

“RACIAL STRIFE IN THE CITY”

FOR LESSON

*Belonging
in Brooklyn*

NARRATOR **Fahiyim Abdul-Wasi**



ALI But you were still living in Crown Heights?

RUN TIME **8:19**

ABDUL-WASI Yes, still living in Crown Heights.

ALI So how —how is it that — because I — for people who may not be familiar —

ABDUL-WASI Sure.

ALI — with how schooling districting —

ABDUL-WASI Sure, sure.

ALI — and stuff works. How is it that you were living in Crown Heights but then going to school in Bensonhurst?

ABDUL-WASI That’s an excellent question. So I — I forget, like, how the whole thing — how we got in there in the first place, you know. But I remember us being bused to Bensonhurst. We had to take a bus in fifth grade to my public school, me and my brother, and also we had some local kids in our area that went to the same school. So we got bused there. But there was one time that we missed the bus, and, you know, we — it was like, “Well, how are we going to get to school?” But we had a girl in our group. Her name was Cheyenne. You know, respect to Cheyenne. She was like, “I know how to get to school.” And we literally just followed her, you know. So it was, like, about seven of us little kids following Cheyenne to the 3 train, [laughter] then to the B train, to get to school. I said — I was like, whoa. And, you know, rid— we rode the trains before, but not without our parents. But by ourselves, it was like another world, you know. So — and we was like, “Yo, let’s just take the train to school from now on.” You know? So — but we — we mixed it in. But sixth grade, we were bused as well, early on, but I think

they stopped it after two or three months, and we just got train passes and went to school. But I forget the dynamics. Actually, I have to ask my parents about that, like, how did that work? Yeah.

ALI So you mentioned by the time you went to middle school, or junior high school —

ABDUL-WASI Yes.

ALI — there was strife going on.

ABDUL-WASI Absolutely.

ALI So tell me what that was.

ABDUL-WASI Sure, sure. There was a lot of racial strife going on in the city. You know, New York City, for those who may not remember, was in the throes of a major recession in the mid-'70s. And a lot of things got cut back, programs, services. The blackout of 1977. I think there was a — another mild, you know, recession in the early '80s. So, like, you know, things were very tense. The trains were always packed, you know. And — and you just felt a lot of tension in the city. So as, you know, things were happening on Wall Street, you know — I mean, I was like 11, 12. I didn't know what was going on. You know, they're rising in fortunes, but still a lot of the depressed areas of the city still under pressure.

So it was — the situation first started with Eleanor Bumpurs, a Black woman who got killed by police in her apartment in the Bronx. So that — this is, like, '84. Michael Stewart, around the same time, was another young man, a graffiti artist. Police killed him in a train station, I believe. So these are things I'm aw— being, you know, becoming aware of. But I think the thing that kind of really blew my mind open, in terms of what's really going on, is Bernhard Goetz. Bernhard

Goetz was considered, you know, this vigilante, because, you know, some young brothers — and this is to — to give you a backdrop of what was going on in New York City, like, like, crime was everywhere, you know, and, like, mugging was like breathing, you know. So it was typical to see young youth, you know, just walking in between the cars and, like, robbing people, especially in Brooklyn, you know. So that's where — you know, “Crooklyn” is — [laughter] the nickname “Crooklyn” comes from Brooklyn — you know, that goes back to the '70s, you know. So just robbing — marauding bands of youth robbing people, so... But that was very — that was a daily occurrence, if you will. You know, people lurking around certain dark corners in the city. Times Square, all types of ill repute, if you will.

But, but, yeah, so, allegedly, these youths accosted Bernhard Goetz, and he pulled out a revolver and shot them, I think three of them. And there were, like, a lot of, you know — a lot of animus, a lot of angst, you know, about that situation. A lot of people were riding for Bernhard Goetz, because they was like, you know, “These youths are, you know, are, you know, an example of what's going on in the city. The city's lawless, and somebody got to stand up, and...” But other activists were painting another picture, and — which was consistent in terms of the discussions that were going on in my home, as well as family's home, my — my other family in their homes, and other friends of the family, you know, in terms of, “Yeah, you know — you know, we don't like crime, but, you know, you know, typecasting young Black men like that, as animals, and —” Because it was, like, a language that was painting young, you know, Black men as, you know, just lawless animals that need to be, you know, shot in the pasture somewhere. So that was, like — this is 1985, and this was what was piquing my interest.

Then it was the Howard Beach incident. Howard Beach was Michael Griffith.

So that was a turning point for me, you know, in terms of, like, my budding racial consciousness, if you will. Because I was the type of kid that, even in fifth grade, you know, you know, I was the type of child that — because I’m hearing things in my home, and visiting my relatives, and, like, things like “Black is beautiful” stuck with me, you know. So I remember one time in the fifth grade, in the — in the cafeteria, I said — somebody said something to a girl, “You Black.” But I said, “Yeah, but Black is beautiful.” You know, so — and they stopped, you know.

So I remember being in seventh grade and in my history class, I had a white teacher. He happened to be Jewish. And he said something — we were talking about, like, the civil rights movement. And, you know, you talked about Dr. King a lot. You know, we — we have utmost respect and love for Dr. King, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And I said, “But what about Malcolm X?” And the whole class got quiet, you know. So — because I only knew who Malcolm X was because of, my uncle Yusuf had a picture of him, like, lying on his table. So I read — it was like a card, and I read it, you know. So — so the teacher basically just, like, goes off. Like, paints Malcolm X like a Black devil, if you will. You know, so I said, I was like, “Okay,” you know.

So — but the Michael Griffith incident, you know, where him and his — I believe his uncle — they were in Howard Beach. And during this time, in the ’80s, you know, I could tell from personal experience, like, certain, like, Italian neighborhoods, like, they would let you know, like, you know, “You’ve got until, like, 7:30, and then you’ve got to be out of here.” You know? So that was the climate in certain neighborhoods throughout the city. But in Brooklyn, yeah, in Bensonhurst, and in Howard Beach, which is in Queens, it was, like, yeah, after a certain time, you’ve got to get out of here, because, you know, something’s

going to happen to you. These cats will chase you, and — and that was a regular occurrence, you know.

I remember being at — even as a Black youth, I — I got on with everybody, you know, people of different racial or ethnic nationalities. And I would go visit their homes. And I remember that one time it got kind of close, and I’m in a schoolyard, hanging with my friends, and it was, like, older white guys, or teenagers, you know, and they — one of them said something. He’s like, “Yeah, it’s about that time, man. You know, you got to get going.” And that was the signal, you know. Because I felt — it’s starting to get dark and [laughter] everything, so I was like, “Yeah, let me go jump on this train.” I was like, “All right, Tommy, I’ll see you tomorrow.” [laughter] You know, because they gave me the signal. It was, like, yeah, you know.

So — but, yeah, Michael Griffith, Howard Beach incident. Him being chased across a highway and got hit by an oncoming car, by these white youths or young adults. That set off a firestorm in the city, yeah.

BIO Fahiyim Abdul-Wasi was born in 1973 in New York City. He grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. Since adolescent, he has explored different Muslim traditions throughout his teenage and adult years, including the Five Percent Nation, the Ansaaru Allah Community, the Nation of Islam, and Sufism. Abdul-Wasi’s work as a hip-hop journalist has been featured in a variety of publications and he served as the editor-in-chief of music magazine *The Source* under the byline Joshua Fahiyim Ratcliffe.

CITATION Abdul-Wasi, Fahiyim, excerpt from oral history interview conducted by Zaheer Ali, August 07, 2018, Muslims in Brooklyn oral histories, 2018.006.25; Brooklyn Historical Society.