Listen, I saw, you know, that, um—that—” My birth name is Danya. So she was like, “I saw that Danya came out as a trans man and that her name is Izzaddine now. And I would just say that now he is my grandson. Izzaddine is my grandson, and I just gained a new grandson, and that’s amazing.” And my dad told me that. Because when my dad—when I came home, my dad, like, sat me down and he was very serious, and he was like, “So your grandmother called me. She found out.” And I was like—and I started bawling already, because I was like, “Damn it. This is the end. This marks the end.” And then my dad was like, “And this is what she said. She said that she gained a new grandson.” And then I started bawling more, because I was like, “Oh my God, like, if my grandmother says that...” Like, she’s like the matriarch of the family. That means that, like, I’ll be able to go back home and visit Palestine. And like, to me, that was like the biggest—I—

Awad: Your grandfather is not...

Mustafa: My grandfather passed away when I was 2 years old.

Awad: Okay. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Mustafa: Yeah.

Awad: Okay.

Mustafa: Um, so when I—so in terms of my family in Palestine, like, I’m so lucky. Like, my story is like—I’m one of the luckiest people in terms of like—who I know—in terms of like my relationship with my family being as strong as ever, because I know a lot of folks who don’t have that same fortune. And for me, like, I went back home to Palestine this summer, and then I went again this

January. And this past January, um, I was able to go to my village and stay there and spend time with my family, and everyone just was like super supportive of me, and they're—my grandmother to the degree she wants to find me a wife, and that's like really weird, because I'm like, "Uh, I don't really want to get married at all," and she's like, "No, but you have to get married." So it's kind of like this weird thing where she accepts me so much that they still want me to conform to, like, the "normal," quote-unquote, traditions of like what it—the role of a man, basically.

Awad: So in terms of finding you a wife, would that be within the village?

Mustafa: Yeah, or within Palestine, like any Palestinian village.

Awad: Really?

Mustafa: Yeah.

Awad: They're open...

Mustafa: They're open to it, yeah.

Awad: Oh, wow.

Mustafa: Um, but—

Awad: Very liberal.

Mustafa: It's so liberal. I know, no. [laughter]

Awad: [laughter] Wow.

Mustafa: But it's like interesting because my grandmother, like—okay, but like, on the other side of my—on my mom's side of the family, I'm like estranged from them. I don't talk to them, and actually, they don't really support me being trans.

Awad: The white side.

Mustafa: The white side. So like, for them—it's just funny because, like, when people are like, "Oh, your family in Palestine must really hate you and not accept you," I'm like, "Well, actually, my family in Palestine, they're like hella down with me being, like, a trans person. And on the other side, my white side of the family, they really hate me, um, because I'm trans." Not just because I'm trans, but because I'm Palestinian and I'm like—I, like, identify as like somewhat Muslim, you know. So like, my mom—my dad's side of the family in Palestine, they—you know, I still talk to them. I talk to them all the time. And my cousins—it was actually really funny. Here's a funny story. So I was there this summer, and I was in the car with my grandmother and my three little cousins. My cousin Leyan and Rama. Leyan's 2, Rama's 7, and Razan, she's like 13.

Awad: Was this the first time you were going back since transitioning?

Mustafa: Yeah. It was the first time going back since transitioning. Um, and the last time I was there prior was in 2014, before I physically transitioned. Um, and so—and so I'd met Rama. She was like—she was 4 when I was last there, before I transitioned. So we're in the car, and I'm driving my grandmother and my cousins back to the village to drop them off after we, like, hung out. We had like a picnic or something that day. And Rama is like—in Arabic to my grandmother, is like, "Teyta, where's Danya?" Which is my birth name. And Teyta's like—my gr—Teyta was like, "What do you mean?"

Awad: Your grandmother?

Mustafa: My grandmother was like, "What do you mean?" Like, "What do you mean, where's Danya?" And Rama was like, "I remember I had a cousin named Danya, and, you know, she kind of reminds—she kind of looks like him but, like, is not him. Where is Danya? Is she dead?" And my *teyta* started cracking up. My *teyta* was—my grandmother was just like laughing hysterically, and she was like—she was like, "You could say that, but also, like—I don't know. Yeah, you could say that." And my cousin Razan, who was 13, she like—she knew. So she knew—and you know, I think that she had the conversation with Rama after and was like, "They're the same person." [laughter] Um...

