

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

QAIS KAMRAN

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Aviva Silverman: Hello my name is Aviva Silverman, and I will be having a conversation with Qais Kamran for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. This is an oral history project

centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. Its March 14th, and its being recorded in Ridgewood Queens. Hello.

Qais Kamran: Hi.

Silverman: Well, you were just telling me a little about how you're interested in oral history work; I thought maybe you could speak a little more towards that.

Kamran: Sure. Yeah. I'm an Iranian American, Persian Jew. And oral history is the majority of the history that I have about my community. And as elders pass on, those histories pass with them often. So recording them is a big part of our community's effort to like, preserve our history, and there are big projects around that in the Iranian Jewish community. And I have attempted to like do some of that with my own family.

Silverman: Hmmm, can you talk a little about those projects with your family?

Kamran: I try and mostly leave a recorder on when we're having conversations. And I have these recordings of my grandparents discussing family history with someone like my father or my mom. So they're not like, attempts to drive the conversation towards it, but when it comes up, to like, make sure it's preserved. Yeah. And I think growing up in LA as a minority, I got involved in this UCLA oral history project because we're a big part of that Los Angeles community. And, um, there was an effort to record immigrant experiences in Los Angeles that I was part of.

Silverman: Do you want to tell us more about your family history?

Kamran: Yeah, sure. I'm like, technically first generation some people will say second generation. And my family moved here after the Iranian revolution in 1979, from Tehran, but originally we're from Hamadan Iran, which is also where in Jewish history, Queen Esther's from so that history has always been important to me growing up in Los Angeles in a Jewish community that was predominantly Ashkenazi, and sometimes, like the surprise that there are Iranian Jews, but we are very much right there in Jewish history as Persian Jews. Being from Hamadan, is like a big part of who I am.

Silverman: How did you celebrate Purim?

Kamran: [sighing] I didn't celebrate Purim this year—it's terrible! Usually we celebrate Purim by making the— Purim usually hits at the same similar time as Nowruz, the Iranian, or the Persian New Year and there's a cookie that we make for Nowruz that we use like the same dough to make Hamantaschens. So usually, I'll celebrate by making those and this year I didn't do anything. I was flying from Los Angeles, just let the holiday pass.

Silverman: Mmm. So you grew up in LA.

Kamran: I grew up in LA. I grew up in a really insular Iranian Jewish community. I went to Jewish day school and— [...] what can I say about that? There's so much to say! [laughter]

Silverman: Yeah, anything.

Kamran: Being— being part of the Iranian community of Los Angeles, I think we're a very particular kind of immigrant community where we've all moved and stayed in the same areas and replicated life from before in Los Angeles. So I grew up. Most of my friends were Iranian kids, and— I don't know, there's so much to say and it's like, struggling a little but—

Silverman: That's ok. When you say that life was replicated— can you talk about some details of that? Like what? What kinds of like community life?

Kamran: Yeah. I went to school with cousins and family friends. And—up until we were actually like, prohibited from speaking Farsi. We spoke a lot of Farsi at school.

Silverman: Who prohibited you?

Kamran: The school. It was— so basically after the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian Jewish community left very quickly. There was— if you think of the context of that community, World War II didn't just have like an effect as like, people heard about what happened to Jews, but the Shah of Iran at the time was a Nazi sympathizer and there were German troops in Hamadan where my family was, and that influenced the antisemitism that already existed in Iran to take on like new shades, and when they moved to the States, it was like every everyone altogether and Los Angeles and Great Neck are two areas where we concentrated. In Los Angeles, it was— there was already a very big active Jewish community, and most temples and schools didn't actually want to admit Iranian kids. And Stephen S. Wise was one of the ones that did. And it was I think, like culturally... difficult to— what's the word I don't know, not even assimilate, but just like exist in this Jewish community as Iranians so maybe that— that relates to why we stuck to ourselves but also just as people I think we like— we like our own community. And in the school, like in an Iranian— in Stephen S. Wise temple you don't have— the context is all Jewish kids. So the population is reflective of Jewish communities. And there were Ashkenazi kids, there were Iranian kids, and there were kind of in-between people from Eastern Europe or South America. And they didn't really fall into Ashkenazi camps necessarily. So there would be like on the border of racial— like the racial divide, and there was a very strong racial divide. Like to the point where when kids would play basketball, it'd be like Iranian versus white people. And we named whiteness and spoke about whiteness a lot, to the discomfort of our parents because they didn't like us naming white as something other than them... But it was a very discriminatory and difficult context to—ah, to grow up in. Like, teachers thinking you're bad and seating you in the back of the class, and a lot of stereotypes about what Iranian kids do and don't want... and, it would come to a head sometimes, like in the sixth grade when they banned us from speaking Farsi because our teachers didn't understand, and ... having meetings with the principal on diversity, [laughter] as like a 12 year old. I think otherness is a very big part of who I am—being othered as a young person. It's interesting to think in the context you're othered,

but you're also in the community. So you have a strong sense of identity. Or I had a strong sense of identity. And a lot of— now being in a city like New York, or like we discussed like, where you come from and how, what being a person of color means, I think that that school context really— affected how I felt about whiteness and the US. And [...] Yeah, it made a lot of other things, other community struggles here, easier to understand. [...]

