

## Oral History Interview: Ibrahim Farajaje

Interviewee: Ibrahim Farajaje

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

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Monique M. To get us started, as I mentioned, I'm going to start at the beginning. My first question I usually start with is just getting a sense of where you grew up and what that experience was like.

Ibrahim F. Well, I grew up in Berkeley, California in the '50s and the '60s, so I grew up in a pocket of the world, in the San Francisco Bay area, where I think I probably experienced more openness to difference growing up there than people I know who grew up in other places, because when I talk about things from my childhood, people are like, "Wow, you *did* grow up in Berkeley." So I grew up with a sense and experience of religious diversity, of linguistic diversity, of being surrounded by people of different racial, ethnic backgrounds, languages. I mean, I grew up multilingual from childhood, so yeah, I had an experience of living in differences, and it was just a positive thing for me. It wasn't anything rare or exotic, that was just the world I grew up in.

I grew up in religious communities where I never heard anything homophobic. I didn't know, for example, the whole thing that African descent religious people were supposed to be really homophobic and were

always ranting and raving in the pulpit about it. I never, ever heard anything, absolutely nothing.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. So I felt, you know, I never had any sense, as I developed as a religious scholar, that...how can I say? I didn't have that background, like I didn't have the background of hearing hate preaching or anything like that, so I never had anything that impinged on my core being from early on. I just didn't have that. So I was kind of like this free spirit.

And I remember when I got to – I know I'm jumping ahead a little bit – but I remember when I got to university and I would be talking with friends, and they were like, “Well, you can't do that or you can't say that,” and I was like, “Well, why?” They were like, “Well, what religion are you? Haven't you ever heard” A, B, and C and they would trot out the standard phrases. And I was like, “No, I've never heard that. Never, ever heard it.”

So I think that was like a really important part, and having multiple religious exposures growing up in a family that was religiously mixed, and an extended family that was religiously mixed, too. I mean, everything was like kind of, you know, Berkeley upper middle class people of color progressive. That was the world I grew up in.

Monique M. That is certainly a very different background from the majority of the interviews that I've done. One thing I realize I forgot to do is to start us off with today is February 23, 2011. My name is Monique Moultrie and I'm here with Dr. Ibrahim Farajaje, and we've just covered his growing up in Berkeley. I'm going to go a little deeper and ask you some details about the neighborhood you grew up in. You described it as very diverse and multi religious, multilingual. Was it upper class, middle class? What kind of home environment did you have?

Ibrahim F. Well, the neighborhood that I grew up in was a mixed class neighborhood. I'm trying to remember. There were...well, down the street lived my, I usually say, play aunt and uncle. He was the first African American Supreme Court Justice in California, and they lived three houses down. I mean, it was...yeah, it was a very mixed class neighborhood. I probably didn't know what everybody's class background was then, but... And it was racially mixed. At that time it's an area that would be considered West Berkeley, which is now very trendy, but it wasn't then.

And I grew up in that neighborhood because my father made a political decision that he wanted us to not grow up as elitists, and that he wanted us to grow up in a neighborhood where we would experience a lot of things that most African American people, mixed heritage brown people living in the barrio would experience. So we didn't live in the hills. We could have lived in the hills, but we didn't live in the hills. We lived in what

they call the flats, in the flatlands, and went to probably one of the worst elementary schools in the city.

There was still de facto racial segregation then in Berkeley, and I went to a school that was like 98% brown kids, and we were Fijian, African American, mixed, Latino, Pacific Islander, Japanese, Chinese. I know there was one Italian guy in my class all the way through school, but it was a very brown school, and we didn't necessarily get the best teachers or the best materials in the city. And I didn't realize...I mean, I didn't know anything until I was in the second grade and I went to – because I went to summer school. I've been a geek all my life, so I went to summer school. I loved to go to summer school. That was fun for me.

And in the second grade in summer school, we were doing a science focus, and I realized that the white kids knew way more stuff than I knew. A lot of them were children of people who worked in the labs at the University of California and went to schools that were closer to the university and in the hills, where they had teaching aides or teachers' assistants, or whatever they were called, who came from the university, who taught there. So that's when I realized, like, okay, they're getting a totally different education than I am and we're all in the same city.

But my parents, being very, like, were education activists. I mean, I come from a very activist family as well. And so when I took my activist turn, they weren't at all surprised, because it was just completely in my genes.

But my parents were really involved in the stuff with the school board. They were very involved in the school and very present in the school, sometimes to my embarrassment. I'd say, "Oh my god, here comes my mother again." But I learned a lot from that. Now that I'm older, I really appreciate it, and learned a lot about advocacy and how you just have to stay on stuff. And that's how they were. They were really involved in our educational life and saw to it that we had tutors. We had a tutor that we went to on...I went to on Saturday mornings and spent the morning with this tutor, who kind of like kept me ahead in everything. Then I had the language tutor that I went to as well, so it was a really strong emphasis on educational excellence.

Monique M. What language were you studying?

Ibrahim F. Then I was studying Spanish, because I've spoken Spanish since I was a kid. And I started French at that same time, and then because I was doing five million other things, I dropped it and resumed French when I went to middle school, and it's become effectively my second language because I did my doctoral studies in French-speaking Switzerland.

I want to say also that in my home, from my parents I received a very strong sense of the importance of social justice and self-definition, self-determination. And a message that they constantly repeated and modeled for me is you cannot let yourself be defined by other people, and if you want to do something that doesn't fit other people's image of what you

should be doing, if that's what you want to do, you go ahead and you do it, and don't let anybody stop you. So that also, I realized later on, when I started counseling people, it's like, okay, that's a very different scenario in which I grew up. But I also feel that these things kind of happened for me to help me do what I would have to do later on with my life. Yeah, and then—

Monique M. Now...oh, go ahead.

Ibrahim F. I was going to say it was like also because of living in Berkeley with the university there, we would have, you know, sometimes like there was some kind of program, I don't know, that my parents were connected to where a foreign student would come for dinner, and so I could get exposed to other cultures in that way, and started dreaming about, oh, I want to go to this country, I want to go to that country, I want to see this, I want to see that.

Monique M. When I was doing the research for the questions I was going to ask, what came up was your multiethnic background, and so I was wondering if you could speak a bit about that and how that formed you as a child growing up in multiple familial cultures.

Ibrahim F. Yeah. Thank you for asking that, because both of my parents are mixed heritage, and I grew up... So I grew up in this family with this whole range of colors and faces and hair and everything, and for a long time I just thought everybody's family was like that. I didn't know...I wasn't

socialized with any kind of color distinctions, like I never heard anybody in my family describe somebody by their skin color, a person of color. I never heard them say, like, “Oh, so-and-so is dark-skinned, or so-and-so is light-skinned,” or what have you. And I grew up really close to my maternal grandmother, because she had actually moved to California when I was born, and she, herself, is first generation born in the United States, and I was really, really close to her, and everybody said that I was her favorite grandchild. I mean, she was legally marked on her...well, on one certificate it said that she was white, another certificate said she was colored.

And again, I got like this fierce lesson from her because one day I was with her, I was at her house, because I would always spend my free time, go spend my free time with her. And she was a great oral historian, so I learned a lot of my family history just from sitting with her listening to stories. So this was like a big lesson for me, what I’m going to tell you now. I was sitting in her dining room, and someone had come, like the Avon lady or something like that, but it was a white person, and engaged in conversation with my grandmother as though my grandmother were a white person. And since she felt like, oh, okay, in the comfort of other white people, this woman started saying really negative things about people of color. And my grandmother just like gave her a couple of minutes, and then she told her, she said, “Do you see that young man

sitting over there? That's my grandson." She said, "I can be whatever color I want to be, but what you need to be is out of my house right now."

