

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

MIKAIL KHAN

Interviewer: Aviva Silverman

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Aviva Silverman: Hello, my name is Aviva Silverman, and I will be having a conversation with Mikail for the New York City Trans Oral History Project, in collaboration with the New York Public Library's community oral history project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. Its December 19th— or 17th?

Mikail Khan: [whispering] 19th!

Silverman: 19th, and it's being recorded in my apartment. Hi.

Khan: Hi.

Silverman: Could you introduce yourself?

Khan: Yeah, my name is Mikail Khan. My pronouns are they, them, theirs. Yeah, and I could go into more detail, but yes, that's a very short intro of me and just my pronouns.

Silverman: And where are you coming from today?

Khan: I'm— I live in the Bronx currently. I've been living there since 2018, but yeah, I'm just commuting from the Bronx to Ridgewood, or actually, I commuted from Chelsea to Ridgewood, then I'll go back to the Bronx.

Silverman: And how do you find the Bronx?

Khan: The Bronx is interesting because I live— again, just a little bit about me. I grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Originally, my ethnicity is Bangladeshi. So yeah, I mean, I think for me, living in the Bronx is interesting and also kind of a double-edged sword sometimes because I'm living in a predominantly Bangladeshi community, but they're very cishet and very, you know, I wouldn't say they've ever witnessed even trans people walking out amongst them. So—but I do love, again, the culture and the food and just again, like there is a sense of community there amongst the Bangladeshi circles. But again, I do have to always hide certain parts of myself if I'm around certain subsets of the Parkchester area in the Bronx.

Silverman: Hmm, and can we start from where you grew up, and yeah, and how you and how you eventually came— but we can start, we can start there.

Khan: Yeah, so I grew up, you know, born from the early 1990s. I've been— I grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and I essentially grew up in this very crowded neighborhood called Shantinagar and that was my life for the first 15 years, like going, just growing up there and also, you know, going to school, and again, just obviously, it was a very family-centered life, very communal life, but also you know, that it was a very challenging childhood for various reasons, but partially one of the main reasons being my gender nonconformity from an early age. And yeah, and I think always— I think I grew up in a very, in a household that was very subsumed in a lot of domestic violence, and I think that was also kind of obscuring my access to my gender nonconformity and sexuality because I was just too caught up in other people's lives or just my family's lives or some people at my school and I never really

acknowledged what was actually going on with me in those early years. And even if there was something going on with me, other people's opinions would dictate or change my viewpoints about myself. So, at many intervals, I would just think that oh, I'm you know, I don't, I'm not meant to exist or I'm just a problem to my parents and to my schoolteachers and you know, it definitely contributed to very declining grades in those early years. So yeah, I mean, I think again, like now that I think of it, it's just like what people perceived was like, oh, like this person who was refusing to conform to very feminine characteristics or modes of behavior. Like I guess I had to dismiss those elements of myself to fit in with the— with a very again, it's a very predominantly Sunni Muslim society or the whole country is, honestly, and it has its own repercussions of being like sort of like a Sunni supremacism, as some would call it. So yeah, I mean, I think that— that whole, those whole intersections like being in a Muslim society, being gender non-conforming, and then obviously there were some— we, my parents weren't well off. So, there were also some ways that class was dictating my ability to access gender non-conformity, which I don't think gets talked about a lot in various circles, because I think only, even in the United States, I feel like transness is only accessible to— mainly accessible to again, white upper-class folks. So, so I'll just stop there, a little bit about my childhood in Malabarish.

Silverman: Were there any sorts of like models or people in your childhood that you could see in yourself or reflect back in yourself as being gender non-conforming?

Khan: I mean, I think there were a lot of people I mean, not 'til— I mean, I definitely did not see anyone basically reflected in myself because I would say I have— okay, so it's complicated, like even gender non-conforming in Malabarish because I think what gets featured on media, news outlets is mostly trans women, and we know how trans women are very hyper-sexualized and also relegated to the, you know, most forms of sex work and that's what's happening on a consistent basis in Dhaka and that's the— those are the images that were portrayed that I had, I was accessing or even like folks are— I saw. And then, trans masculinity or other forms of non-binary ways of living, it was just not at all in plain sight or so again, like there's a large push mostly in India, which is more a colonial power in that region of South Asia. There is a push there for— amongst trans masculine people to be heard and seen but there wasn't in my time growing up in Malabarish, there wasn't any movement for trans masc or non-binary or other forms of— other ways of being other than the, again, the hyper-sexualized trans feminine figure. So, so again, what I saw was obviously there were gender non-conforming and trans people but it wasn't necessarily my reflection of what I am because to me I was like, *oh I, that what I am, it just does not exist. So therefore I, I should just try to be a woman* and you know, hang out with the women and just try to be, you know, try to carve some space within that very, those constricted sets of performances and ways of being that were dictated to me. Again, from various elders, and even my peers in school where, you know, if I at all talked about, *oh I'm— I don't think I like cis men or am attracted to cis men*. If I say, said those things, most people would just retort and be like, *okay, this is, this is Bangladesh and you cannot talk this way* and that— those are just the messages that were told to me. So, but I think once I hit age 17, 18, I did start making other queer friends even in Bangladesh and I think that was instrumental to at least forming some analysis in me that, oh, that there is some subculture here in this country and then... And I think obviously, for lack of a better term, and I don't like subscribing to this narrative of like,

oh, I left the country and I found queer people, which is true because that's what happened, but I don't think that's the narrative I want to— you know, portray about Bangladesh that, oh, there's no queer or trans people. It's just, I think there are, but everyone is just kind of relegated to— to some forms of cis-normativity there.