Awad: How'd she explain it, though? Do you know how she explained?

Mustafa: I don't know how she explained, but when I came back this January, Rama came up to me and was like, "I know that you're the same person. I understand now." And [laughter] I was like, "Oh, *shatra*," like—

Awad: Mm-hmm.

Mustafa: Like—[laughter] I don't know. *Shatra* means like, yeah, "smart thinking," yeah.

Awad: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. "Smart girl."

Mustafa: Yeah, "smart girl." Like—and it was just so—it was just so funny, because I was like, "This is really—" I don't know. It was just so telling. My family's so cool with everything. And there was also a moment this past January where, um—where I was sitting with my family, and one of my uncles, he, like—he has like severe schizophrenia and he has mental health issues, and so he wasn't very much in the know of, like, who I was and my transition or anything. So I was like at my grandmother's house, and they came over, my uncle and one of my—my two cousins. They came over and, you know, he's saying hi to everyone, so like, everyone's in a circle, he's going one by one, he's saying hi, *salaam alaikum*, to everybody, and he gets to me, and he's like, "*Salaam alaikum*, who are you?" Like, "Who is this? I'm confused." And everyone just, like, stops

talking. Everyone's like, "Uh..." [laughter] And then my cousin Sundus is like, "Oh yeah, that's, um, Izzaddine, um, used—formerly known as Danya. The—he's the son of Mousa."

Awad: Mm.

Mustafa: And then he was like, "What do you mean, the son of Mousa? I already—you know, I know Jadd and Khalid, but I don't know this one." And so Sundus was like, "Yeah," like, you know, "he's now a man." And then he was like, "Oh! Okay, that makes sense! Okay, *habibi*." He, like, gave me this big hug, and he was like, "I missed you so much. I haven't seen you in so long," and like, it was just very welcoming and, like, I don't know. And then he invited me over to his house the next day, and I just sat down and had a conversation with him, um, like everything was, you know, normal. So, yeah.

Awad: So how—so before telling your father, you were very nervous that you were going—never going to see your family in Palestine, et cetera, and their reaction was very welcoming. What do you think—why do you think they were so welcoming and affirming? Like, how do you think they make sense of you?

Mustafa: Yeah. I mean, I think part of it—so there's like a few reasons why. Um, I think some of it—I think, you know, for some of them, they think that—they don't really understand the full concept of, like, transgender or transition. I think a lot of it is like they think, from what I hear, from how my cousin kind of describes how some people think of me, is like I was born two genders, or I was born the wrong gender, which I—you know, I was born the wrong gen— [laughter] you know, or the wrong—yeah, how I see it.

Awad: Right.

Mustafa: But like, they see it as like, you know, maybe I was born, like, intersex or, you know, um—and so I made—like my parents made the wrong decision or something like that. So that's how some of them see it—see me. But I also think that a lot of it, too, has to do with the fact that because I am transitioning into a man, like being a trans man, it just makes much more sense to them that, like, "Oh, you were always masculine. This makes much more sense." Like, "We have a—you know, of course you want to be a man." Like, it's—you know, this would be so different if I was transitioning into a woman, male to female. I think that, like, for various reasons, but I think that the fact that my par—my family accepts me has a lot to do with, you know, that I'm just like a grandson; I'm like—I'm strong and—yeah.

Awad: Can you talk to me a little bit about the other things that changed within your family besides being offered, you know, a marriage?

Mustafa: Yeah.

Awad: What other things changed in your role?

Mustafa: Well, I actually know who my uncles are now, like in the sense of like, I can talk to them about, you know, them. Like, it was—it's really interesting. I have this one uncle. His name is Mohammad. And growing up, you know, like—he's married to my dad's sister, my aunt. And growing up, like, he wouldn't really talk to me. He wouldn't engage with me and my mom. He was—he's very conservative, like he doesn't talk to women, really, except for his wife and my grandmother. And so, like, you know, I knew nothing about this guy. I didn't know his personality, really. He was just very reserved and quiet. And then when I came back as a trans guy, he—you know, now I know everything about him. He messages me on Facebook all the time and is like checking in on me and wants to talk to me about things. He works—he's a construction worker in Israel, and he—you know, I rented a car, and so he called me up and was like, "Hey, can you pick me up in Tel Aviv?" And then we, like, just went on this—we were in the car for like a while and had these amazing conversations about just politics, his own life. Like, he's building a house; he invited me to help him work on his house, you know. Um, and so just my relationships to Palestinian men have changed in a lot of ways, and my relationships to Palestinian women, because now that I'm seen as a man, I can't be as, you know, um—I don't know what the word is—cozy with Palestinian women? I don't know what the word is. I—you know, it's harder for me now—like I—every time I'm in Palestine now, I have to really be careful about, like, my—

Awad: Touching?