Silverman: Mmm. And so, okay— that was in elementary school. And as a child, what else did you connect to?

Kamran: I was really into reading. And that was also something that I wasn't supposed to be interested in as an Iranian kid, like *we didn't like to study* or— [laughing] I'm using finger quotes. And yeah, I gravitated to a lot of African American literature and learned— learned about US history, in a way that's— I think, it wasn't my history. It was like something I had to learn and understand as like someone coming into a place— and [...] I don't know.

Silverman: Ok, yeah. So, you were in a family and who— you know, who did you connect to in your family?

Kamran: Mmm. *Who did I connect to in my family?* [...] I have an older brother, and a younger sister, two parents who were married until I was 21, then got divorced. They're also cousins, which is a very normal thing in our community. Because of the context of Iranian life in Iran, a lot of people intermarried, um. And—which did I connect to? My— my parents, my family itself, I think, are known a little bit to be weirdos for our community. Eccentric [laughter] maybe? And so, in that sense, I was really lucky. Both my parents went to college, and my— my mom going to college I think, was a big thing. Not like for my family in particular, but in my friend group. It wasn't like consistent. And there are a lot of artists I guess, in my family, and people who married non-Iranians, non-Jews, which is also very taboo. Um. I don't know if there's someone in particular in my family that I connected with, but in different periods, different— different people.

Silverman: Mmm. And you opened with how, you know, storytelling, composited a big part of knowing your family history. Were there ways in which you learned early on, certain lessons passed down? Were there— I don't know— were there just specific stories that you still think about? That were part of your upbringing?

Kamran: Yeah, so many. My— my grandfather was a big storyteller and he— had a— he had a very difficult childhood in Hamadan where, again, it's in a context where like, German troops were around and um—

Silverman: Can I just um, pause?

Kamran: Yeah.

Silverman: I didn't— because I don't know about the history of Germans in Iran— what were they doing? Were they— how were they in relationship to the efforts of the war, at the time?

Kamran: So, the first Shah— the reason that actually his son kind of took over was after World War II. Because the Nazis lost and he was a Nazi sympathizer, he could no longer really be head of state, so his son was put in his place. Hamadan is in the mountain regions of Iran, closer to the borders of Europe, so it was like, an access point.

Silverman: Ok.

Kamran: And, I don't know exactly how, but I know that—during that time, there was a lot of active pogrom-style harassment of Jewish communities, and that changed under this, the son, which is one of the reasons now, Jews who left Iran are very much sympathizers with the regime that was toppled. And they saw a lot of racial uplift during the time of the second Shah, where opportunities were specifically given to Jews, maybe in an effort to repair history. And—hmm, yeah.

Silverman: Mmm. Yeah.

Kamran: [laughter] We meandered away from the original question—

Silverman: No. Thank you!

Kamran: But so yeah, I remember my grandpa telling me stories about going to get water from the well, and on his way back, kids would throw dirt in his bucket and he'd have to like go start over again. And, just being consistently like harassed by children. And my grandma— she'll tell the story of the only time she won anything. Ah. On her way home, she was jumped by a bunch of kids, and her prize was stolen.

Silverman: And that's because they were Jewish?

Kamran: Yeah.

Silverman: Wow.

Kamran: Because they were Jewish. And still, poor. The modernization of the country, and a lot of people leaving smaller towns for the big city of Tehran helped a lot of people move up. But also my grandfather left Hamadan when he was 16 and went to Palestine and joined the IDF, and was there for three years, where he got most of his education and then, that affected his relationship to Zionism. Yeah, he was like a big Zionist. Um.

Silverman: Did that carry through the rest of your family?

Kamran: Yeah. It's, you know, I myself am an anti-Zionist, but like thinking about why people are the way they are, I think a lot of people, in discussing why Jews don't need a state, they fail often to remember that Iranian Jews left in '79, far after the founding of a state when, a threat against the population happened and was very clear, it wasn't an imagined violence. Immediately after the revolution that head rabbi was killed, many people's families were attacked, and Iranian Jews, kind of, I think, proved a point that Zionism really wanted to prove which is we are— we are here to take you in when this happens— unfortunately, and it is—[...] Yeah, you can't use the same, I guess, talking points. Like, as an anti-Zionist, it's like there's a different kind of story you have to look at to access Iranian Jewish reality.