Silverman: And so, when you met up with friends, where would you go to hang out?

Khan: I mean, again, these are predominantly queer, gay men, and again, that's not— that wasn't, again, the most affirming way of, again, finding myself, but it was at least something that's different than what I was used to or being told. I mean, they would throw parties or like, they would host their own little gatherings and I would go. And back then, people would just perceive me, oh, like, I was like a kind of very, not a— I wouldn't even say I was very masculine-presenting or anything. I was just like a kind of masc-appearing lesbian, and the word 'lesbian' was imposed on me when I was not comfortable with that term. When— so I think there was also that— like, I think people also didn't have terms in [unintelligible]— we have certain terms for same-sex loving, which I have issues with the whole, the word same-sex, but that's the only Bangla word we have.

Silverman: What is the word?

Khan: It is shomo kami, but other than that, what someone else was asking me just a couple of days ago that, oh, what is the, what is like an accurate word for lesbian and I don't have a word for it. And for trans— I mean, I have so many issues with the word, it's currently now what Bengali people call third gender and it's just called tritiyo lingo in Bangla and that's just — those don't describe a lot of what trans women want to be called and other trans people, what we want to be called. So, we don't even have a specific Bangla terminology for how to discover experience. So, if we don't even have terminology, I don't even know how we're going to actualize ourselves in even socially and politically. So, yeah.

Silverman: Yeah, that sounds really difficult. Is there a way that you have communicated your gender that feels comfortable?

Khan: I mean, you mean in the now or back then?

Silverman: Either, or both.

Khan: I mean, my trajectory with my gender— I mean, currently, it doesn't feel as urgent because I think I've passed the stage of like, oh, this is me and I don't know what I want to do. I've passed the stage of like, oh, this is me and I don't need to keep being traumatized by it. But I think from, again, from a young age, I knew that I used to think I was basically cursed. Like I thought, oh, hell awaits me and because, you know, I grew up in a Muslim household, hell awaits me and even I was, like, I think my father got fed up with me at a point and he sent me to conversion therapy with an Islamic therapist who would just feed me ideas of how I should be a woman. And womanhood is my birth right. Or cis womanhood is my birth right because I don't, I think lots of people can access womanhood, but in this particular case, cis womanhood. So, so yeah, I mean, there were various, obviously

traumatic things happening and obviously I wasn't processing them. So, in a way, I was just like—you know, and I realized a part of the whole root of the issue is sometimes my father and some elder folks in my life who are dictating things. So, again, I think part of actualizing my gender was moving away from these toxic people, I would say. And, you know, just finding people who were more either like-minded or would have— would be open to having or holding space for these conversations, and I think at a point how my gender, I guess, went through phases or something. Yes, I was labeled a lesbian, masc lesbian. Sure, I adopted that for a little while. Then I was like, okay, there's something deeply not right about what— how I'm saying I'm a masc lesbian. So, then I said, okay, I am gender non-conforming and then I started using they/them pronouns from like 2012. So, and it was hard at first for people to even, because I think back in 2012, 2013, the conversation on pronouns was very different and, you know, I would get misgendered left and right, but at least with a subset of other trans people I knew in the US, it was easier to just, okay, they/them and non-binary. And then, you know, during I guess 2016, 2017— I mean, I feel like there was a lot happening that I could get into between 2011, 2017, but after 2017, again, I decided, okay, I'm going to start HRT. And so, I started HRT around 2018 and it's been about four, close to four to five years now. So, I think I'm at a stage where I don't even think about gender really, it's just there and I think that's great, but I'm also like, I don't think a gender is ending. It's just, I'm just not thinking persistently about it and not having and not having too much anxiety about it. So, yeah.

Silverman: That's a big evolution.

Khan: [laughter] Yeah! So yeah, that's where I'm at in 2022.

Silverman: And just to kind of go back through all the different forms of recognition or being able to kind of like, see yourself, do you have a memory of the first trans person you ever met or— either in media or in person, or just a way to kind of see someone and be like, *oh this exists?*

Khan: Yeah. The first trans person I ever met— I mean I would say definitely a trans woman who was in Bangladesh, and she runs an organization her name is Joya Sikder she's still in Bangladesh, she's an elderly trans woman so again she was the first person I met in terms of — okay she's— I mean, she's a former sex worker and I think she's still doing some great work, and she's trying to move beyond the third gender label that's been— again, the third gender label is only prescribed for trans women; it doesn't even acknowledge other forms of gender identities. So, there's a— there's a— clearly an issue there, so. But I think— yeah, she would be the first trans person in Bangladesh that I witnessed. And I do think I've— I mean so, I think part of my evolution was I did have a best friend, their name was Orono and they— I mean we were the same age, like we were 18 and then you know friendship evolved and stuff, but I think they identified as a gay man, or like a gay man like them. But I do think because I was also identifying oh like as a queer person or whatever, a masc lesbian and we both didn't really have we both didn't come into fruition but I do think there was something there with Orono and I think that relationship also changed my and you know they were my best friend but you know and that was also part of the trauma of my early 20s— they took their life back in 2013, and I think partially that had to do with— I mean, they weren't

openly discussing their gender maybe, as a trans feminine person or anything, but I think that was part of it. And obviously, that wrecked me, or wrecked my soul for years and its 2022 now, but it's still at a point for some time, I couldn't even talk about Orono because that was just devastating. And they died actually in New York in 20— end of 2013 around this time, in December, so... But I do think that was also instrumental, in that a relationship with that person— a Bangladeshi queer person was instrumental in forming my sense of self. Whether it's just— doesn't all have to be related to the gender it's just my confidence in myself, which is very key to even forming your gender identity, in a very oppressive society that I would say— not just Bangladesh even here in the US I think people like simplify oh what is New York such so great but then there's so many types of crap happening here so, yeah.