Mustafa: My touching, my interactions, how I come off, um, because—yeah, because I'm seen as a guy. So like, you know, when I would be with my—when I would be with my cousins who were women, or young women, like, we used to just hang out all the time and whatever, and now I just, like, have to be very reserved with them. Um, and so that, like, took me a little while to get used to. I think, too, a lot of it is like, to be honest, like, being a man anywhere, you are treated with the utmost respect and you are a king, and in Palestine I definitely felt that. Like before, it was really hard for me in my—especially in my village, it's very, very conservative, in Palestine. Like women can't even go outside. I used to get scolded for going outside. And now it's like I walk outside, and everyone's like, you know, "*Ibn Mousa*, the son of Mousa, come here. Let's get you tea. Let's talk about life," you know. It's very, like—I can be up—and like I can be more myself, and a lot of that has to do with me transitioning, but I can just, like, be me. And it's like just really, really, really, really weird being a tr—like, a Palestinian man in society. Also, in relationship to—like, because Palestine's under occupation by the Israeli government, just my relationship to the Israeli army and police are much different. Now I'm more seen as a threatening Palestinian man than I am, you know, a non-threatening Palestinian woman, which have definitely, like, changed dynamics. I remember growing up and see the way—the difference in how they would treat my older brother and my younger brother rather than how they would treat me, and they would treat my older brother, like at checkpoints, very aggressively, because he was a bigger, you know, guy. And you know, now, like when I went through checkpoints, of course I have an American passport, but even with an American passport, they see my name, they see that I'm an Arab man or a Palestinian man, and they get like very—they get like more confrontational with me than before. So those are like just some of, I guess, the differences that I notice when I'm back in Palestine now as, like, a trans man, or as, you know, a passing man. And a lot of it has to do, too,

with like, I am—I come off as like very masculine in, like, in how I’m perceived. So that’s also—and I’m a bigger guy, so, yeah.

Awad: Uh, when you went to Palestine, did you just stay in the village, or did you make an attempt to connect with other trans people or gender non-conforming people in Palestine?

Mustafa: Um, so I went to Palestine for like a work thing because I work, like, on Palestine media stuff. And also—well, that was this January, and then in the summer I went and I led a delegation of Americans to Palestine. [rustling]

Awad: Okay.

Mustafa: All right. Um—I forgot my train of thought.

Awad: So I was asking you if in this last time that you went to Palestine, did you try and connect with, um, other trans or gender non-conforming Palestinians?

Mustafa: Um, so this past summer I was there on a delegation. I was, like, leading a delegation. And so, um—I’m pretty—I have, like—I’m pretty close to folks who do, like, activism in the West Bank, particularly, and Jerusalem. And so I—you know, I spent a lot of time there with, like—but like, not a lot of them identify as trans or gender non-conforming. So like, this summer, not as much, but when I was there this summer—or when I was there in January, I was there for a work trip where I gave social-media trainings to different organizations, and I—one of the organizations that I worked really closely with was alQaws, which is a Palestinian LGBTQ organization that does work not only for Palestinians inside of Israel but also Palestinians inside of the West Bank. And it’s very much like oriented around support and giving support and services to the LGBTQ community in the Palestinian society. And so I did this training with young people on social media and digital security, and it was like the first time that I really fully engaged with the LGBTQ community in the West Bank in a way that wasn’t just like one or two people but like—um, yeah. And I think that when it comes to trans and gender non-conforming, I honestly didn’t really connect with too many folks. There was like maybe one young person that I met who, like, I keep in contact with. But my really good buddy was there, and they identify as trans, transmasculine, and they’re from New York also [laughter] and Palestinian, so we have like a pretty close bond. But it was like really cool to explore Palestine together. I took them to my family’s village, and they met my grandmother and they met my—you know, all my cousins, and it was like such an amazing experience, because here’s like two trans Palestinians just, like, being—like, roaming free—not freely. It’s really messed up to say “freely” under occupation, but like, roaming in Palestine. Like, we had—I had rented a car, and like, just roaming in Palestine and just being able to be ourselves and connect with all these people and, like, you know, connect with people on such a real level too. And you know, yeah, that was like a profound experience for me, because we were able to still be very, like, trans and also, like, queer on our own terms, but also hold the balance of our Palestinian identity and explore what it’s like to be, like, Palestinians who grew up in the United States, and having to be there and navigate the language

barriers and then sometimes the cultural barriers and... Yeah, it was good to experience that with somebody else who understood where I was coming from.