Silverman: And is there a way to talk about that with your family?

Kamran: Yeah, I do, and with my grandpa, too you know, before he passed. One of my uncles who became a Trump supporter from being a very leftist— it's very odd thing that happened. He's never been really Jewish, or a Zionist, but he was trying to get my grandpa not to like me, and he was like, *Oh, you know, he, he's an anti-Zionist.* And my grandpa was just like, *what does that even mean to you? You're not even a Jew, like he's very much a Jew. And if he has opinions, I'm sure that they're formed from things he's learned.* I think with my grandpa, the important thing was loyalty. So how I have moved with my anti-Zionism has been like, am I always actually standing for my people, even if I disagree with them and that made our conversations a lot easier because [...] yeah.

Silverman: And could you just explain when you say standing with your people— what that means?

Kamran: When I, when I was young, I was very much a Zionist. And I think it fit in for me with my leftist politics very easily. And in college, it was the first time I really had to face that, among other people that this, these values I hold are actually contradictory to how I see the world. And I was an organizer in communities that were doing, like radical work in Northern California, and my Zionism became an issue that I had to face, but I couldn't really face it there because there were there was only another one other Jewish person in my organizing committee and it was this older white man who wasn't a practicing Jew and didn't, like— was very dismissive of his Jewish identity. And I actually ended up moving to Palestine for six years. Because it was really important for me to learn how to be an anti-Zionist from people of color who like, had similar experiences—

Silverman: Can you talk about where you were living and at what time in your life, what year that was, or how old you were?

Kamran: Yeah, actually this relates to my being trans a lot too. So like, I'm transitioning and in college and my politics are changing all around the same time, like 20 years old. And I graduated and moved to the Bay—

Silverman: And did you say what college you went to? Sorry. I'm trying to get all the—

Kamran: I went to UC Davis No, no problem. Yeah, I went to UC Davis and I— and after Davis, I moved to Oakland. And this, ah, this thing of my being a Zionist followed me and made it really hard to connect in community. And so I packed up and I flew to Tel Aviv for six months when I was 23? Or 22. And I just went like to kind of see it from a different perspective. I've visited Israel a lot of times in my life, my family there. And this time I went on my own and I stayed in Tel Aviv, and I started hanging out at a cafe that my cousin introduced me to— Café Albi. And it was owned by a trans Iraqi man and a butch Yemeni woman. And they were really instrumental to my ability to transition and to see people masculine-of-center— I don't know—experience their genders— helped me see a future for myself.

Silverman: Yeah.

Kamran: Um. I'm one of two I think that I know of, so I'm sure there's another but I've really tried hard to look— Iranian, trans Jewish men. The other one I know lives in Tel Aviv. And— yeah, growing up in LA, there was just, there was— there was no queerness for me to see. There was no body like mine. And [...]

Silverman: When you were growing up, did your family ever mention queerness or gayness or—

Kamran: Um, you know, I remember. I think because of television, there was a point in like, the late '90s, where gay people adopting was a hot topic in public discourse and in like, you know, sitcoms we were watching, and I remember my brother and I arguing with my parents at a very young age about why gay men should be allowed to adopt and my parents being like, *No*, and they're also very— they're very liberal but like, they were like *No, that's not natural* and my brother and I having to say, but *there are all these children that now need*— that was one of the few conversations around homosexuality I remember. It was just not something that came up. And I remember my grandma once saying I had a cousin who was a lesbian and I was like, *What? Who?* You know? But she like brushed past it so quickly.

Silverman: Right. Do you remember at that age— because now a lot of gay people are always like, *what's your root?* Do you have any that you can reflect on?

Kamran: Um. *My root*. I mean, so there's so many points. There was— this is really an odd— an odd root, but in the original, the real L word, so not the L word, but the spin-off that was like a reality show. There was this black trans man who was kind of attached to the group even though he didn't actually know any of them. And his story was, he was like a femme cheerleader. And then he realized he was trans. And I was very femme my whole life from like, 8 til 20. And I think one of the hardest things for me was to imagine going from that to like, to transition and seeing someone else actually do that was the kind of thing that allowed me to make that change.