And I had several experiences like that with her, where she would tell me, like, oh, someone said, "Oh, would you ever let your daughter marry one of them?" And she'd be like, "My daughter is one of them. I am one of them, too." So I learned a lot about, like, you know, not passing. When you can actually pass, choosing to not pass, and the power of that as a political thing. I mean, I think that's really kind of... Whenever I think of my grandmother, and I miss her still today, and she died in the '80s, I just think of that, like the fierceness of this mixed woman just – *boof* – saying "I can be what I want to be."

And when I will start to think about bisexual identity – and I don't like the term bisexual anymore. It makes me very uncomfortable because I don't like the binary in it. And I'm getting ready to write a piece about that, actually, for this new bi anthology that's coming out. But when I think about her saying I'm not going to be confined in one identity because I am more than that, that was one of those deep, deep lessons that goes in. I think I was maybe 11 years old when I witnessed that. And it got really downloaded. I mean, it was in there. It was totally in my heart, in my being, and it still is.

And so I think that also, like growing up in this multiethnic, multi religious family, too, just gave me a sense of...a sense that there can

always be more, that there can always be more. The heart can always be more expansive, because that was just what I...that's just what I experienced. On both sides of my family, too, with their humor and their quirks and particularities and what have you, but their...I mean, I learned a lot especially from, at one point, especially just from the wisdom of the women on both sides of my family. And then as I got older, starting to discover all of my uncles and everything, and entering into more mature relationship with them and listening to them talk, listening to my father talk about what it was like to grow up mixed when you couldn't be mixed. He says, "You all and my grandchildren, you all have the possibility to identify as mixed." He said, "I didn't have that. You were just one thing." But we always knew that we were. He would talk about that. And now he just identifies as being of mixed heritage, which is kind of cool, because he's 70 something and very vocal about that.

And one of my friends from ACT UP, who was in D.C., this was in the '90s and my mom was in town, and I witnessed this really sweet moment, because he said to my mom – because he was mixed heritage – he said to my mother, "I don't have a lot of role models. I don't ever get to really talk to anybody, so can I talk to you? What was it like for you being mixed heritage growing up?" And they had this really sweet conversation, and she was just like, "Just be. Just be." And that made a really deep impression on him, and he just fell in love with my mother from that moment on.

Monique M. [Beautiful.]

Ibrahim F. Yeah, yeah. No, I'm really...I'm just so grateful. I taught at Howard for ten years and worked in the HIV industry in the trenches, and I heard so many horror stories, like some people just growing up with horror story after horror story, and just feeling such deep gratitude for the experiences that I had had, that sometimes, of course, I took for granted because it's like, oh, that's just my life, it's just my family, it's just, you know, it's nothing special. But I do realize what a great thing it was, what a great thing it was for me to be able to march in ACT UP with my mother, who still talks today about demonstrating at the White House. [Laughs.] You know, so...

Monique M. Now, you mentioned your extended family, aunts and uncles. Do you have siblings?

Ibrahim F. Yeah, I do. I have siblings of birth origin and I have, like, adopted siblings as well.

Monique M. So where do you fall in the mix? Are you a middle kid, older kid, younger kid?

Ibrahim F. I'm the first.

Monique M. And so growing up with, it sounds like, an extended family around you. What would you say, other than this sense of forming your own identity, were key values that were present from your family?

Ibrahim F. Educational excellence, development of leadership skills, public speaking, the arts, and a sense of responsibility to community. Like a strong message from...I mean, from all of them, because everybody reinforced that. And a strong message was don't ever forget where you came from. And that was a strong...that was a really strong message from them. And obviously – [*laughs*] – I took it to heart. But yeah, I mean, those things were, like the educational excellence and the public speaking were big values.

And I think I got a lot of affirmation in the family, in the extended, in the whole cycle, circle of the family because of doing really well in school and playing the violin, being well mannered, etc. and so forth. And I think that yeah, I mean, I got a lot of...I think people were very proud of me as a child of color in that world at that time. And I've become more and more aware of that as I become older because the older people tell me things about when I was young that they remember, you know, an emotion that they had or something like that. So some things I didn't even realize at the time that later on, you know, it was like, "Oh, do you remember when you got such-and-such an award and we did this and that, and we were so proud of you, and we called back to the old country and told everybody." And a lot of those things I didn't remember all those details, but...

I mean, I think that some of these people thought I also was a little, just a little bit of an oddball because I was rather shy and quiet, and just bookish.

I preferred to be in the house reading or playing piano or violin or something like that. I was not a big athlete. Although I did play Little League for three years. [*Laughs.*] I spent a lot of time on the bench. I was very good friends with the bench. You know that expression somebody's way out in left field? Well, that was the position that I had, and I would just be daydreaming when I was out there, so it was good that they put me way out there 'cause if anything came my way, I was just in another world.

Monique M. Now, I've asked about sort of your forming as your environment, your neighborhood, your interpersonal relationships with your family. You mentioned that you grew up in a multi religious environment. Can you speak about that some? What were the major faith traditions that you came in contact with?

Ibrahim F. What I came in contact with in my, let's say, before I was...up until 13?

Monique M. Yes.

Ibrahim F. Up until 13 it was various forms of Christianity, so Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish. There were Jewish people in our extended family or in my parents' circle of friends or what have you, but everybody was aunt and uncle. I grew up going to different religious celebrations and participating in different things with different relatives or cousins or what have you, and going to bar mitzvahs and that kind of thing.

When I was 13, I came into contact with Islam because I was in boarding school in California and my math master was a Palestinian Muslim, actually, who had been educated by Quakers. And that's where I got my in-depth exposure to Islam. I mean, I was familiar with Islam and of course we talked about it at home with the Nation and everything. I remember having a long talk with my dad when I was maybe like, I don't know, nine years old or ten years old, asking him what he thought about the Nation of Islam.

And then later on, of course, being in the Bay Area, I mean, I think I used to...we used to go fairly regularly to a festival that commemorates the dead at a Buddhist temple that was near where we lived, because my father also had a very mixed circle of friends from when he had gone to college in San Francisco, and so he had also deep connections in certain parts of the Asian community in the Bay Area. So I was just like, oh, religion is fun. [*Laughs.*] From jump that was my...it's, oh, religion is fun. And that's how I experienced it. I mean, I loved to go. If somebody asked me to go somewhere to some kind of service or ceremony or something, I was right there. Huh? Hello?

Monique M. Oh, I was asking...I thought there was someone in your background. I was asking did you profess a particular faith perspective while you were young, or were you just visiting? Were you baptized or confirmed or something like that?

Ibrahim F. I mean, as a child my parents had me baptized. But I didn't ever have...I had no personal sense of belonging to one particular thing, because they also inculcated in me very early on all the paths lead to God, all paths lead to the divine, one religion is not better than another one. And they were like this is what we are, and other people are other things. I think they were particularly involved in a religious community where they had...sort of my father, a very strong attachment to the leader of the community. And this was a congregation of middle, upper middle, upper class people of African descent, mostly. So they were involved in that community, but when he left, I know my father's participation started to dwindle, and he kind of, from then on, detached from any kind of organized religious practice.

And then I think little by little, by then I was 13, I was at boarding school and would come home on the weekend every once in a while. And when I was in boarding school I was in heaven because it was like I organized the religion club and we would go around to different places, like on Friday night go to a synagogue nearby and, oh, it's Greek Orthodox Easter this week, and let's go to the Greek church in Oakland. So it was just all open for me.

Monique M. That's a pretty eclectic religious experience. So you said you were exposed to Islam at 13. Did that plant some seeds of interest or were you still just really open to everything and gathering data?

Ibrahim F. Yeah, I was gathering data and I really liked...I really liked what my teacher said about Islam, and it really resonated with me really deeply. And of course I had just read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* which, you know, the 21<sup>st</sup> was his death anniversary and it just dawned on me the other day because I've been putting a lot of stuff on Facebook about him. But I really liked the idea of sort of, you know, he always said, my professor, my teacher always said Islam is about justice, equality and love, and that was how he was describing it to me in 1966-67, and that also marked the turning point for me because that's when I started to have a particular opinion and started to identify as an anti-Zionist or a pro-Palestinian, because before that I was very pro-Israel.