Awad: Mm.

Mustafa: Yeah.

Awad: Um, so I guess just to circle back, um, what brought you to New York from Albuquerque?

Mustafa: I've always had, uh, a desire [chuckles] to come to New York. I've always been in love with the idea of New York, um, since I was young. A lot of it has to do with just, like, cultural stuff. So I'm—I was really, really into, like, break-dancing culture, and so I would just watch all of these documentaries about New York and how it came out of, you know, this place that's like the mecca of hip-hop and break dancing. And so that kind of like stemmed it, and then when I started getting older, like, I—growing up in Albuquerque, you sometimes just feel so enclosed to everything, because everything just stays the same; it's very slow pace; it's very, like—you just kind of grow up with the same people up until, like, you get married, basically. And so I didn't want that for me. I wanted to explore the world. I wanted to explore—I wanted to live in other parts of the US, and New York was, like, one of those places. So when I came here—the first time I came here was like for a conference for Students for Justice in Palestine, which I was like heavily involved in. And then I met like, you know, all these people who were Palestinian but also, like, had pretty down politics. It wasn't like back home, where I felt, like, shamed for being queer and trans. So I was like, "Oh, this is cool. I think I could, like, find maybe a community here." So then I started making friends with all these, like, amazing—you know, not just like people who identify as LGBTQ or queer or whatever, but like Palestinians who just were, like, you know—weren't as judgmental of my queer and trans identity.

Awad: So I just want to clarify. So in Albuquerque you...

Mustafa: I felt that way. I felt—

Awad: You felt that way from the Palestinian...

Mustafa: From the Palestinian Muslim community there. Because when I came out as trans and queer, like, they weren't down with that as much. Um, which is like, you know—now they're down, but before, they were like very resentful of me being queer and trans, especially because I was like very active around Palestine, like the issue of Palestine. So in New York, you know, I felt like I could still be active around the issue of Palestine and not lose my, like, identity or feel shameful of being queer and trans. So it took me a while to, like, actually make the move here. I had been wanting to do this move since I was like 20. But it took me a while. It took like a few breakups later to, like, be like, "You know what? I just need to just move on." And actually, a big reason why I moved here is because I felt stuck and I felt very, like—like I said at the beginning of this interview, Albuquerque is a place where like everybody just knows everything about you. They, like—there's no sense of being anonymous there. And I really felt like, you know, people

were relying on me to do a lot of things, and I felt, like, obligations towards a lot of people and, like—because of my organizing, and I just, you know, I just couldn't take it anymore. So my good buddy who I saw in Palestine, the other trans Palestinian masculine person, was like, "Dude, just, like, move here. I have a room open. Just, like, make your move." Because before that, I was, like, in a very dark, depressive state where I, like, just got out of a relationship with somebody I really loved. I, you know—that person, um, you know, really—I don't know. It was just like a hit. [laughter] And not only that, people were just asking so much of me. So I was like, "This is my time." So I moved to New York, and I'm so glad I did. Like, I love New York, and I continue to meet amazing people, and just like, it's a challenge for me, which I like. In Albuquerque it was a bit too comfy for me. Like I was very comfortable there because my family was there, and like, you know, I didn't really seek out opportunity as much as I wanted to. So but here in Albuquerque—or but here in New York, like you, you know, you have to really hustle. You, like, have to—you have to make your way to really survive in this city, I feel, which I love. I like the challenge and the obstacles. So, yeah, I'm in New York City. And it's cool too because, like, there's such a—I don't know. I can just be anonymous and walk through the streets and not really feel like I have to perform a certain way or be a certain way or act a certain way. I can just be me, which is such a beauty of this city. And I feel like that's why—what draws a lot of, like, queer and trans people here, is like the idea that you can just be you. You know, I'm sure that it's not like—it's different for different people, experiences, but for the most part, yeah, for me, at least, it's like that.