I was a tomboy as a young person, as like a prepubescent person. I think all my closest friends were boys. And at the same time as race became real for me, gender became real for me, I

think in the third grade. Where it just felt like, too much otherness. And I think I put that all away. [laughter]

Silverman: Mmm hmm. And so zoom ahead, you're in this cafe, in Tel Aviv—

Kamran: [laughter] This cafe in Tel Aviv. And I just loved watching the two owners like, I spent so much time just looking at them. And taking so much pleasure in their gender expression, and seeing the joy of it. And they—the cafe was also— so it was like a leftist space and a queer space and a Mizrahi space. And sometimes those things conflicted with each other, those populations. We could really talk about Zionism with each other honestly, like what it meant and people's differing opinions, and what it meant to be— this is also at the time in Israel where Mizrahi identity politics were like starting to become a hot topic, and I got to learn a lot of really important details about understanding why Mizrahi Jews in Israel were Zionist, like how the state was treating them and how that affected their politics. And then also talk openly in a way that like, often in college, from professors I loved, to friends, there seemed to be this need to like dismiss the reality of Jewish persecution. To be an anti-Zionist like that you needed to minimize people's histories, which felt really shitty like sitting in a classroom and having a professor I really admire talking about an Iraqi in a pogrom in Iraq and being like *Ah, but it wasn't such a big deal*. It's like *okay*, [laughter] *it wasn't a big deal to you, but it was a big deal* and that person you were talking about might have become an anti-Zionist but you can't leave behind that whole community that was affected by that reality.

Silverman: Yeah. Context.

Kamran: Context. Yeah. And like even now, so many of the things that I learned then— like, my partner was asking me why certain Mizrahi Israeli singers, were ignoring Zionism and like, reaffirming their Arabic, let's say roots, and why they're not speaking publicly if they are privately anti-Zionist and understanding that within Israel itself there's this construction that makes it a lot easier for an Ashkenazi person to be an anti-Zionist in public life. And it's very different for a Mizrahi person. And what that looks like. Yeah, I don't know. Context.

Silverman: Yeah. And so, you said that at the same time as your political awakening you're also transitioning. What did that look like, and how did that take shape if it was taking shape in Israel?

Kamran: Yeah. Growing up in LA meant everybody knew you. You'd go anywhere and someone would tell your mother, it was like very hard to be invisible. And, ah. Everyone had to be really careful of anything they were doing that was taboo. So going abroad, even going away to college, which most like— very few kids were allowed to do, gave me a space to experiment. And going to Tel Aviv gave me the most space you know, was like, in a different time zone. My family obligations were minimized and there was this like, *you're off doing something important*, you know, *like a young Jew going— going to Israel*. So I was kind of just left alone like you can— you can go there and do whatever you want. And, ah. I spent six months. I started working in that cafe as a cook. And— I found actual community. I returned to the States

because I had to complete a community service. Something I'd done in college, got settled in court and I had to come do like 500 hours of community service in Davis to get my record clean. And I came back—and—I don't know, fell in love and stayed in Davis for a while. I think falling in love also affected my trans history. I think—I'd never been in love before I was 24 years old, which felt like very old to be in love for the first time. And when I was first heartbroken, I realized, I just became very emo and sad and suicidal. I realized that I really needed to start transitioning—ah. Like, to stay alive. That nothing was going to really make me happy until I did. I started—I started taking hormones, but I also started like, long before I started taking hormones, I started doing things to make it look like I'd already started taking hormones. So that I would be asked by family members questions and I could say no without lying because I really didn't like to lie.

So I got you know, I got people to ask me these questions and to be like *no*, and then like three months later started T and nobody asked me for a long time again because they had already checked in. And, yeah, I don't know, then I went back, I went back to Palestine. But this time got a visa and stayed there, for awhile.

Silverman: Back to Tel Aviv?

Kamran: Back to Tel Aviv, yeah.

Silverman: And were you doing the same thing?

Kamran: Yeah. I went back to Albi, and I used to work in the kitchen. And I wanted the same job and they're like, *well, we don't have the kitchen right now, but you can work in the bar*. And my first day back they were like, *so are your pronouns different?* [laughter] *Has anything changed?* And that space—Ah. I like transitioned kind of there in that cafe like in front of the people there, and, with these two mentors, I guess, who had... on the one hand I had a butch mentor and got to see what that life would look like and a trans mentor and what his life looked like. And also seeing—seeing the way that my butch mentor looked at me as I was transitioning and understanding, like, that I had access to something that they also couldn't have imagined for themselves. I had more intergenerational relationships there than I ever had in the States, in my queer life. I found in New York, it's very difficult to find intergenerational friendships. In that space, there was such a spectrum of queer people in, like 70s, 60s—

Silverman: Why do you think it is, that there's such a range there?