I was obviously very drawn to, I think, something, although I was a horrible student in his class and I was the only student in his class – [laughs] – which is, I think, maybe why he spent a lot of time talking to me about other things, because geometry was not entering into my network at all. But I would go...our boarding school was kind of like in the country and the teachers taught in their garage. Those were our classrooms. We only had, like, three actual kind of consecrated classrooms. So I would go to his house every morning, and our class started at eight, and he would come and he would bring me breakfast, so we would have this certain kind of yogurt where all the water's been drained out of it. We'd have that with crushed mint and olive oil and

some pita that his wife had made or he had made, and we would have breakfast, and we would just talk.

And so that was the kind of the ambiance of Islam for me, and there was a tenderness and a warmth and a simplicity, where I was like, oh, this is where I belong, because it was like I could hold all the paths and hold that. There was no exclusivity in it in the way that I learned about it from him and the way that I experienced it with him. And I think he would not identify as an observant Muslim at all. But that was the tilt.

It was in, like, right after...at the same time or close to that, because I had a very close friend in boarding school who had sort of like this kind of, I guess through reading Malcolm X and what have you, had gotten very attracted to Islam as well, so once in a while he and I would get together and we would do the Muslim prayer cycle together. And I was like 13, 14, 15, around there. And so I think that planted a very deep seed. And at the same time I was very interested in Buddhism, in Zen Buddhism and meditation and all those things that were kind of coming to the surface in that time period. They all just like engaged me just completely.

And then in the summer of '69, I think, the summer I graduated, this young Hassidic rabbi, who was a musician, came to California and he opened a house, I think in the Haight-Ashbury, called The House of Prayer and Love, or House of Love and Prayer. And he just led these all night services with all this music and dancing and everything. And I never

made it to the house in San Francisco, but I started a correspondence with him. I guess I was just...you know, some people might say I was all over the map, but now, as I look back, I see that all these things were forming my way of perceiving multiple belongings. There were so many multiples in my life, and of course I met people who were like, "Well, you can't be all of those things. You have to pick one thing." And I think at one point I would be like, I was like, okay, I've got to pick a thing. But I couldn't pick anything, so I felt badly because I couldn't pick just...like, you know, what's wrong with me that I can't just pick one thing and be one thing like everybody else? And I think that also, like spiritually and intellectually and psychologically, planted the seed for me, for my thinking to develop in the way that it has about multiple belongings for people, people belonging to multiple communities, and that being fine.

I just gave a keynote address in Atlanta on Saturday on that. That's kind of a message that I have to give to people, that it's okay. And I know it's okay because of my experience, but I also know that a lot of people tell you that it's not okay. So all that was going on. I was reading Thomas Merton. It was just like this frenzy, you know, adolescent spiritual frenzy that I was in, and everything looked good, and everything looked great. And whenever I would try to pick one thing, I would get practically physically ill because I would get so focused and concentrated, like, okay, if I do this, okay, what's their social politics, what's their attitude toward the war in Vietnam? I would go through all of these criteria and do all this

research and what have you. But I was, of course, I was having fun because that was my thing. You know, it really was...that was my life. I mean, it still is – [*laughs*] – so... I would say that the years between 13 and 16 were...spiritually put some things in place that were very significant for me.

And the other piece in that was also that in...the way our school was structured, you finished all your requirements for the state of California in the first two years, and then after that you just took these semester seminars. And I took...because I was advanced in French. I took 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature and 20<sup>th</sup> century French literature, and that was the first time I heard somebody pronounce, “Oh yes, this is a queer writer and these themes come up in his writing,” and so on and so forth. It was just very matter-of-fact. This was way before there was anything like queer studies or LGBTIQA, anything. And these teachers, that’s how they taught French literature. So things that people are still now just writing about, like, oh, discovered these letters of this writer, like I knew about that by the time I was 16.

In fact, when I went to college, I got put in some advanced French class, and I’ll never forget this. The teacher was at the board and he was talking about some writer, maybe it was Proust, maybe Gide, Genet, I don’t remember who it was, and he’d asked us with his back to us, in French, “And why do you think he wrote this particular sentence in the middle of this disquisition on such-and-such a thing?” And I raised my hand I said,

in French, I said, “Well, because he was queer.” And the teacher practically dropped the chalk, and he turned around and he said, “Do you know what you just said?” I said yeah, and he asked me again, “Do you know the meaning of the word you just used?” I said, “Yeah, yeah.” And then I kind of talked a little bit more about the writer. And, I mean, the teacher asked me to come to talk to him afterwards.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. And he was like, “How do you know that? How do you know that?” And I said, “Well, that’s because that’s what I was taught in high school.” And he was like, “Where did you go to school?” [*Laughs.*] And then in my philosophy...I had a philosophy class that I took as a senior, and we read Plato’s *Symposium*, and as a part of that, we had this whole discussion on homosexuality. So my first exposure to people talking about queer stuff was totally positive, and I connected it...it became connected in my mind with the life of the mind, that there was no...I mean, it wasn’t something sleazy or scary or what have you. Here were these...these were topics that could be discussed in a classroom.

I mean, I have to...I keep going back, because this was 1968, 1969, and so that was like kind of a light going off in my head about that, especially the literature and reading Plato’s *Symposium*, because Plato’s *Symposium* has this whole thing about the identical souls. And so it was just like *wow!* It was just this whole door that opened for me. And then with my friends,

we would sit around and, like, talk about it, like, “Wow, gosh, I wonder how that works, you know.” But there was no...I think we were just like educated in a way that completely countered homophobia, without it being a program or a specially constructed curriculum or anything.

Monique M. That’s pretty cool.

Ibrahim F. Huh?

Monique M. I said that’s really cool.

Ibrahim F. Yeah. You know what’s interesting is that a lot of the kids that came out – well, not kids, grownups – but a lot of people that came out of the school in the years that I was there subsequently came out as queer, became well-known queer writers, artists, musicians, what have you. And I think it’s because we grew up in that environment.

Monique M. Awesome. Now, I’m going to move us forward a little to other times. So you graduated from high school and you chose to go to Vassar, which is quite a bit away. Talk to me about that decision and your experience at Vassar and why you chose to be a religion major, etc.

Ibrahim F. Okay. Well, I went, actually, my first year in college I went to Williams. I wanted to go to Columbia because my best friend from boarding school had gone to Columbia. And I got admitted to Columbia early admission, but my parents didn’t want me to be in New York City at the age of 16. And now that I have a 15-year-old I know I would not want my son on his

own in New York City. But then I thought it was just the most horrible thing that could happen to me that they didn't want me to go to Columbia.

My dad had his heart set on me going to Princeton because a friend of his wanted me to go to Princeton. I didn't want to go to Princeton because I knew Princeton's reputation as being extremely racist at that time. And so somehow we settled on Williams, and I went there for a year. I hated it. I was just miserable and plotting how I could get out from the time I got there.

I used to go to Vassar when I would go to visit this religious community on Upper Hudson, and so I would get a ride from Williams and I'd have to go to Vassar to get a ride to get back. And so I started spending time there and we had this exchange program. I said I'll go for a semester and see if I like it; if I like it, I'll transfer.

Went to Vassar. I loved it. I absolutely loved it. And those were some of the happiest years of my life. I mean, it was a really good experience for me. I really liked being in an environment that was predominantly women and with women teachers, women administrators, women students, everything. And I think that some of my pro-feminist, [womanist] education just comes from living in that environment and within an awareness of the fact that I was in a women's community and I had to acknowledge what privilege and entitlement I had and move in a way that was different. So I learned kind of a whole different way of being in the

academy that wasn't based on the kind of pushiness of the guys, like, at Williams, like, you know, rush to answer and "Oh, I know that," and so on and so forth. And Vassar, to me, was just like my boarding school, just a bigger version of it, where there was real exchange and real engagement with learning, and it wasn't just like the first step to an MBA or something like that.