Awad: Um, is there anything that you, um, would like to add about your experience or—I'm trying to think of what else...

Mustafa: Yeah. I mean—

Awad: Or that you would like to talk about or include in this?

Mustafa: I mean, I think—not really. Right now I'm kind of like—you know, I'm like two years into my transition, physical transition, um, and my body is changing like—it's changed so much and it's continuing to change. And you know, I'm like constantly questioning in my head now about, like, my position of being a trans person and, like, a trans man and a transmasculine man and, like, a trans straight masculine man, like, and how when I roam through the world now, I'm not perceived as, like, queer or perceived as, you know—like, I'm just perceived as a dude, honestly. And you know, it's really—I've been struggling with, like, this idea—identity of being trans and, like—because I carry it with me, but like, um—I don't know. I'm really happy that there are, you know, places to keep our stories alive, because I feel so many times, either we shy away from, like, fully accepting our transness, or society doesn't accept us for being trans, so we run away from it. Like this is like kind of—like me being able to articulate and talk about my story really helps with my understanding of like, oh yeah, I need to stay strong and be trans. Like I can't just, like, hide with this identity—this passing identity that I have now, being a man. [laughter] So I don't know. That's just, like, a thought I had in my head that I wanted to express. But it's really irrelevant to the rest of the conversation. [laughter]

Awad: I mean, it's good. It's a good addition. Um, did you want to say more about why you find, you know—why you find passing somehow, like, problematic a little bit, or not problematic but you're wary—wary of what that means?

Mustafa: I mean, I don't really necessarily find it problematic, because like, I feel comfortable with it. Like, I'm comfortable. Like when I walk through the streets, before, when I was like—before top surgery and really before hormones, you know, it was like difficult being ID'd as, like, non-binary. Or not—I wouldn't be ID'd as non-binary. I'd just be ID'd as, like, a queer. Like—

Awad: [chuckles]

Mustafa: Which was like—had its, like—it was awesome in so many ways, because I loved it. Like I honestly think that being queer and being able to, like—it's like so much fun. It's like the best way to live life, is to be queer. And I think that's part of the reason why I'm so wary. Maybe it's not so much wary about passing, but it's kind of like a mournfulness, like I'm kind of mourning the fun that I did have when I was just, like, ID'd as queer. And like I lit—and not just ID'd as queer by, like, outer society but by queer communities. Because now when I go into some queer spaces, I'm, like, not really ID'd as a queer person. I might—sometimes—like I know that people are very conscientious about asking pronouns and all these things, but like, now I just feel like a dude [laughter], you know, like a straight dude in these spaces. And I miss kind of like being queer. But I also, like, am comfortable with walking down the street as a dude because I don't get harassed. So it's like this balance, but—I don't know if I'm not making sense, but...

Awad: No, it makes sense.

Mustafa: Okay.

Awad: What did you find most fun about being queer? Like what did...

Mustafa: Everything.

Awad: [laughter]

Mustafa: [laughter] I think the best, like—I remember when I would first go to my first queer parties, and everyone was just, like, doing their own thing and not caring about society's rules about how you're supposed to, like—how society wants you to, like, dress or act or just be. Like you would go into these spaces and everyone just would do their own thing and, like, just be their full authentic self and express it in the way that they wanted to. And I just remember, you know, being so amazed at that. And then people would, like, pull me in and be so accepting of me, and I wouldn't have to pretend—you know, I wouldn't—my insecurities just went away. And you know, like being queer is like putting two middle fingers up in the air and saying, "Fuck you, world, I'm going to do whatever I want." And now I just feel like I'm like—I'm, like, not doing that. I'm just conforming back into society and just being a straight dude, a straight masculine guy, like, you know? Like [laughter]—and it's boring. It's kind of boring. The hetero life is sometimes really

boring, you know, and—yeah. I don't know. That's, I guess, what I meant [laughter] when I said that.

Awad: Um, I guess that's a good—that's a good thought to kind of end on and ruminate on. Um, thank you so much for sharing all these, like, really personal stories and... And, um, yeah, I really appreciate that, especially like, you know, as a Palestinian. It's so rare that we hear a story of someone's experience with their family and these issues. And yeah, thank you.

Mustafa: Thank you, Nadia. [chuckles]