Kamran: It's a fairly small country. And Tel Aviv is like the New York of the country, but it's so much smaller, you know, so it's like one cafe is actually known as a hub for people, so people are coming there. And, I don't know. I don't know why. I think, I think there's something about how much smaller the community is itself, that people will stick to each other more.

Silverman: And how did you then get to New York?

Kamran: I worked at the Albi and then I worked for a little bit at—Who Profits, which is

a BDS-centered organization that gets information on what businesses are functioning in occupied territories. And then from there, I started working at the Honolulu, which was a small club that was owned by a group of Israelis and Palestinians and was also a weirdo spot. They eventually asked me, if I wanted to become part of the business and I realized if I stayed I would be— I would be living there the rest of my life, and I was 28, and I wasn't sure if that's what I wanted. So I thought, this was the time to go back. I wasn't sure if I actually wanted to— eventually I would have to emigrate, and I didn't necessarily want to do that. Like there was only so long you can have a visa. Being a citizen of a country is such a big thing. I kind of like only being a citizen of the US, like I feel attached to being— in a way, you're property, and I didn't want to be Israel's property.

Silverman: And there's not dual citizenship?

Kamran: No, there is, there is, but you're still Israeli. You'd still be Israeli—

Silverman: Ah, got it—

Kamran: —and subject to whatever Israel demands of its people. And, um. I work in nightlife, and then wanted to open a club, and New York has the highest rate of trans people moving in the country, it's a center for us.

Silverman: So where did you land when you moved?

Kamran: Brooklyn. My sister went to Barnard and then moved to Crown Heights after college, and we weren't sure if we wanted to live together even though that was like a childhood dream of ours. And when I was looking for a job— I didn't move before I had a job, so I came and dropped my resume off at places. I was staying with her, and that same weekend her roommate was like, *Oh, actually, I am leaving. I got a job in the Bay.* And I ended up moving in [laughter] like very fated, almost. My sister and I are really close. So we lived together for two years in Crown Heights.

Silverman: And how was that shift?

Kamran: [sighing] I realize I'm like, I'm still shifting. Not being in the States in your 20s had a profound effect on how I learned to socialize and be a person. And, these last few years, I feel like I'm learning how to be an American again. And— uh.

Silverman: Can you talk more about the differences of not being in your 20s here versus somewhere else?

Kamran: I was— I spoke Hebrew but not very well. And I was in a context where English was a language people spoke as maybe a bridge so that we were around a lot of Palestinians and to like not speak Hebrew— like English was the other option. But at the same time, I was around a lot of people who were speaking Arabic or speaking Hebrew. And I was like, kind of a silent

listener in those contexts, and I think— I don't know. I moved back and I felt a little foreign here.

Also, the English we speak in the US is one version of English and then like when you're in a different place, you're often like— I at least I found that I was speaking in Hebrew in English. You know, like changing the rhythm of a language. And. Yeah, I don't know.

Silverman: Mmm. Ok, so you moved in with your sister. I'm just trying to keep up.

Kamran: Yeah. [laughter]

Silverman: And so how did you become employed? What was your job?

Kamran: I worked at a queer venue. It wasn't queer at the time: C'mon Everybody. It's— I was nervous moving back to the States. I was managing a club in Palestine, and I was nervous about coming here and having to start over and also to start over—one of the facets of being trans is you're often infantilized, I think because you look young. So at 28, I looked maybe like an 18 year old and that means that people treat you a certain way and it's a— it was really hard to prove what I knew or like who I was in my age.

Silverman: And were these queer people treating you that way or just like generally was the affect that people felt—

Kamran: I think like, white gay men. Yeah, like now— it took three years for me to get back to where I was when I left Palestine, in terms of, like being seen.

Silverman: Mmm. What drew you to nightlife?

Kamran: What drew me to nightlife. I have always liked to throw parties since I was a kid. I think gender-wise that was also odd, you know, like, Persian boys threw parties and did a lot of things, but Persian girls did not do those things. And I was often breaking, I think, that boundary without realizing it, and maybe not leaning into things as much as I wanted to. And after I transitioned, I was able to re-access those, those parts of myself. Nightlife also gave me a lot of space to experiment with my gender. And I mean, there's a lot of things about it. It's also— I think, it pulls a lot of trans people because it gives you a place to kind of perform your gender in different ways to people and try on new things to reach your audience.

Silverman: What were you trying?

Kamran: I don't know. Everything I mean, it seems so simple, but like, you know—I was, in many ways, very comfortable with being a woman, like I really was attached to that identity. And, when I transitioned, I kind of had to rethink all my mannerisms, like where they came from, and how I speak or look at people. And how people perceive me now. Yeah.

Silverman: Where did they come from?