Silverman: I was just thinking about around kind of like, the invisibilization of more masc-presenting people, and sort of like how that existed in both Bangladesh and in here in some forms, and I wanted to know a little more about your experience with that.

Khan: I think it's different. Again, I do think it's again, society's preoccupation with— that I've used the word hyper sexualization then also I think there's a anti-Black element to that because we see Black trans women are mostly hyper-sexualized and I think the skills in the case with Bangladeshi trans women were because of their involvement in sex work, and just cis men's and their proximity to cis men's pleasure in the sex workers market, I think that is what created this hyper visibility, and I'm not trying to take away from the fact that yes, trans women should be visible to somebody we're not in the way that I think media portrays or especially, either centered on their killings or murders, or it's centered on *oh like they're a sex worker* or something, so that was what was going on with trans masc people. I think I don't know if I would even say invisibility of it, it's just I think trans people are kind of infantilized in Bangladesh because again, societies— and even now like we're in 2022 and I think people are like *oh like trans just means you aspire to a certain way of cis womanhood or cis manhood* and because trans masc people— *oh like they're like a child version of a man*, like I think there's that was that is playing out somewhere in Bangladesh and that's why. And also, like I mean I think I mean I kind of wrote an article about it about why trans masc people do get erased in public not just in Bangladesh— there are other countries who have the same issue. I think it also has to do with trans women I think they form community in groups. Whereas trans masc people they don't have that same group structure and I think that also plays a key part on this this isolation that happens with and I'm saying trans masc, trans women— there's so many other genders in between and beyond but I just but those are just the two I'm talking about like because again, currently Bangladesh and its current formation they only see transness as like oh there's trans women: hijra! and then trans masc don't have a name and if they do you know it's not my concern what happens to them like that's why. But, I would say trans women and trans men are facing the same levels of issues and accessing services accessing housing there is but obviously I do think trans women bear the brunt of the violence in any case. I just think it's society's obsession with misogyny and sexualizing people in this manner, so...

Silverman: Right. And to just kind of pivot to your trajectory, and what brought you to New York?

Khan: Oh I mean, I knew or at least this is one thing that I think yes my family was you know a mess but they wanted me to go to America for college then that was there I mean they were like *oh you have to go and you cannot stay here this country is going to—* I mean Bangladesh is not— and there's always a lot of issues in Bangladesh that I don't want to get into politically, and then other things. And obviously I was a woman, a girl and they were like *this is— you know as a girl you should just leave the country*, and because— and I think they kind of knew that I was a little different. I mean though that much was apparent they were like *I don't think you're gonna blend in here based on how—* so I think they kind of they saw there was like *okay I'm just not gonna blend in* and they didn't see marriage really was on my cards or anything. They were talking on marriage but I was just like *that's not gonna happen* so I went to Philadelphia to this liberal arts college, so, that's how I ended up in the US. And then I came to New York after I graduated, so that's how I stayed on. Yeah.

Silverman: And what were you studying?

Khan: I mean, my father was very strict in the sense like you have to study a practical subject and, he was like *okay I mean economics is where you are okay in*, so I just studied economics but I also did really like film and film studies, so I mean that I did out of my own accord and my father didn't really know about it. So, I just had a double major in economics and film. And I feel like, because you don't have really access to the arts really in the Bangladesh school curriculum as much. I never obviously followed economics, currently I just work in communications and stuff, so it is similar to film to some degree but because I need a steady job with health insurance due to my— some of my disabilities, I'm just like *okay maybe I'm not— I didn't make it in the film industry* so, I might just— I just work in the non-profit sector, which isn't the greatest but you know, it pays the bills. Yeah.

Silverman: Yeah, got you. And so, what was it like to come here to study?

Khan: I mean, I think I didn't know proper English when I came here first. It was a steep climb just to just to even talk English like my peers, and I think— yeah, I mean, even my professors were like— oh like I mean they tried to really help me with my English and also just referring things I could read and stuff so... But then I was also hungry for knowledge because I felt so much of it was kept from me while growing up, because everyone was dictating how I should be, and so I think I was very hungry for a lot of knowledge— I mean, more knowledge about queer trans issues so I think that's what helped me improve my English. Now if I say anything and people might say oh I wouldn't peg you I was like oh you if you whether you had you know some English issues but you know I just feel like so that I think again I was always like I want to know more know more so that's I think though that was the initial battle that I faced just in this country more the English and then obviously paper and some immigration issues that were a little bit ongoing but then I was on a student visa, so... But I think— yeah, I just think because I went to primarily a queer-ish college that helped form my identity, so I took a while. The first year or two were a little isolating because I really was very Islamic, so I was just like *I don't want to talk to the queer people here because I just don't see why I would— like, I just think it's just wrong*. Because I was also stuck in my old ways of like *okay this is like whatever parties they're throwing I'm not gonna go*, you know people would try to get me to go, but I just wouldn't because I was just like *it's*

against my religion, but I think slowly I— all I knew that I was just kind of miserable in my repressed self so, yeah.

Silverman: And so, what— what party was the threshold?

Khan: No, I don't know if I was just making more queer friends that were a little different, and then... And you know, I guess I had started liking some people and that was out of my control, and I was like *okay if Allah was really looking out for me, why would I freaking like this person?* Like, it doesn't make any sense. So, some reality wasn't matching my brain you know, what I was training my brain to think about Islam and religion and everything so you know when reality hits you all the time, you have to— I mean that's what was pushing my— these rigid walls that I drew up, right? So, I don't fully recall what was the turning moment. I don't think there's any, it's just a series of things that were happening, so...