And again, I think it was...there was not an out queer community at Vassar then. I think it started a few years later. And it's interesting, too, that I think a lot of the men who were in Vassar at the time that I was there, so like the very first men to come to Vassar, we were a real minority. And I've been disheartened when I talk to current students, women who graduated recently, and they talk about how, you know, they hear from the alums about the good old days, and for them how it's a struggle sometimes because guys, even if they're not the majority, dominate in the classroom, some teachers defer to them, that kind of... So I was disheartened by hearing that. But in my experience it was very, very different. It was really different.

Monique M. And so what led you to major in religion?

Ibrahim F. Well, what else could I have done? You've heard the story of my life. What else could I possibly have done? I mean, I started out with a...I always knew I wanted to major in religion, but I couldn't really say that because—

Monique M. Well, I would have thought French, since you'd done so much work in French.

Ibrahim F. Well, I liked French, but I really...religion and philosophy were my things, you know. And I got denounced by the cell leader of my cell from the African American Student Association when I was at Williams. I was denounced for having an un-together curriculum. And I was like, "Well, what's an un-together curriculum?" "Well, like religion and philosophy." He was talking about un-together brothers. So then he described the courses of an un-together brother, and it's like religion, philosophy, French, psychology, because when the revolution comes, we have to all da-da-da-da-da. And I was like, you can't have a revolution with just doctors and lawyers. You can't. That's not going to happen that way. You have to have artists, you have to have people with soul. And then I got banned from the association after that, and brothers were told to stay away from me.

Also because I was really involved in anti-Vietnam stuff. And I was told that that was not a people of color issue, and I didn't know any better. I mean, I was 16. I didn't know any better than to...I just, like, argued with the older brothers, and just argued with them. And that was one of the reasons I was happy to get to Vassar, because the black community at Vassar was very different. It was very different. It was just very...it was just more inclusive, it was more laid back.

So I knew that I wanted to study religion, I wanted to study in-depth. I thought at one point that I wanted to be a psychiatrist, because psychiatry, psychology, religion were all very close to me. I had started reading Jung when I was in high school. But I went to the premed orientation and I was like, I can't do this because there's too many interesting classes to take, and I will be spending all my time taking chemistry, organic chemistry, physics, and I don't want to do that. So then I said, oh, I'll major in psychology. But the psych department at Williams was very behavioral psych, so it was like lab rats and all that, and that wasn't what I was interested in. So everything I wanted was in the religion department, so I knew from my first year that that's what I was going to do. By the end of my first semester I was like, yeah, I'm going to be a religion major.

And then when I went to Vassar, I came in contact with this professor who ended up being my advisor and I was his teaching assistant, who really had great impact on me. And it was through him I got the idea like, okay, this is what I want to do. I'm going to teach. I'm going to major in this, I'm going to get a doctorate in it and I'm going to teach. That's what I'm going to do. And I just went on my track.

And I was very active in the religion department as well because I was...he was the chair of the department and I was his assistant, so I got to see on the inside, and I thought it was great. I was so excited, like when I grow up, this is what I'm going to do. And I just loved studying religion. It was just like opening door after door after door after door, and then

getting excited about, like, oh wow, you know, gosh, I wonder who knows...people don't know about this. Oh, they should know about this. And that's how I ended up in religion.

But I think I was destined from, you know, like when I would go to the library when I was a kid, my first library visits maybe I was five years old, or four, when I went myself with my little red wagon and my mother. And I would get, like, all this...they would always look for me in the religion section. It's like I exhausted all the kids' books on different religions of the world. I *loved* those when I was a kid. I would always, like, make a beeline, get it, and just sit and read it. Everybody in my family said it was no surprise whatsoever that I ended up studying what I studied.

Monique M. My next question, I guess, steps away from your academic trajectory and so you're 16, 17, you're in college. One of the things we haven't talked about yet is your sense of your sexual orientation and how that helped form you as a child, as a teenager. And so before we leapfrog into your seminary work, I wanted to highlight that part of your narrative.

Ibrahim F. Mm-hmm. I think, like I said earlier, I...because I didn't have any negative messages and I had positive messages about the body and this, that and the other, I mean, sexuality wasn't like a preoccupation for me. I just figured, like, oh, okay, it's there, it's developing, it's blossoming, it's doing what it needs to do, and I'm forming a frame for understanding it

and experiencing it. When I get to a point of experiencing it and...but something interesting happened.

Somebody was doing a...a student at Bard College was doing a survey on sexuality, and this is, again, this must be in 1970, '71, and he had several categories. You could identify as homosexual, bisexual, asexual, heterosexual. And I thought, okay, well, I must, since everything is everything and everything seemed possible... My first reaction was I didn't know how to define myself, because I couldn't find, amongst those, something that...so I said, okay, well, bisexual is the one that comes probably the closest to at least what I experience theoretically.

And, I mean, around that time also I started to develop relationships with people that spanned genders as well, across the gender lines. And again I think for me it was just, sexuality was this thing to just be celebrated. Even now, as I'm talking about it, I just think, like, it was just a very playful...it was a playful part of life to be enjoyed. I didn't have any negative messages, so I didn't really have anything to feel guilty about. I mean, now that I'm saying it, I feel like I came from another planet or something, but... I mean, that was...

But what happened early for me was I started noticing that people were always making these references to religion around what their personal issues were, like, you know, well, but the Bible says this or the Bible says that, and that was how I start... Also, when I would counter what people

were saying with information, because I had just learned something in the class, and found their resistance to taking that information in, and then I just would feel like, well, okay, if that's the way you feel like thinking and you want to torture yourself, then that's your choice, and I would just kind of skip on to my next thing. Because again, it didn't compute with me. My thing was always like if I think A and then I get some information that tells me, oh, there's other possible ways of understanding this, and there's positive ways of understanding it, I'm going to go with the positive ways of understanding it and just move in that direction. So I'd always be taken off guard by people who were religiously oppressed around sexuality but who couldn't kind of disentangle themselves from that, and my 16-year-old soliloquies weren't convincing them.

Monique M. So how did that mesh, especially with those who believed the Bible says X, Y or Z, when you decided to go to seminary, and an orthodox seminary at that?

Ibrahim F. Well, I didn't go to seminary for traditional reasons. I mean, I went, actually, to just spend a year. I had no interest in getting an MDiv. My project was to go to Oxford and do my doctorate at Oxford, but my spiritual advisor had suggested, well, do a year in this community, go through the whole liturgical cycle of the year and everything, and then at the end of the year, you can go ahead and reapply for the grant for Oxford and see what happens.

[Part 2.]

Ibrahim F. So of course I went for...I did this first year, and the first part of the year I didn't like it at all. I was like, oh my god, why did I do this? Why in the world did I do this? It was sort of like one of the first times in my life that I was unhappy, because I had been pretty much happy everywhere I had been. And I was kind of in a world, in a social world that was very, very different from anything I had ever experienced. And, I mean, I was with some people who had never seen another person of color – [laughs] – or a person of color who themselves didn't identify as a person of color, they had never seen a person of color. And so it was just like kind of...I was like in a state of shock for the first semester, and I was like, I'm going to leave. Yep, I'm going to leave.

But what happened was after I came back from the break, there was this group of us that had been this kind of informal after night prayers discussion group, we'd just like get together and discuss things, and they were all either seniors or in the MTH program – already had finished the MDiv, done a year away and then come back to the MTH. So I learned a lot in being in conversations with them. I mean, I learned a lot. A lot, because they were really brilliant. And that sort of become my lifesaver, this group.