Kamran: Maybe like watching, watching those queers in the cafe in Tel Aviv, and seeing that like—

Silverman: Got you. And I'm wondering, so your social landscape at the time. It seems like, yeah, working in a club is a really easy way to have access to like a social landscape. Were there other places that you've partied or met people at? Or did it feel very centered in your job?

Kamran: Yeah, I'm a bit of a workaholic. So I think it usually centered in my job because I was usually at work. [laughter] It was just my work was social, so often— I am surprisingly introverted, and need a lot of alone time. So outside of work, I'm usually doing very quiet things.
And... Yeah.

Silverman: Yeah. And, sorry to— are you still working at not working at C'mon—

Kamran: I'm not working at C'mon Everybody, I'm actually working on opening— so I moved to New York with the intention of opening a trans-owned and operated collective nightlife venue. And hopefully that will come to be this year.

Silverman: Wow, can you tell us more about that?

Kamran: Yeah. When I was at the Honolulu, I was given hiring power for the first time in my life— that was the club in Jaffa, in Palestine. And obviously I hired, I hired a bunch of trans people. That process of— trans people are really integral to nightlife but are often performers and not given access to like certain...ah. In Tel Aviv, it was really hard for people to transition into being a bartender from being a nightlife performer. For trans women, especially. You're, like, pigeon-holed. And... Being able to tell people they could wear whatever they want to work, and making my boss comfortable, like *no* like, that club was a little bit rough. Like I often got harassed. Not for being gay, just by men. And they were really concerned like, I'd hire a trans girl, like *oh, like what if somebody does something and then what will happen?* And actually, those women are very capable of controlling the environment and not getting— shutting down any disturbances. I also saw a lot of friends being kind of like, eaten up by nightlife like working in it and burning out and kind of aging out and being really afraid of aging out of nightlife. And... New York felt like a place that I could [...] give or I could— the idea behind this club is that people become owners as they work there and when they're ready to transition out of nightlife, can sell those shares and have an opportunity to set up the next part of their life... And. Yeah.

Silverman. Wow. So have you located a neighborhood or?

Kamran: Yeah, I mean, there's one place that I'm really hoping we'll get. It's in Prospect Heights. But, Bed-Stuy/Crown Heights border is kind of the area I'm interested in. And... yeah.

Silverman: How does leadership work, and that forms if it's collective-owned?

Kamran: A collective. Yeah, that's something we've been thinking about a lot. Like, hierarchies are very important in the service industry. It's a big thing. And some of it is useful because chains of command and responsibility matter, but how do you like think outside of that and remove hierarchy? And I think these are questions like, we're trying to figure out. I think when you have a stake in a business, you care about it in a different way. And not everyone who works there will be an owner or have to be an owner. But people have that opportunity. What was your question? It was how will—

Silverman: Yeah, The hierarchy question, if there's a leadership, if it's collective?

Kamran: In Davis, I lived in communal living for a while so corporative voting, and boards were like a big part of my college life. And that model is something I've carried with me and like, wanted to see in other parts of my life, so, I don't know.

Silverman: Yeah. Amazing. I was wondering— I mean, I guess since you haven't been here, continuously through... How many years have you been in New York City now?

Kamran: Its four years now.

Silverman: Four years. Ok.

Kamran: Yeah. I'm about to hit four years in April.

Silverman: Amazing [laughter] Um, yeah, sometimes when we are younger, and then we go through, like a different, an intense historical time. What it looks like for trans communities to span that time. And if you sense any change in your own personal community? In ways that people are in relation to each other, with others exercising their— through politics or—?

Kamran: Um. [...] It's like, it's hard to answer that right now in this context of— there's just so much happening to trans people, and, ah. And that violence, I think is taking center stage in our ways of relating to each other, but [...] I hope— it's really hard when you're in part of the community that's really struggling to build things. People have needs that are not being met. And... Like material needs that are not being met. And I think that makes collaboration also hard at times. And, because we face so much violence in the world, sometimes we bring that home to each other. And I think right now, in New York, what I'm seeing is people trying really hard to stop doing that. [laughter] I don't know.

Silverman: Yeah. I would love to see more of that. More, sort of like transformative justice enacted interpersonally in community.

Kamran: Yeah, it's very hard, I think because we don't have access to justice, in context outside of our trans community, with our bosses or parents or... When we have access to each other and we make mistakes, it's a lot easier, there's like a lot of access and attacking each other.

Because we don't get to— we don't get to like, fight with the club owner or with— whoever it is that's causing us a lot of harm. But when we cause each other harm, that's the place where we're like, okay, I can— I can tell you everything. Or I can— and, yeah.