Silverman: Yeah, if there's any kind of like— memorable— moment...

Khan: I mean, I knew that there was actually a Bangladeshi, she was a senior and I was a freshman so she was a Bangladeshi, she was straight, though but I remember liking her and I was just like *I don't understand what is going on*, like again like I think I was just like so bent on repressing myself that... At a point, you just have to stop putting this pressure on yourself, right?

Silverman: How do you connect to Islam now?

Khan: I mean, it's complicated. It's not complicated— I mean, I don't really— I think I stopped thinking about a lot of things too deeply. I just think my relationship with Islam right now? I would say I'm spiritual but I'm not— you know, super... I got to go to this gathering, I have to go you know I don't do the Five Walk Namaz like I used to, and you know when I actually came to terms with okay I'm you know queerness and also starting to come to terms I did feel some animosity from other Muslim folks on campus because they were like *oh like you're an MSA but you're doing this you're going to this party*, you know so there was just some weird dynamics that were happening in college with some of the Muslim students because I was more starting to be more openly queer so—I left it so I think it made it became more a private thing for me but then I think when I came to New York I did meet a lot of queer Muslims here, so that's when you have your own little huddle of like okay you're meeting up for Iftar or Ramadan... So, it just became a whole separate thing like if I am to practice Islam it would just be with other queer Muslims in the community versus going even though I'm in Parkchester there's a couple of mosques— I just wouldn't go to those mosques because I could totally blend in, but I'm just not gonna go because it doesn't feel like— I'm sure one of the preachers would start saying sermons around— you know this— because I know some mullahs as they call it do say hateful things against queer and trans people. So again, for me I do think it's necessary for the space to be safe for me to even like engage with Islam in a communal way If not, then I know my boundaries in the sense that I'm just gonna keep Islam to myself. So...

Silverman: What did it feel like to meet other queer Muslims here?

Khan: I mean, so it actually started from college. There was this friend, she was just like, *oh, there's someone in Philly, who's a— you know, Black queer Muslim you should meet her* as like I don't think so cuz I was just like *I'm not Muslim anymore*. But then I was very curious, so I did end up meeting that person, and she invited a couple of other people, and then I stayed in touch. And then, she was like, *oh, there's a huge community in New York— not a huge— like, it was just maybe ten people but that's huge back in 2013, you know*. So, she was just like, *oh, let me just introduce you through email*, and then I knew that there were these monthly meetups and stuff. So, that's how I met some people. Obviously, every group has its own little messy stuff happening and you know, you get caught up in the mess, too. So, I don't want to go into the mess, but you know, everyone, every place has its own queer drama. And the queer Muslim groups are not far from it either. So, yeah...

Silverman: I agree, so it's complicated—

Khan: No, I mean everything's fine, but I do think I was very... Because I really wanted to reconnect with Islam, and I think— I mean, after meeting these queer Muslims and realizing *oh, there are ways to be that you don't just denounce Islam, and just you can be in some space together*. But it's not really a super important thing for me, right now, because I'm spiritual now to some degree, and I even look at other religions like Buddhism and stuff. So, I don't see myself like, *oh, I have to be a super Muslim*. But, yeah.

Silverman: And I don't know if you want to speak about this, but I was wondering, because you're drawn to film, if there's certain films that you watched, that give you a lot of information about yourself, or just anything that felt, I don't know, important.

Khan: I don't know. That's a difficult question, because I watch a ton of films just to see what's going on, and I watch a lot of arthouse films, but I mean, I do know at an early age... And I think a lot of times people reference this film, you know, it's kind of traumatic. But I watched this when I was 12... It's that movie "Boys Don't Cry," so it's just because again, but I do think obviously it's a white-centered narrative to some degree, but I do think it— and it was obviously played by a cis woman, who I think later acknowledged in her Oscar speech that, you know, it wasn't played by a trans person. So, there was that, but then obviously watching that film, I'm like... I didn't really put the connections together because I was 12 or 13. But everything other people were saying to me in Bangladesh was like, *oh, yeah, whatever you're going through, it's just not gonna happen*, because one of the earliest things I told my father, I was like— oh, I think I was nine, or something. I was like, *oh, I don't think I'm a girl*, stuff like that. I would say just even in the room with him, and I think he knew something was— I'm like a weird— or like he probably had a red flag in his head. So, basically, he would just say *oh, don't say these things in public* or like, *this is just not possible what you're saying, so, you know, you shouldn't even speak it*. But with "Boys Don't Cry," there were so very few films are available in Taka, and they're only because it was it's just only very mainstream films, or some Oscar-nominated films have just come in, just because of how we didn't have a proper movie theater till like 2004 or 5. Yeah, so I think that was one film, and then I mean, I wouldn't say I watched trans films growing up. I think when I came to college, I started watching a couple of trans-related films, but I do think it was very

binary in the portrayals of trans people there. Obviously, things have changed a lot in recent years, and you watch everything, and everything now, but off the top of my head... I can't give you a list of films. I do think—

Silverman: Oh, not a list—

Khan: Yeah, but I would say that was an earlier film that I watched, but it did impact my idea of like *oh, is this the fate that awaits trans people who are kind of boyish or like all that?* So, that wasn't a great thing and obviously like if you— I mean, I secretly watched that L-Word thing. But it was terrible. It was terrible, that trans-masc portrayal there, and everyone talks about how terrible it is. So, those are the mainstream things that are available to me. Or in terms of Black or POC trans stuff, I think those came to my realm later on in life. It wasn't a— and I think it wasn't a thing even in the 2000s to have Black or POC trans characters on films. So, yeah.