And then when it came time to make the decision as to whether I would leave or not, my advisor said, "Well, look, you know, you've done a year

so you might as well just go ahead and do the degree.” And I was like, “But I don’t know if it’s really the thing for me to do, because I just...I want to study this in a different way. This is not really what I want to do.” But he somehow convinced me to stay. He said, “Well, try one more year.” In the middle of the next year he was like, “Well, you’re halfway through now,” – *[laughs]* – so...

But I had fun learning. I had fun learning. It was just that the social life was really awkward and just not...I didn’t have a great time in that sense. But I developed some really good friendships, and intellectually it was really important because, I mean, the people who were teaching were some of the greatest scholars in the orthodox world, and I realize now, having taught for 25 plus years, that a lot of stuff they kind of watered down. Because sometimes I’d be like, why isn’t this more complicated? Because I read some of their other stuff, and I’m like why is the...? And now I understand. Now I understand.

But I think that I learned there also the importance of...the importance of looking at who writes history, and that was before that was kind of a common critical discourse. I had one professor who always told me, like, well, the reason nobody knows anything about orthodoxy is because in the eyes of the West, orthodoxy doesn’t really exist, and they’ve just written us out of history. And so that was really important.

And I think another thing that helped me survive was that the summer before I went to seminary, for my graduation present from college, my parents sent me on a trip to Lebanon. And there I experienced orthodoxy in a way that I couldn't possibly experience it in the United States because there were orthodox churches everywhere, discussion groups, orthodox leftists, I mean, just a whole kind of diversity of experience that just didn't exist and still doesn't exist in the United States, and a real political engagement around Palestinian issues and what have you, and that was really exciting. So knowing that that existed somewhere out there in the world really sustained me when I was in seminary because the world that I was in in seminary was like just kind of a really small world. People didn't...students didn't think very much beyond, oh, I'm going to go to seminary, I'll get ordained, I'll be in a parish, and that was it.

Monique M. Right, so that was my next question. Being at an orthodox seminary where most people are ordination track, did you also think that ordination was needed, necessary, something you should feel inclined to do?

Ibrahim F. No, I wasn't in the least bit interested in it. I was not in the least bit interested. And I had definitely gone there with, in my mind, that that was not something I was going to do. And when I talked to my spiritual advisor and everything, he was like, yeah, no, you're on the track for being a religious scholar, that's where you are. And in orthodoxy there's a strong tradition of lay theologians. There's a very strong and long history of that. So I didn't feel like the odd person out in that way. I think my

classmates kind of looked at me weirdly because they were like, why are you here if you're not going to get ordained? Because they couldn't imagine that somebody would just want to come and study for the sake of studying it.

And I think that's one of the reasons why I take very special care with students, with seminarians who don't want to get ordained, because there's so much pressure. I mean, I see that in school now. There's so much pressure on the students who say, "No, no, no, I'm just here because I'm going to figure out what I'm going to do, but no, I'm not interested in getting ordained." And then I see them a semester later and they're like, "Um, I think I'm going to go for candidacy." And I'm like, "Do you really want to do this?" "Well, not *really*, really, but, like, everybody's doing it." And they just sort of... I feel like I have a mission to hold that space for people, to say I know what it's like to hear that, and everybody around you doing that.

Monique M. Now, when you made the transition to move from seminary to do a doctorate, was that a seamless transition? You said you knew you were there to study and your spiritual advisor was sort of tracking you in that way. Did you take time off? Did you apply immediately and start philosophical study?

Ibrahim F. No. What happened was actually I got told in my...you know, everybody would go to meet with the dean of the seminary in the first year, and he

would tell everybody that they needed to have their eyes set on being trained for a parish. And when I got there, he told me we're going to watch you because we want you to come back and teach here. And so when I graduated, the idea was that I was going to go do my PhD and then come back there to teach.

And I went...so I went for my first year out of MDiv, I went as a student in the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Biblical and Near Eastern Studies, I think it's called. And I did that for a year, but while I was there, I started applying to PhD programs in the United States because I knew what I wanted to do. I knew the area that I was interested in and I felt like I would get a better doctoral program in that in the United States, that this program for the licentia was adequate, but I didn't want to stay and do my doctorate there, so I did a year and then I got admitted to the GTU in Berkeley, actually, in a PhD program, but I didn't get enough financial aid for it to be viable. So I left the GTU or I postponed entry for another year or something like that.

And in the meantime I got a phone call saying would you like to go work in Geneva, and it was like... [*Laughs.*] So I got this job working for the World Council of Churches, which basically was...I was a consultant to the Faith and Order Department, which is like the department that deals with all the big theologians in the world. But the person who was the head of the department was like, "The most important thing for you right now is to finish your doctorate, so when we go to a conference here or there, in

Helsinki or Kampala or someplace, if you want to come, you can come. So you're free to do absolutely what you want to do. We want to support you in doing your doctorate." So that's what I did.

I was admitted to the University of Geneva and started my doctorate there, and had this connection with Faith and Order, so I got to travel with them. I helped edit a document or two. But I had a salary, I mean a stipend that came from them, and they also helped me get a scholarship from a Swiss religious federation, and my partner got one from the Swiss Reformed Women's something-or-other. And she was working on her degree in theology in Paris, but tele—not telecommuting because it wasn't telecommuting then, but some courses directly there in Paris, others that she did on her own and what have you. And she was doing a lot of reading in feminist theology because she was very interested in the question of ordination of women to priesthood and what have you. So I started this PhD program in Geneva which was like the next big nightmare in my life. They didn't want me.

Monique M. Well, all PhD programs are a big nightmare, so that's irrelevant.

Ibrahim F. They did not want me because I think they felt I was being imposed on them by the World Council of Churches. And they were also not thrilled about people that weren't Swiss, or people who weren't Protestant Swiss from Geneva. Maybe Lausanne, but nah, not so much. They were very Geneva. These were people...the professors were from families that

descended from the time of John Calvin. So, like, when you read those names of those people, like Farel and Facio and what have you, those were the names of the actual professors that were in the theology department when I got there. And I had to spend my first six months preparing for this oral exam that, if I passed the oral exam, I was admitted to doctoral research, if I didn't, I could study for a certificate. So it was kind of like, what do you call it, a make it or break it deal.

Monique M. Right.

Ibrahim F. And I spent six months getting up at 3:00 in the morning to take the bus into Geneva to go to the library and go to the basement of the library because the building was open because they were cleaning it at that hour. So I was completely still and isolated down in the basement, reading and preparing for this exam. And the exam was going to be all in French, and I would have to translate in the exam from Hebrew, Greek and Latin. It was a three hour oral exam.

And so when I got to the exam, which was in this room with no windows, and I'm sitting on the ground level, and the professors are slightly up above me, all around me, kind of like leaning over looking at me. And so I just like, you know, went through translation from Hebrew, from Aramaic, Greek, Latin. And when I got to the Latin one, I had told the professor already before, I said, 'This is going to be the last one, I'm going to be really exhausted, you know that I know the Latin text, can I just

comment on it?” He says “No, you have to translate it. I want to see you translate it.” And he was really obnoxious, and he was really obnoxious during the exam because it was this really difficult phrase in the Latin. And, you know, I read it, I translated it, and he made me read it and translate it three times, so of course my stomach, by then, is in my throat because I’m like, I must be doing this wrong, I must be messing up.

And this is the one exam in my life that I didn’t care what the grade was or anything, because I’m, like, you know, way, way an overachiever. And I was like straight As, all my degrees with honors, magna cum laude, what have you. And this, I was like, I don’t care. I just want to pass this and I don’t ever want to hear about it again. But I was so traumatized by this exam, it was so traumatizing, it was so brutal, that afterwards I couldn’t talk in public for two years. I couldn’t talk to anybody that I didn’t know.

Monique M. Oh, that’s so sad.