Silverman: What is— you don't have to— I'm just thinking about like, well, what would repair look like for you, in community?

Kamran: *What would repair look like in community?* That's kind of— my answer circles back to intergenerational friendships. So, I think one of the reasons we don't have that actually, in New York is— we excommunicate elders often for mistakes that they've made. And in my community in Tel Aviv, that was— there was a lot less of that, you know, like people aren't perfect. And the standard for who you interact with is different. I've seen a lot of people— like, accountability is really challenging I think when there's no restorative justice, when there's no space for repair work, and something I've seen a lot of is, actually, queer people being pushed out of community but then cis, straight people existing in those communities and not being held accountable.

And, I hope, like even with the club I hope we'll have some kind of interpersonal conflict resolution space where people can be heard. Yeah, there's room for restorative justice.

Silverman: Mmm. What is your orientation towards door policies? Since a lot of queer parties often have some sort of sliding scale based on an identity complex, and just wondering for your club, if you have you have an idea of what you will do.

Kamran: We will have membership. And it's not going to be queer-exclusive. So you know, like, let's say this venue is going to be hopefully in Prospect Heights. I would like it to service the community around it and not just, queer people in the community. I don't know— door policy. I think there will be a [...] I don't know if I can talk about this right now. [laughter]

Silverman: That's fine, yeah, totally. Because sometimes, there's a lot of DJs or people that are in nightlife that have experienced the policy of like, cis white men paying \$75, and a scale for everyone else of paying \$10, and by everyone else I just mean, under the umbrella of queer and that's been sort of a divisive topic for some people in relationship to what it means to host and invite in people for a queer party. But it's also absolutely fine, if that's like something obviously you'll get to.

Kamran: Yeah, I think it's also— as a, as something that will be very openly *we're trans owned and operated*, we're gonna have to be really careful. Because, you know, lets say, in the context of like, like men's rights, or. Often, we will have to— yeah, maybe... [laughter]

Silverman: Totally yeah, it's a work in progress.

Kamran: Yeah [laughter]

Silverman: So just more broadly and thinking about being trans in New York, have you had experiences with safety issues?

Kamran: Yeah. That's just a broad— safety. So many things fall under that umbrella. Man, I don't know if I have an answer that question either.

Silverman: Ok, no problem. We can turn towards something more positive. What are some things that you love to do in New York?

Kamran: Things I love to do in New York. I love Prospect Park, and Riis Beach. I really, really enjoy community-centered events, from parties to talks. There are a lot of queer S.W.A.N.A. people in New York, so I get to go to a lot of art events—

Silverman: Sorry, also in— in asking about these parties, could you name them? We love to know like, just in a historical sense, where people partied and what they were. So that we can kind of keep track of—

Kamran: So right now I like to go to Haza Party. There was an event, when I first moved to New York that I would go to that I don't anymore: Yellow Party. *What else?* There's also just like, I don't know I'm in so many Instagram group chats that are identity-centered and then people do events through those. And... *Other meaningful events right now...* I go to Laylit, too.

Silverman: Yeah. Is there anything coming up that you're excited about?

Kamran: I'm going to Laylit on Friday, actually.

Silverman: Mmm. And how do you relate to your religious background now?

Kamran: *How do I relate to my religious background...* I don't know. It's funny, my partner says I'm religious which is funny to think about because as a Jew, when we say *religious* it's like, it means something particular. But I think to the average American, I'm religious because I— I practice, what is maybe minimal in terms of like Jewish life, but you know, High Holidays. And, I have a lot of queer Jewish friends, and we try to do alternative Tu Bishvat, [...] I don't believe in God. Though I don't think that I was Jewish and I didn't believe in God and I'm Jewish now I don't believe in God. And I believe it's very easy to be Jewish and not believe in God.

Silverman: Why do you think that is?

Kamran: Because you don't have to believe in God to be Jewish. It's not— It's not in this necessary facet. It's like there are a lot of different— different ways in which Judaism expresses that, like doing Mitzvot itself is like an act of being Jewish in the world. And its thought, you can do— you can do these things and faith will come; you don't need faith to do these things. When I was in high school, we read a book about Elisha ben Abuyah, who was a rabbinical— in the time of the Talmud, this very important Jewish thinker who— he ends up getting, his name gets

stricken, but his teachings remain because he goes through this process of no longer believing in God and betraying the Jewish people. But he's still, he's still there. And it's just like discussion about what that means to have an important teacher be someone who wasn't even Jewish at the end of his days.

Silverman: Hmm. What else are you learning from, now?