Silverman: Right. Yeah. And so, when you left college, did you come immediately to New York, or—?

Khan: No, I stayed in Philly for about six-seven months, but then I couldn't really find a job like that. Like it was just— I think it's harder to— it was harder apparently to find full-time jobs there. So, I was just doing some part-time gigs. And then, I mean, right as I came to New York my bestie, you know, they passed away. And that was a terrible blow for me as an entry point to New York, because my cousin was like, *oh you can stay with me*, because she was living in the city then, with her fiancé. So, I was staying with her, but then my best friend died. So, I was just— and then you know, that led me to *me* being suicidal to a certain degree after seeing that play out. So, I definitely had one of the worst years of my life in 2014. I don't know how I recovered from that. And you know, I wouldn't I don't really want to go into details too much in this chat, but it was just — yeah, I mean I think in your formative years of someone so close to you passes away, you just start to question your reality, more and more. And especially if it someone was a gender non-conforming like you. So, I think— so, that was a big—I think that also helped me. I don't know if it helped me figure out my gender more and more, but I realized that the isolating weight of some of the gender stuff I was going through, because I couldn't really talk about it with other cis people. And I don't think they realized the gravity of the situation that took place, that there was a gender non-conforming person who passed away. To you all, mostly cis people, this person was cis when this wasn't the reality. And then me, another GNC person was just completely bedridden from the pain and the grief. So, anyway— but I do think it made me realize the people who do show up and that was actually some subsets of my biological family and some friends. And I think those are the times like you know who your real pals are, and even bio family. Because my father wouldn't have it. He was he was just like, *oh you're depressed? Get over it*. Like, you know, he would just say terrible things to me. Yeah.

Silverman: And once you were here, where did you start to socialize?

Khan: In New York?

Silverman: Yeah, were there certain bars, or parties, or places you got to meet people?

Khan: Yeah, again, one of the first instruments were the queer Muslim circles, and then going to different parties, or these South Asian collectives that were here. So, I— you know, I think there were some certain South Asian, or other POC activism events that were happening, and those are not— that were sober spaces to some degree, some of them. So, those are spaces where you know, I would meet people or form— or just have more conversations. But I would say that in even in those earlier years in New York, like 2014-15, I guess again my articulation of trans identity wasn't fully formed. I was still hanging around a lot with cisgender people. So, I think when you're hanging with cisgender people, you don't necessarily dialogue too much about gender. So, that was that— by cisgender, I mean cisgender queer people. So, there was that, but I think in that year though, because it was just 2014 and I was pretty, you know, suicidal back then so I think I started associating New York with negative emotions because I was just like, this is a place I entered, I lost someone so close to my heart. And then it can be an isolating city if you're depressed, you walk here. So, I think I was also like, *I need to leave New York because I just don't see how I can recover from this ordeal*, you know. So, in early 2015, I just you know, *I don't know if I want to be in America*, I think I was just going through a phase where I just didn't want to do anything and I wanted to escape. I don't know where, and I was also young, so I just didn't want to do anything, and you know go to work, and it was a non-profit job where I was doing program work, but I was just very... Yeah, I was very disconnected from myself, so... And even gender, I wasn't even— I mean it was there, I wasn't addressing oh like, *what should I do about it*. So, I applied to some college in India, and you know, I did get in, and I was like, *okay I'm just gonna go*. It was in Delhi. So, I left. And I got connected to some queer and trans people there in Delhi, so I went around July 2015. And I did meet some interesting people there, but I think once I went to that university— it's called Jawaharlal Nehru, JNU for short— the gender binary really got to me when I— as soon as— because it was a girl's hostel and a boy's hostel. I was placed in the girl's hostel, and I couldn't leave it. So, I didn't realize how hard it hit me in that space, where I was just— and it's nothing against girls, it was just me. Like, people might say *oh like you're in a girl's house that's*— you know, and I don't have anything as girls or women, but I do think it was starting to get to me, that's this whole segregation and how you're supposed to interact with one another based on that segregation. And I thought I left that behind, and that is also part deeply embedded in a lot of South Asian behavior, and codes of conduct. Like, even I went to a school in Dhaka, where I had to wear a girl's uniform and the boys had to wear a different uniform. So, all this to say, I think that's when I knew oh, *I'm right*. I rebelled against it in the sense that— but it did come from a place of privilege and choice, because I can execute a choice in that setting where I could be like, *oh I don't think this university is for me*. It is a free university— I didn't have to pay, it's the public university in Delhi, so the costs were— basically, I paid zero to get in and to access a school, some schooling there, but I was just like, *I can't take it being in the girl's hostel*, and I talked to another trans man there who did go to JNU a couple of years before me, and he was also like, *yes I went there, the girls hostel was terrible, I only drank throughout the whole experience of*— so I was like, *no I'm not gonna drink*. I don't want to drink or do drugs, and I just can't because that's just gonna make me lose my mind, so... And then you know, on top of that my mother was also very sick so I went to Dhaka, Bangladesh in September, October 2020— sorry October 2015. And then my mother was very sick,

