

“FINDING MY IDENTITY”

FOR LESSON

*Listening as
a Creative Act*NARRATOR **Mohammed Fayaz**

FAYAZ I remember days where my parents would have folks over, and I would be going out. And I would, like, wear a hoodie and jeans. And then I would go to, like, our lobby, our little foyer. And then I would, like, take off my hoodie and my pants and put on my shorts and T-shirt and then leave them in the lobby, go out, come home, and put them back on before I went back inside. Crazy. And I know my sister has memories of when she had her acting-out phase. I know that she would take off her **hijab** before — like, would wear it out the house and then, like, take it off.

And so, little things like that, and we're talking about, like, ten, eleven years old, twelve years old, so not even like anything to, like, judge or anything. And, not that it should ever be judged, but to know that, like, a young person finding their identity in, like, a time of your life where, like, of course the world feels like it's falling apart and you have no idea who you are. But, you think you know everything. So, the clearest answer to me was, like, oh, well, my parents who should be loving me unconditionally, because this is what, like, gay white culture and media has taught me is that, like, come out to your parents. Live in your truth. Live in your light.

Or, like, your parents should love you unconditionally. If they don't love you, that tells you everything you need to know. This kind of idea of, like — and, like, in media, as you're sort of seeing more and more LGBT culture, it's always like the evil parents who kicked their kids out. And so, I had no model for — like, it was bad enough that I wasn't in med school already. And so, to know that I already had this other thing that's going to be extremely disappointing — and I've always had a strong personality in the sense of, like, what's right and wrong.

RUN TIME **4:38****HIJAB**a headscarf
worn by Muslim
women.

And to know that I felt like I was being treated unfairly and wrong, it — sparks started flying in, like, the worst way between my mom and I.

And we would bump heads a lot. I would go out — when I first started going out — oh, actually, I remember — this is fun. I remember going to my first Pride, 17, with that person I had a crush on and some of our friends, and coming home super late at night. And so, I probably got home around, like, 11, which is kind of late for a 17-year-old from my family at the time. And my sister banged on my door and was like, “Where were you?” And I was like, “I was out.” And she was like, “Where were you today?” And I was like, “I was out with my friends. We were in the city.”

And, I, like, went to, like, slam the door shut because I was like I’m not doing this. Like, you’re not my mother. Like, I’m not doing this game with you. I’m not playing this game with you. And then, going back and forth a lot, and then eventually, like, she had gotten the door open just enough. And then she was like, “You are a disgrace to my parents.” And she spit in my face. And I was 17. And so, I remember, like, very — and my sister and I have always had a difficult relationship. And it didn’t get better until she got married and left the house. We started to, like — and then she had kids and we started to understand, like, okay, like, for the sake of, like, these children or for the sake of, like, you who have just gotten married, let’s work on — let’s work on this.

But, at that time, 17, my older sister just spit in my face and told me I was like a disgrace. And my parents are having these, like, conversations with me. And my brother, I’m not really, like, that close with at the time, only because he’s 21 and going through his own shit and so not having, like, not really having anything at home, like, keeping — making me feel nurtured or comfortable or secure or loved, these things that are, like, really, really crucial for anyone, just put a straight fork in the road.

And even though my name is Mohammed and I was introducing myself as that to everyone, I just knew that me and Islam right now are not it. It's not happening. None of my friends were religious. I didn't know any queer Muslims. I didn't know any gay Muslims. Maybe there were — if I were to go out, there would be, like, an Arab go-go boy. And that was, like, my closest relationship to Islam and, like, and anyone gay. And so, just really difficult. I think, yeah, there were, like, reality shows and stuff, and nothing real, nothing substantial, nothing I could relate to. And so, it's actually really sad when I think about it now because, like, those things — like, any teenager is going to have that moment with their parents, whether it's who they're dating or if they've started drinking, if they want to go away for college, if they — whatever it is. And so, it just sucks because that was my version with my parents. And so, at some point around when I started to kind of go abstinent and then kind of pursue happiness or sense of self, I had learned to forgive my parents for those interactions.

And as I started to understand the world at large and this world and this society being the product of, like, men having manipulated and abused a lot of things, including religion, I started to understand that, like, my parents are — love me, first of all. They only want the best for me. For my parents to not want me to be gay is for them not to want me to go to hell. For them, it's a simple equation: You're gay. If you act on it, you're going to hell, simple as that. For people who love me who want to spend eternity with me in the afterlife, who want me to have an easy life here on this earth, like, queerness, gayness, doesn't compute. There's no room for it. It doesn't make any sense.

BIO Mohammed Fayaz was born in 1990 in Brooklyn. He was raised in the Jamaica Estates and Middle Village neighborhoods in Queens. As a young adult, he channeled his creativity into art, with a particular focus on depicting people of color. He created early promotional materials for the group Papi Juice, which was founded to celebrate queer and trans people of color, and became one of their core organizers.

CITATION Fayaz, Mohammed, Excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, October 22, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.52; Brooklyn Historical Society.