Ibrahim F. Yeah. No, it was really...it was really just brutal. I mean, again, nothing happens without a reason. To me it was really important in how I deal with my students when they’re in their dissertation defense or whatever. I’m like, “Okay, here, go to the spa. Spend two days there before you come for the thing. Just be really relaxed, take really good care of yourself and da-da-da.” And I’m so gentle with them. When they come in the room, I tell them, “You’ve passed, so now we’re just going to sit and have a conversation,” instead of holding them in suspense for three hours

of taking them through all these paces and then telling them, “Okay, we’re not sure whether you passed or not.”

So anyway, I passed, and I started working, and they shifted me from one professor to another because nobody really wanted to take me on. And now, being a doctoral advisor, I realize how horrible that was, I mean, how horrible a thing to do that was. And I was really young, too. I mean, I was really, really young, and I think they weren’t used to that. They weren’t used to having young doctoral students, because I was 23 when I started. So I had one professor who liked me, and that was the professor with whom I took Aramaic. And one who taught church fathers with whom I had a good relationship. But my advisor, I just think, just didn’t want to have me and I felt like a foster child in a home where nobody really wanted me. That’s what it felt like to me. And I was so not used to that because I’d always been like, you know, the best student in the school, well received by professors, and some students hated me, but, you know, there’s always player haters.

But it was just really difficult, and it was...it was a big turning for me in my life also because I think that’s when I started to just really...

Switzerland is so kind of monolithic. I mean, it was at that time. It’s different now. But it was just very monolithic and very kind of...it was a monotone. And I stuck out. And I think my initial reaction after that exam was to try somehow to just not be visible. And my partner kept saying, like, “You stick out so you should celebrate the fact that you stick

out and just do what you want to do.” I was like, “I can’t do that. I can’t do it. I can’t do it.” And like I went to get my ear pierced, but I was afraid to do it because, like, you know, what would people think, and so on and so forth, because it was a very conservative world at that time. We’re talking 1978, and Switzerland was *very* conservative then.

But it was really thanks to my partner that I started to be like, okay, I’ll do this. Okay, I’ll braid my hair. Okay, I’ll do this. And realizing since I was different, since I was the other, I was never going to be Swiss, so I might as well just enjoy myself. [*Laughs.*] So I started, little by little. I worked really hard on my dissertation for a long time and I became a teaching and research assistant in Lausanne, which is a city up the lake from Geneva, so I moved to Lausanne. And that was really important because that’s when I started to develop a circle of friends who had been involved in queer stuff, women’s stuff, anarchist stuff, eco stuff, all that everything, and I got involved in this theatre collective. That was really life-changing for me. I mean, I still, to this day, have really close friends from that collective, actually. And one of them, one of the founders, lives part of the year in Istanbul, so it’s been really good to reconnect after a long time.

Monique M. I’m going to push us forward a little, in light of time, and ask questions about...so when you finished the dissertation, was your intent to remain there and teach, or was your intent to come back to the States? And sort

of walk me through, briefly, how you made it to Howard, or whichever job you want to talk to first.

Ibrahim F. Okay. No, yeah, Howard is...that's where it started. That's where it all started. That was really simple. I decided, like, I couldn't stay in Switzerland. What was starting to happen there was the xenophobia was becoming more pronounced as more and more brown-skinned refugees started coming. The Swiss had always prided themselves on "we're not racist like the French," they would always say. But I just, you know, I started hearing things in the street or watching attitudes in the street, because there were a lot of Ethiopians and Eritreans that were coming as refugees and getting asylum, and a lot of Zairewa. And, you know, just little...and I was like, I can't go through this another time in my life. I've been through all this already. And I wanted to...I had done all this work and I wanted to...I wanted to teach in a black school. So I wrote to – *[laughs]* – I wrote to the president of every historically black college and university in the United States.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. And I didn't get answers from some. And one guy from somewhere in Kentucky wrote to me, and bless him, he said, "You know, I would hire you in a minute." He said, "I would hire you in a minute." He said, "You are just...you look so exciting," he said, "But I think you would just die on the vine here after a semester."

Monique M. I'm teaching in Kentucky. I can testify.

Ibrahim F. Okay. That's what he told me. He says, "No, you need something else."  
What had happened was when I first got to Geneva, like in the first month, I got this letter from Emory saying that I had been recommended to them for a position by Dean Lawrence Jones of Howard Divinity School. I didn't even know that Howard had a divinity school and I didn't know who this Dean Lawrence Jones was. I didn't know how he could recommend me for a job.

Monique M. [*Laughs.*]

Ibrahim F. And then I was at a World Council conference years later and there was a guy who was one of the canons of the National Cathedral, and he was African American, and we were talking, and I was like, "So do you know a Dean Lawrence Jones?" And he goes, "Yeah, yeah, I know him very well," and spoke really highly of him. And so I wrote Dean Jones a letter, and Dean Jones wrote back to me and said, "I would love to see you any time you come to the United States, you come to D.C. Please come to Howard and see me." And so I planned this little trip to visit various schools on the East Coast that were also non-African American, like I talked to people at General Seminary and what have you. So I got on the train and I went to D.C. and went to see the dean of the School of Divinity, and within ten minutes I had a job.

Monique M. Sweet.

Ibrahim F. And he told me, he said, “Ever since I saw your C.V. when you applied for this” whatever grant it was that I applied for, he said, “I’m going to hire this man or I’m going to see that this man gets a job.” And, I mean, he hired me on the spot. He said, “When can you start teaching?” And I was so ecstatic when I walked out of his office, I was like practically skipping through the streets of D.C. I was like, oh my god! And I started teaching in January. I moved to the United States in December of ’85 and I started teaching in January of ’86. And I’ve had two teaching jobs in my entire life, Howard and then Berkeley. So that’s how I got...that was like...that’s the very short version of how I got there because it all happened very quickly.

Monique M. That’s a pretty excellent story.

Ibrahim F. And then I learned what it was like to teach in a historically black college – *[laughs]* – was the next big learning for me. ‘Cause I was like...I don’t have a contract and I’m supposed to be going there pretty soon, and I’m not going to go there if I don’t have a contract. “Oh, we’ll get it to you, we’ll get it to you. Don’t worry.” And finally I called the dean and I said I haven’t received any paperwork and I’m not going to leave Switzerland and come to the United States when I don’t have a place to live, anything. So he sent me my contract, which was as a visiting lecturer. I was supposed to be coming as assistant professor. So I called back and said, “What’s this visiting lecturer thing?” “Well, that’s what we’ll give you and after a semester we’ll change it to...it’s just a formality.” Which I

later found out it happened because there was a senior professor who felt really intimidated by me when he saw my paperwork and then he just told the dean you cannot decide this on your own and call someone to the faculty, and imposed the fact that I had to come as a visiting lecturer. So that's how I got there.

Monique M. Now, so you were there ten years, and obviously you were doing activism work while there, and I have in your bio very influential in starting the LGBTQ group there at Howard. So talk to me about sort of living in multiple worlds while in D.C.

Ibrahim F. Yeah, I mean, I think that...D.C. was very...D.C. is where I felt like I came into my own, where a lot of my pieces as artist, activist, spiritual leader all started coming together through the crucible of HIV, through the HIV pandemic, because I really am – and I have to say this, because this is one thing I do want documented – *[laughs]* – I was the first religious scholar to address HIV as a religious and theological issue, and the ethical imperative to be involved in it.

When I...I had – I'm going to get choked up now – I had a student who came out to me in maybe my second year teaching, who came out to me and then, at the end of...and wanted to do a PhD. Who wanted to do a PhD in queer studies and religion, what have you. And he kind of disappeared from sight. And then I found out he was in the hospital, and then I found out that he was dead. And I was just horrified. I was just

horrified. And of course nobody really spoke directly about it, and I just asked. I said, “Was he in the HIV ward?” “Well, I had to put on this suit to go in there.” And I said, yeah, okay, fine, thanks. That answered me.