meaning she had a brain aneurysm. So, you know I was there for a couple of months and but then my father was like *oh you have to go back to America, like this isn't*— like he just didn't like it that I was in Dhaka. Plus, I think you know, there was some level of embarrassment that I'm gender non-conforming and hanging out the family like this and getting older and stuff so and you know I have just so you know I have an older sister who was also around but she was also very abusive towards me because of my sexuality and gender so, again there were so many dynamics happening in that family, and even I didn't want to stay there but it was also like okay. My mother then eventually fell into a coma for a year so then I came back here though and again just you know just did some odd jobs here and there. But again, throughout it all I think my father wasn't updating me about my mother's health status, so I assume that okay she is in a coma which is terrible. She was mostly at home, and again there was just some home setting for her, because she wasn't always in the hospital so I think that also took up a lot of my 2016 just hearing these updates or lack of updates, but I'm also trying to distract myself, because I knew there was this dark thing happening in the background which is my mother maybe slowly passing away, but then I'm like *oh how do I distract myself?* I mean I wasn't even addressing a gender topic and this is how I also was like I think to me, addressing my gender identity was sort of like— I feel it would disappoint people and then also it was scary to think about because other terrible things are happening in the background. So, I think that's where I was like I put this gender topic in a shelf, because I didn't want to address it. I was just like *okay I'm gender non-conforming*. But I knew that I didn't like how I'm appearing in public. And this is where you know the big blow happened where I was like, *you know I should start taking steps with my gender identity*, which is my mother you know passed away in February 2017. So, after that I was just like you know again, I feel like I went from one grief to another which is my best friend dying, and then my mom and you know part of the grief with my mom was more so like oh like she didn't get to know that I was trans so that was also part of it. I think there was just so many things that were unsaid but she knew that there was *something up with my child*, that we weren't talking about. And I think that was the pain point of losing my mom that that she never really got to know the trans child. So, there was that. But I think after that I was just like, *okay my mom has passed away*, which is weighing heavily on me. But I was also like, *I need to also think about myself in this context where like I can't just go from one grief to another*. So, for me it laid the foundation towards late 2017 that oh, I want to take steps to start my gender transition, that is the medical transition I know, the medical transitions of most trans people are heavily talked about in media, and that's the general term. But to me, that made sense for me to go through the medical transition. And I didn't tell my father, I didn't tell my sister, I didn't tell my larger family. I was just like just like, just like Islam is personal to me, this is a deeply personal experience for me. I don't think anyone, if they really wanted to know and care, we would have a conversation like adults. So, that's how I approached it. I didn't even come out like that, it was just... First of all, I think it was always in people's faces that oh, I am a trans person, but if you don't acknowledge that, I mean, I think I've given enough evidence to various people in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi community that I'm trans, but now it's just a more in-your-face or concrete step that I'm medically transitioning. And I started that 2018 spring. So, yeah, I'll stop there for now. [laughter]

Silverman: You don't have to stop, but yeah, thank you. And— sorry, I'm going back into the beginning. When you said that you had written—you had done some writing about masculine-of-center people I was wondering if you do other forms of writing or how that came about?

Khan: Can you expand what you mean?

Silverman: Oh, you said you had written an article, I believe?

Khan: Yeah, I mean, I generally like to write but different types like whether it's screenwriting or you know, essays. I don't have time right now because of my job, but I do like writing different things. But are you asking what topics I like to write about?

Silverman: Yeah, if there's a specific focus, or place that the writing goes?

Khan: Yeah. I mean, I think with the some essays I do talk about Bangladesh a lot because Bangladesh as a country gained liberation in 1971. So, I do talk about oh like there has it really gained liberation when you know, there's so many subsets or populations haven't can't even like formulate themselves in society, so I do talk I do critique that nationalism aspect of Bangladesh's formation and what it's seemingly stands for when it doesn't, so there's that. So, those are more critical pieces but I do thing with some screenwriting stuff. This was, again, in the past, not really now, because I'm stuck in the non-profit industrial complex. So, I mean, I do like sometimes writing a little bit of comedy with trans figures or, like, talking about Islam and its approach to trans people. And then I also— yeah, I did write some dramatic narratives, the narratives of two of, like, you know, how a toxic masculinity can show up in a romantic relationship, especially if it's a trans masc person. So, there was that that I did sort of make. I mean, not just screenwriting, but it's just I also directed that short film. So, yeah, I mean, I do want to do those things, but I don't have time. And I do think it requires, like, yeah, just time and energy that I feel I need to be better about now, given the pressures of a full-time job.

Silverman: Right.

Khan: So, yeah.

Silverman: And do you want to talk about your job now?

Khan: [laughter] I mean, there's nothing going on in my job. I do comms and marketing, which is a subset in the non-profit sector. But, yeah, I mean, it's been kind of turbulent even at the beginning. When I started my gender transition in 2018, I was at this NGO, and they do eye health or whatever, but they paid, you know, decently. So, I entered with, like, okay, decent hopes. And I was presenting, again, very masc, but also very— not very masc— what am I saying— but feminine, but masc. So, it wasn't clear to HR people, oh, like, maybe that's how another lesbian, you know, or something, or like a queer person, just masc presenting, which is fine. Like, I think that's more acceptable when you're cis in the workplace and being cis and queer. But then I broke it to HR. *Hey, I'm, like, starting hormones. How do you want*

