

## “PUBLIC SPACES”

## FOR LESSON

*Belonging  
in Brooklyn*NARRATOR **Shahana Hanif**

**HANIF** For me, public space is everything, because having the stoop wasn't enough for me. Like, I wanted to have more. I wanted to have a park. I wanted to have, you know, just games. I wanted to, like, own the park. I just — and I wanted to be there all the time.

And I remember we had such limited hours for being outside. And so, like, just a curfew, but like also if we happened to go back inside for any reason, like, oh, we got thirsty, or we had to use the bathroom, my mom would get really tight.

And she'd be like, “No, you can't go back outside now. Like, you came back in. Like, stop coming in and out.” And, so she would always make a fuss. So we did the most to really stay outdoors. And we just loved it. And, for me that's still true, where I love being outdoors. I love having access to public space that is especially centered to meeting those very needs of the fact that many people, especially Black and Brown people, have not had access to public spaces in which they're not criminalized.

So, during — right before Avenue C Plaza became an institutionalized thing, it was just an empty lot. And, I had seen it — I had always seen empty lots as opportunities. So, there was — this was in 2015 or 2014, where there were a number of child killings in Bangladesh. And around that same timeline was also the killing of several Bangladeshi atheists — atheists and other thinkers and bloggers who many felt were writing in contradiction to Islam according to the sort of, like, hegemony.

And, we — a few of us activists were like, “We want to respond to these attacks on bloggers and thinkers and writers.” But we also felt that our own lives would

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be threatened by it, and especially in a place like Kensington, where there are so many mosques, that we could potentially, as women, gender-nonconforming, queer group, we could put ourselves in danger. And so, we then were like maybe it's time to just activate our people in a different light and talk about abuse that happens to children and just young bodies, young bodies who are in poverty. And a big focus for us during that protest was also recognizing the ways in which Facebook and other social media are used to make abusive issues and violent scenes go viral. And so we took it upon ourselves to do political education on the plaza. This wasn't a plaza yet. It was just the empty lot. We just called it the triangle. And had invited, you know, everybody to come but mainly Bangladeshis from across the boroughs to listen to us and to become activated and respond. And so, the first half was just conversation and dialogue, all of which we presented in Bangla. And then we did a rally in the neighborhood. And, for me that was the first I had seen that, like, a rally take place with the issue that concerns Bangladeshis. And, it gave me hope that we care. People aren't silent. But people need an activator. And, the political education can be done. But it's going to take time.

And at that time I also learned, like, right before the protest rally took place, a few of us were doing outreach on the ground and speaking with people who are on the strip of McDonald Avenue, which is the concentration of Kensington's Bangladeshis. And, they're all men. So, throughout my life I've seen this, like, image of men occupying Kensington and occupying spaces that are restaurants, spaces that are, you know, salons, doctors' offices, and loitering. Like, this is — their space that they have not been told that it's their space, but they've known that this is their space.

And so we were doing some outreach, giving out flyers and, like, trying to reach what we thought was, you know, our base. And it was so difficult because, one, realizing that, wow, like, these men have this space to freely, like, just take over and eat and enjoy and meet their friends after work and, like, do whatever they like. The second thing was recognizing that, on one hand, we were trying to reach the masses. So this meant men who were also potentially catcalling and harassing us while we were on our way to, you know, work or school.

And for me, like, that was a huge learning curve because I was like, wow, like, the organizing I'm interested in takes into consideration that a person in the room might be a harasser but also is impacted by immigration or is also impacted by child abuse. Like, how do I hold these nuances and do the work I want to do for my neighborhood, for myself? And so, I felt really committed to staying in Kensington despite all of these sort of like contradictions of, like, not belonging, feeling like I didn't belong.

And then, the other piece of outreach was realizing that it was hard to reach the younger folks and women. And that is still a battle for me right now where I'm like, you know, if we invest in more public spaces or, you know, centers, community centers, it'll really break the status quo. And it might be messy. It will be messy. But it's necessary.

**BIO** Shahana Hanif was born in 1991 in Brooklyn and was raised in Kensington’s Bangladeshi community. After a health crisis as a teenager led to a diagnosis of lupus, she went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in women’s and gender studies from Brooklyn College. While there, she became involved in intersectional activism and community organizing, especially with the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and Naree Shongothok: Bangladeshi Women Organizing for Social Change. Hanif has worked as director of organizing and community engagement for New York City Council Member Brad Lander.

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