Kamran: *What am I learning from.* [...] Hmmm. I'm so focused on the club lately that I don't know if I'm— learning about a boring things like city codes. But, friends. I had the opportunity to go see an art exhibit of a friend in Norway, who is a Sudanese refugee. I was in a group of five queer— all of them but me were refugees and then I'm like the child of refugees, just like talking with each other and learning from each other.

Silverman: Mmm. Sorry to— I'm so curious about the club— are there other ones— other clubs that you see as a model that you want to emulate in some ways?

Kamran: No, but there are other cooperative club venues that are going to open in this year and the next and I've connected some of those people. And I'm excited. Excited that I'll be doing that alongside other people.

Silverman: Wow. Why do you think that is that there are multiple ones happening at the same time, or similar time?

Kamran: Nightlife took such a hit during Covid, that I think it made a lot of people reassess their relationship to it. The sustainability of it, and also how central it is to our existence. It's an industry that does make a lot of profit, but then also, who's making the profit and it's not actually going to artists and workers. And we're seeing that become more part of the public discourse too, with like, even in the major US news talking about Live Nation and what it means for Ticketmaster to be like, to hold so much power, like we're asking these questions as a country of, what— what is our relationship to the arts? And big artists themselves speaking out about how *we can't make a living touring*. Like how could independent artists doing that survive? I think, yeah, we have to shift our relationship to the arts, and nightlife is part of that.

Silverman: Totally. In wrapping up, I have a few more questions I hope you'd be down for. What have been some important forms of support for you over the years?

Kamran: One of my closest friends who— he's the first— was butch now transmasculine person I was friends with. And he gave me my first ace bandage. He's been really important.

Silverman: Do you want to name him, or leave him—?

Kamran: Yeah. Misha. Misha Kaufman. And, my sister, and then maybe, literature. [laughter]

Silverman: Yeah.

Kamran: Yeah.

Silverman: Any books in particular, or are you—?

Kamran: I didn't even know it was cliché until a few years ago, but Giovanni's Room— reading that in college actually changed my life. Um. I read it at the same time as I was starting to have a more radical politics. And— yeah, Baldwin is and was really important to me. Yeah.

Silverman: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add to your interview today?

Kamran: I feel like we jumped around so much, I'm sorry.

Silverman: No, it's totally as it goes, as you think of things.

Kamran: Yeah, I guess I didn't really talk about—we talked about LA a little bit but there's really beautiful things happening in my community now, movements to like— ah. When I came out, I was one of like, very few people out in my community. My mom and some of her friends started a group for parents. That's kind of taken on so many different forms now, and there's a really cool support network for the parents with LGBTQ kids in Los Angeles. And. Um. Yeah, its—[...]

Silverman: What's it called?

Kamran: *What is it called?* I don't know if it has a name. It's a, it's an actual support group that parents go to that's moderated by a psychiatrist.

Silverman: Is it like PFLAG?

Kamran: No, no, it's not. So I think— interestingly, because we're an insular community, things only work for us that are for us. We don't— we don't— we don't do well in other things. So even like, my dad struggled with addiction. He went to a rehab for Iranian men in the context of it was very Iranian. And I think also with this, it's just parents who love their kids and really struggle not having community if their kid would come out, and building alternative communities. And they joked that it was also about getting us to marry each other. [laughter] Yeah, it's very important to be with another Iranian Jew. Like, not just Jewish— that doesn't, like that's not enough. Yeah, I think the parents wanted to know other people to like, match-make, which is happening now. And there have been some like, big gay weddings. But mostly gay men. It's really slow with women.

Silverman: How does it make you feel now your mom started that?

Kamran: She's—she's a cool lady. [laughter] You know.

Silverman: Shout out to your mom.

Kamran: Yeah. When you were saying like, *what's the root?* I think one of them was, my mom worked for a living my whole life and that was very queer in itself in my community. And—

Silverman: What did she work as?

Kamran: She— she had a clothing manufacturing company, women's clothing for— like. When she started it, it was like to bring more feminine— women used to have to dress really... in a certain way at work to be taken seriously. And in the '90s there was this shift of like, you can— you don't have to wear boxy suits. So she made clothes for that. That kind of a woman, working woman.

Silverman: Wow. And how did she dress?

Kamran: She's a very feminine woman. Um. Yeah.

Silverman: Yeah. Wow. Thank you. Is there anything else that comes to mind? I know we— because we're centered in New York City as a project, we often—

Kamran: Talk about New York.

Silverman: —Highlight that, but, I'm also so happy to kind of fill in aspects of what helped inform you as a whole person.

Kamran: Yeah. I think we talked about a lot. Do you have any questions?

Silverman: [laughter] I will off the record, but I'm so happy that we got to speak today.

Kamran: [laughter] Yeah, me too. Thank you.