to deal with it in the workplace? Because, I don't know, do you have protocols in place? She was like, *no*. And then, you know, *you're our first transgender employee*. And I was just like, *Okay, I mean, great*. Like, I mean, not great. It was just awful. Because, again, a lot of these were cis white people in the workplace, and they were— they didn't really understand that I was transitioning. They would just make comments about my looks or my voice, like, strange comments that was inappropriate. And then they stopped inviting me to work meetings because they thought it was— I mean, they didn't know. Like, basically, I think they drove me out of my job by making me ineffective, you know. So, it was awful. It was a very subtle form of discrimination, but still overt, that I didn't really know how to— In the end, the HR is a function of the organization. They're going to protect the organization at all costs. And I realized the hard way, no matter what I told the HR, who claimed to be this bisexual woman. But [laughter] it did nothing. And then, you know, in the end, I just quit in early 2019 with, oh, like, I gave a long letter explaining that, you know, *I understand I'm your first transgender employee, but this is how it played out in my experiences. And I don't understand how that can be, how this even happened*. Like, I guess I detailed all the experiences I've had, just how that made me feel. And then that's how I left it. I didn't go through a complaint process with the New York City Commission or whatever of human rights, because I just don't think the law is for trans people, here. Because I think the burden of proof, I don't have any proof. These are all, like, in passing or— you know, expecting me to use a women's restroom, stuff like that. Like, these are just like— and I think for, I mean, I'm sure other lawyers or trans lawyers agree, like, I don't think the law works for trans people when you're trying to file a complaint. I don't think it's— so I didn't even go that route. For me, it was just, like, I left, and it's on their conscience, on how they treated me. So, after that, I started working at the Gender and Family Project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family. So, a lot of them are trans people there. Yeah, after the job that, you know, didn't treat me, like, they didn't— basically discriminated against me as a trans person, just transitioning the workplace, I started working at the Gender and Family Project, which is at the Ackerman Institute. So, I think that really, at least, really affirmed my beliefs that, okay, there are trans people in the workplace. It was a very affirming environment for me, especially after the experience I went through at the previous workplace. Most of my colleagues were trans, mostly trans people of color and Black trans people. So yeah, I mean, there were two white cis people sort of at the leadership level running the Gender and Family Project. But overall, I had a positive experience at Gender and Family Project. But then, you know, the pandemic hit, and there was some downsizing happening. So eventually, I had to leave; myself and my supervisor. We left because they were like, *oh, we're going to cut your job*. So, then I ended up at a foundation, a queer foundation, which was also pretty good, but it very, like, I mean, because all of it was remote work. You know, I guess as a person, I do want to have some relationships with colleagues, friendly relationships, or trying to get to know them as people, which I wasn't able to at this foundation that I'm not going to name. But overall, people that were nice and all, but there was a lot of management issues. Like the ED changed, everything really changed. And it was just hard to do my job and be supervised as a comms person. So currently, I work at another LGBTQ place that I'm not going to name in this interview, but it is— it's only been four months I've been there, but it is a little messy. And, you know, I just want to see where it goes. I just think there's a lot happening. I mean, I think I need to stop also working in these LGBTQ spaces. I just think there's a lot of liberalism happening in some of these, and I just don't like it. Like, I don't know where I'm going to end

up because I don't think workplaces are for me. Like, I just think I go there, I just want a job where I just get paid to exist. But I know that's not possible. I know that's, you know, irrational thinking, but that's literally like, *hey, I got up, I'm breathing, give me a salary*. But, you know, I just don't think that's possible. But, you know, I think, although on another note, I do think I do want a salary to work in more film-based settings, but I think I struggle with, again, like I have, I am on some level autistic, so I do struggle with, oh, like the point, the reason I don't want to work on some film sets, which I did at a point, actually, because it's too chaotic for me, and I think my autism then comes in, and it really makes me anxious to see, you know, just... I guess freelancing, really, I can't do it right now because of these issues that I have. But, so that's why I'm like, *okay, I'm at this full-time job*, but I do know that working in, like, a film setting or a film organization, the pay scale might be lower. So, again, I'm trying to see, like, how I can not be in these LGBTQ spaces, because they're a mess.

Silverman: Just to ask one more question about that, because, yeah, there's all these internal dynamics in all these groups that both feel like, more aligned with aspects of your, maybe, socio-economic— like, whatever background that you feel more safe or held in, but then also express themselves in what you say is, in this form, liberalism—

Khan: And then contradictions, like, you know, I do think, you know, representation politics has preceded over other forms of material gain, so I do think that's a major issue in all of these places where, oh, you have these people, but then they're at the leadership level, some LGBTQ people, but they're not— they're just kind of what people would, what some might refer to as hoarding power, but not really thinking beyond that. And again, it becomes an optical thing versus an actual... Because for me, a good organization would have more horizontal structures, but that's not the case. These organizations, these liberal LGBTQ organizations, they keep adding more hierarchy, and it's just— yeah. So, I mean, I could go on and on about LGBTQ organizations and the 'gay inc.' industry, but, yeah, so, but I just think, yeah, but even there's a, there's even a subset of spas, spaces that are 'trans inc.', and even I'm not into that. Like, I just think, I feel like we keep replicating these systems that we vow to escape from, but they keep being replicated, even in these non-profit settings, which, again, I don't think non-profit settings are at all freedom-based.

Silverman: Have you found any groups that you feel more aligned to?

Khan: It's hard because I think, I mean, my therapist weighs in. I think I'm just a little bit of a pessimistic person based on life experiences, but I don't think my pessimism is like, oh, I want to tear... I just think we can think of alternate structures. And I do think I have community who do think that way and that I just don't think we have the resources, really, to set up those alternate structures.

Silverman: And when you were talking about horizontal, like a format, what other ways that you would think to organize labor that would help function differently?

Khan: Yeah, I mean, I think outside of any 501(c)(3) setting, any collective that I've been part of, I mean, those are all horizontal. The decision-making, those worked a lot better.

Silverman: And what collectives were those?

Khan: One I can't name because it is a political South Asian collective, and I can't name it because there's actual repercussions against this collective because we organize against Brahmanism, which is a form of caste-based discrimination in South Asia and in the diaspora.