And I started thinking like, well, you know, the black church has always said that it’s on the front of everything, it’s on the front line, and so this is the issue for now. This is *the* issue facing our community globally; we’ve got to get on it. And of course I knew, with trepidation – [*laughs*] – that to talk about HIV, I was going to have to talk about sex. And so I developed a course which I think has been duplicated in other places since then, but without giving me any credit for it. But developed a course for how African American religious leaders should respond to HIV.

So first of all, all the students in the class had to be trained as an HIV test counselor, they all had to have an HIV test. And people with HIV would come into the class to speak. We had a...I organized a D.C.-wide healing service, so bringing people from different HIV agencies in, different churches, getting gospel musicians to donate their time and come and sing at the service.

And did a chapel service as a performance piece. That’s where I brought my Swiss theatre training in. We did a chapel service. The HIV class led the chapel service. But nobody knew that it wasn’t the real chapel service, and they were...because I had people just stuck in the congregation, and when the student preacher started preaching, and he was talking about

HIV, one woman jumped up, and like, “I’m sick of hearing about this stuff! I didn’t come to church to hear about this, that mess, and those are sinners anyway!” And she stormed out, and then someone else [goes storming]. And so the people that weren’t in the class were like, “Oh my god, what is going on here today?” And it was a story of a family that was very prominent in the church and the son, who had been like the minister of music, died, and then everybody told the pastor if you bury him, that means that you approve of HIV, you approve of his lifestyle, and the congregation is not going to accept that.

And it was based on the story of Antigone, who had to defy the law of the state to bury her brother, and so it was told through this woman who’s in negotiation with the pastor. And the pastor undergoes this thing. It was called conviction, a healing stream. He spends his night, like, in prayer and fasting and weeping and everything and comes out of it like, you know, I don’t care if they take my bands away or whatever, this is what I have to do. And so we had like a mock funeral, and at the end, for the viewing, before the casket was closed, everybody went up, and what nobody knew was that in the casket I had placed a mirror so that when you stepped up to look at the dead person you saw yourself.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. And Dean Jones said that was the best chapel service he had ever gone to in 45 years of going to chapel services. And that made a really big impact.

And from there I developed a course too because I just saw that I had to do so much work around framing sexuality differently, not just saying this is okay and you can understand the scriptures this way or that way. I had to frame it completely differently and connect it to imperialism, colonialism, racism, so on and so forth. So I developed this course called The Sociology of Hetero Patriarchy, and they went through looking at all the connections between oppressions, how the press works, how, you know, like...because I would tell people, like, you don't believe what the *Washington Post* says about black people or about what things happen in your neighborhood because you know that's not true, so why is it that everything else is all of a sudden true? And if you're a woman who hasn't been allowed to be ordained, you can understand what it's like for queer people to be excluded.

And we had some really...I mean, those were very powerful years because some of my colleagues were like, "Are you out of your mind? Are you out of your mind talking about this stuff?" And I'm like, "But it's got to be talked about 'cause people are dying out there, so we've got to talk about it." And the students in the Sociology of Patriarchy, they had to also take time to be in queer community. That was like a requirement for the course. So these ministers were...conservative young ministers had to wear, like, a rainbow flag and be in queer community and not say, "I am not queer."

Monique M. Mmm.

Ibrahim F. So, like I had this one student who was an executive in Baltimore, and he was walking around with his *Washington Blade* and his pink triangle. And he said he was playing tennis and his friend was like, “Um, man, is there something...what’s going on with that pink...what’s that pink triangle all about? And I saw that paper you were carrying. I’ve never seen that paper before.” And so he just told him, like this paper is this, this pink triangle means this, da-da-da-da-da. And he said it was just an empowering experience for him because they were all...it was as though they were all in a queer skin. They had to experience that from within. They had to experience what the rejection was like. They had to experience what the, like, you know, the little insinuating jokes and stuff like that so that they could understand in their work. And it was like, wow.

There was one woman in the class, and she was like my mother’s age, so I was, you know. And she came to me the first day and she said, “I’m going to tell you this, Doc, I’m in this class for one reason and one reason alone. This is a requirement I need for graduation. I don’t care how many languages you know, you are not going to convince me that my God says that that mess is okay.” I said, “Okay, ma’am, fine. Welcome to the class.” By the end of the semester, she had had a total conversion experience.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. Because I also connected understanding sexuality in the African descent context, Afrocentrism. And at the end of the semester she said, “I made this collage book for you, collages and images of Afrocentrism and queerness because you just completely changed my life and I want you to have this present.” So two years later, fast forward, I’m lecturing at Temple University and at the end, after the question and answer and everything, I’m trying to leave the building and this woman comes up to me, an African American woman and an Asian woman. And she says, “I don’t know if you do hugs, but I really want to hug you.” And I was like, “Oh, yeah, of course.” She said, “I owe you so much.” And I’m like, “But I don’t even know you, lady,” I’m saying to myself. She said, “My mother’s best friend is Miss [Oberia], and Miss Oberia was in your class. And my mother has struggled with her religion and accepting me as a lesbian and accepting my partner.”

And she said, “Every week after class Miss Oberia would tell my mother what happened in class, and she basically taught my mother the whole course. And,” she said, “By the end of the class, my mother was like, ‘Oh, wow. My religion does not oblige me to, like, hate my child and reject her and everything, and oh.’” So they have this whole reconciliation, and she said it was, you know, it was like thanks to you teaching Miss Oberia.

And I think that happened a lot. That happened a lot through the work that I did there, which was really pioneering and it was really, you know, even people who later started to talk about black church and sexuality, at that

time they weren't going where I was going, 'cause I just kept pushing it. It was like, no, we've got to go, we've got to talk about this, we have to think about this, we have to acknowledge that these people are in our community, this is who we are.

And, I mean, I think it made a big impact because I can even see in certain pockets in the D.C. religious communities that certain congregations are far more inclusive than they were before I started teaching in D.C. And some of those ministers were my students at Howard. And that's the really importance piece. That's something I know that I really do not want erased from history because I've seen things described as the first conference on such-and-such, and I'm like no, we did that, or the first out queer student at Howard, and it's like no, there were two there when I was there. So it's like yeah, let's just get the...let's set the record straight. 'Cause that was hard work. It was really, really, really hard work.

And I know that...Dean Jones was just marvelous. I mean, he was really marvelous. The dean who followed him, I think I was just like a nightmare for him. I think I was a nightmare. After I was on the "Phil Donohue Show" and I came back to town, they were like, "Oh my god, we're jut deluged with phone calls because you were on 'Phil Donohue.'" I said, "We'll, I'm sure some of them were happy phone calls." [*Laughs.*] Yeah, so that, and, you know. Huh?

Monique M. I was going to ask you to talk about the formation of the LGBT group there at Howard.

Ibrahim F. Oh, yeah. Well, see, the thing is at Howard, at that time, to have a student association that was recognized by the student government or the Office of Student Affairs or whatever, you had to have a faculty advisor. And there had been like a small queer group before I got to Howard that lasted maybe a year. But they were the brunt of a lot of homophobia and taunting and what have you and so they just...they shut down. But what happened was that there were a group of students, a group of undergrads who were like, we have to have...who were out. They were all out in their classes and what have you, and fiercely out. And they were like, "Oh no, we have to have an association up in here." And so they came and asked me. Some of them I knew already. We were just friends from demonstrations or groups or what have you.

And I said, "Yeah, I'll be the faculty advisor," 'cause no other faculty person wanted to be the faculty advisor for them because that might mean something about them. So we got together and looked for a name for the group that would set the tone for what we understood the group as being. And we were definitely about integrating the sexual and the spiritual. And so we looked into African traditional religions. We found...we really vibrated to the name [Oxala], which is one of the Yoruba deities who combines genders, and so that's how the group got the name Oxala. And then we had just like meetings where people, graduate students started

coming from the law school, from the med school, and it just kind of developed very organically. And the students were really happy to have a faculty advisor. And we were invited to participate in everything, because we were an official organization of the school. And, I mean, I think the only kind of one big thing that we did was Molefi... what was his name, Molefi Asante?