So, it's called Brahmanism. I mean, yes, we talk about white supremacy in this country, but I think Brahmanism is a very poisonous element in a lot of South Asia, not just South Asian circles. It is actually one of the oldest systems of oppression in the world. It stems from Hinduism and the caste pyramid that emerged from that, or it actually dictates Hinduism, actually, the caste pyramid. So that's also what I've been doing, actually, since the 2014, 2015 era, like organizing with others, progressive South Asian, queer, trans, and also heterosexual people against casteism and Brahmanism. So that has been also part of how my transness got formed as a Muslim trans person that, oh, I need to see beyond Brahmanism and, you know, a few might kill me, but we have people like Alok, for example. They are, I guess what some would say, a towering figure in the South Asian non-binary. I do really love their takes on, again, healing and other forms of, just again, their takes on gender identity. One critique that has emerged from various South Asian queer trans actors, they don't talk about their caste position, their positionality. They are a Brahmin, their family is of Brahmin origin, and that is the oppressor caste in South Asia and India. So, they do talk about it sparingly. So, I think that's where I'm like, who is uplifted even in the South Asian trans community? And from what I can tell, it's mostly been upper caste South Asian trans people. And these include folks like Alok and other people. And you would never see a Bangladeshi or a Nepalese or an Afghan trans, you know, media personality. So again, there are also so many hierarchies in the South Asian trans circles that I'm not trying to organize against that. I think all trans people deserve safety and all that. But I do think it is a conversation that needs to happen that isn't really happening on a wider scale. And yeah, I mean, these are, I guess what some would say hot takes, but it's really not. There are critiques of upper caste trans people who just have the platforms and hasn't really shown any meaningful contribution to other trans. So, the lowest caste in the South Asia is Dalit, the untouchable. And there's so many Dalit trans people in Maladesh, in India, in Pakistan, even here to some degree, not as much because you do need wealth and resources to migrate to this country to some degree, which I had access to and that I'm upfront on that. Yes, I did have some class positionality that helped me migrate here. I didn't live here all my life, but it did help me because I had some connections. So, whereas other trans people here grew up here, South Asian trans people, most of them Indian, upper caste, their families are massively wealthy. But I don't think that gets talked about, really, about caste or class.

Silverman: But within your organizing group, it is.

Khan: It is, and we don't have upper caste people in that collective, really. We're all either Muslim or Dalit or Kashmiri. So, there's that. I mean, it is still a handful of people, though, who are trying to talk about these things or organize. When there's atrocities happening in South Asia, this collective is the only one who at least does something in the public sphere, either in a park here or somewhere. So, there's that. And then I used to at least participate

with Take Back the Bronx or Decolonize This Place. Some of them, to some degree. There was the museum tour that happened with Decolonize This Place. It was the Natural History Museum. It's like a decolonize— it was Indigenous People's Day. So, I was involved in that. My collective, so one of the speakers was me and someone else. So, I do think the South Asian Political Collective, I'm part of that. I mean, I've been with it for many years. I want to leave, essentially, at a point, because I feel like other people should do some work because I'm getting old.

So, there's that. So, I feel like that's a hierarchical structure. It's always been that way. And then I used to be part of South Asia Diasporic Artist Collective. That kind of faded away, again, due to— it was horizontal decision-making, but I think because caste was such an issue in that collective, like there were a lot of upper-caste people dominating the space, I think that's why the collective didn't last for too long. So, there's that. I mean, obviously, but I would say at least while— whatever spaces that are non-501(c)(3), I don't think there was ever a hierarchy in those, as far as I can tell. Yeah.

Silverman: Do you have an idea of where you'd want to go after this job, or is this just kind of a holding space now?

Khan: I don't know. I feel like I... I don't know if I'm biding my time. No, I'm not biding my time. I'm just like... I don't know. Ideally, I'd like to... Again, I want to work on my book, and then I want to work on this documentary. Then I want to work on... I feel like a job is a job that pays the bills, and I just need time outside of the job to do my personal hobbies.

Silverman: I know we're going to wrap up soon, but you just mentioned the book. Would you just— Would you be able to just speak about the gist of it?

Khan: No, I don't... I mean, I can't really speak to it, because I barely started it due to lack of time, but it is a novel. I'm not really into the trans— I do, I do respect the trans memoir, but I just don't think I want to participate in that type of storytelling, because I do think the trans memoir becomes like this— not all. I do think there are some really great trans memoirs, books, but I think a lot of it has become objects of consumption for a lot of cis people to understand, oh, *what does trans mean?* How can I engage with trans people? I just... I do think the trans memoir, I'm sure, will hopefully evolve more and more, but I do think... Yeah, I'm kind of a little bit opposed to the trans memoir, because I just don't think there's an end point to a memoir, which seems to be the case for some books that I've read. So... But for me, I'm more interested in the novel structure and the fictional elements.

Silverman: Okay. I really hope you get time and space to work on that.

Khan: Thank you. I hope so, too. Yeah.

Silverman: And is there anything else you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Khan: No. I think I did talk about Bangladesh a little bit, but nothing I said will ever capture

the full essence of my time in Bangladesh, both the painful parts and the good parts. So, I just think— you know, it is— It's always going to be like, okay, when... Part of me is also like, when can I return back? Because the last time I was back was in 2017, after my mother's death. So, that's always on my mind. Like, when can I return and not be shackled by my past, you know? So, there's that.

Silverman: I wish you would return when it feels right for you.

Khan: Yeah. Thank you.

Silverman: Thank you.