Monique M. Mm-hmm.

Ibrahim F. The Afrocentrist, had taken issue with my interpretations of Afrocentrism and queerness, and so he was supposed to come to town for a debate with me, a public conversation, but it was obviously going to be a debate. And at the last minute he backed out and said that he had an emergency speaking engagement, which I had never heard of an emergency speaking engagement, but he wasn't going to come to town. But some people from some Afrocentric something-or-other were there and we had this conversation that was just really...it was just horrible. It was just like kind of the worst stereotypical homophobic things you can imagine hearing. But the room was packed, and our panel was actually mixed, queer and straight, and nobody knew, in the audience, who was who. And the students were fierce. They were fierce. Just very calm, very clear, very rational, if you will. And the opposition was just like all over the board. So they just basically, all they could say was, like, "Y'all should be killed. Y'all should not exist." That was just sort of like the end point of their

conversation. And we're like, "Okay, thank you. That's clear now. We're leaving." [*Laughs.*]

And then what happens always with student groups is I think that after the founders graduated, the three key people in it – Marcus, Rachel and [Zoila], after they left, I think that it kind of dwindled for a couple of years until it re-blossomed more recently. But it was good. Like if there was a march in town we would march, and we would get so much applause from people when they would see the banner and it said Howard on it. And I'm still in touch with the student founders of it. I'm still in touch with them. And they are like, "Oh, that was fierce back in the day," you know?

Monique M. I'm going to cover a lot in a short amount of time now, so I want to ask you...I'm going to give you a list and just let you choose. I'm going to ask you about your organized activism, I want to ask you about the move from Howard to Starr, and then your journey to Islam officially and changing your name. So start wherever you like.

Ibrahim F. Okay. Um...my organized activism. Well, I politically identify as an anarchist, so I was more identified and active in anarchist groups like ACT UP. I was very active in ACT UP D.C., and arrested a couple times for civil disobedience around HIV. And I was also the chair of the political action committee of the D.C. Black Queer Coalition, and in that function did a lot of TV appearances and what have you representing the coalition.

The next thing was transition from Howard to California? Was that the next one?

Monique M. Mm-hmm. Yes.

Ibrahim F. I kind of was starting to feel burned out at Howard, like I kind of hit the wall. And after Dean Jones left it just wasn't the same for me and so I was like, okay, maybe let me go to California. I had a child by then and I really didn't want my child to grow up in D.C. And I had my family in California, and my dad had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer, so I was like, you know, maybe this is a good time to try something different as well, because I didn't want to be stuck teaching at Howard because I didn't feel like I could go anywhere else.

So I got called to the faculty and I made the move, and it was difficult for me. The first couple of years were really difficult. I missed Howard a lot. I found that things that I hated at Howard when I was there I just started really going like, "Oh, that was great, actually." But I was happy that I could have PhD students, and so that was a really important thing for me.

And as I was there, because, you know, when I was at Howard, I taught a lot of courses on Islam at Howard, from the first time...my first class, actually, that I ever taught at Howard was on Islam in Africa. So I started plunging into that again because I was seeing what the holes were in the curriculum in the GTU in general, and there wasn't a lot dealing with black people of any stripe. And so I started reviving some of my...you

know, I was teaching the hetero patriarchy stuff and looking at development of attitudes in early Judaism and Christianity around sexuality, the body, women, gender, etc. and so forth.

And at the same time in my own spiritual life I was feeling a need to go more deeply into something. I was feeling like I had kind of hit a wall. And that kind of startled me. And I wanted to reconnect with my quest for Sufism, which had started when I was a doctoral student and had somehow gotten...you know, I'd have these periods, like when I lived in D.C., where I actually publicly practiced Islam for two years. I mean, I attended regularly the same mosque and everything. And then I kind of drifted because I had some political-theological questions. But this urge to start coming, you know, in 2000 around Sufism and Rumi and everything, and I just felt like I've got to meet some real people, I've moved beyond reading about this in books.

And it was just in the Ramadan of 2011 that – not 2011, that's now – 2001 I started attending this Sufi mosque in Oakland with this Moroccan sheikh teacher that was just extraordinary, and it was the exact place where I needed to be, and where I reconnected with that sweet, tender Islam that I knew. And so I started talking to the imam, and he said, you know, you've been Muslim forever. You've been Muslim forever. It's just obvious when you talk and how you talk and how you...you know, it wasn't like I had never been in a mosque before or anything. And so we

decided that I would just...I could be a Muslim without doing anything official or I could choose to publicly make that my religious identity.

And I did after Ramadan because it had been just a...I can't even begin to describe what the experience was, and I think it was a real shift in my energy, a real embracing of it, like myself as mystic – [*laughs*] – you know, and holding mystic, activist, all that together. But that was definitely where I needed to be. And that's opened, again, a whole other series of doors. I mean, that's part of the reason why I'm living here, part of the year in Turkey, part of the year in India, and then in the Bay Area. That kind of opening of my heart and just going into the depths of my heart, and that's how that all unfolded or continues to unfold. What was the next one?

Monique M. Your name change.

Ibrahim F. Oh, I actually had used this name...I used the name Ibrahim before, like in the late '70s, '80s, and I thought about changing it then. I don't remember why I didn't. I got caught up in something else and I didn't do it. And for me, Ibrahim, Abraham, is the person who preexists all formal religions and who is radically devoted to the unity of all being, and is beyond all religious identities and is a part of all of them as well, and so I really wanted to be in that vibrational energy. I felt that that kind of described me as well, and my path, the things for which I strive, so I did that.

And that was seamless. I mean, it was pretty seamless. I mean, some people made a point of...it made some people uncomfortable, and so it was interesting, because I got a lot of support from my transgender friends who had similar experiences, especially those who were FTM transgender people. In fact, I discussed with some of them, okay, how do I disclose this? It was really cool because it was just like kind of built-in community to respond to this and be with it. And I think because I had used the name before, like, you know, 20 years before, I knew that it was part of me. It wasn't something like, oh, I have to change my name and let me pick this, because I didn't have to change my name. I could have stayed with the name that I had, but I think I, myself, personally wanted to mark this is a change in my life, this is a rite of passage, this is a new phase that I'm entering into in my life, and so I needed that as a marker for me.

Monique M. Now, I want to go back to something you said earlier about you're about to write an article about the term bisexual. So before we close, I wanted to get a sense of how you actually identify, for the religious record, and of course this will change as we change, but currently how are you identifying?

Ibrahim F. I just identify as...I just identify as – *[laughs]* – I don't know how. I don't...there's not a label I can find. And I know that's...I know that's frustrating, but there's not a label I can find. I want to just say that I'm a...I'm a full human being. I mean, I guess I would...or just say, like, a sexual being. But that has another connotation when the sexual doesn't

have something in front of it. And I don't...I'm careful about what I say because also those words could be connected with Islamophobic reactions to them as well. I guess I will just say I don't have a label that I use now. And I don't think of myself in that way at all. I mean, I think that's part of the change that's been going on in me. It's like I embrace all.

Monique M. Okay.

Ibrahim F. And I don't mean to sound hokey, but that's my truth right now.

Monique M. Now, I wanted to ask you about your personal fulfillment. So you mentioned your son being 15. And so for the record, do you want to talk anything, give any details about more of what fulfills you personally? Do you like to travel, like Cirque du Soleil? What makes up the social?

Ibrahim F. [*Laughs.*] Yeah, I love traveling. I love spending time with my friends. My spiritual is really, really important to me and I have friends with whom I share that, because I'm involved in several different religious communities. I'm involved with a Jewish meditation group as well that's very connected to Sufism. And I'm...I like being outside. I like being outside. I like being near the ocean or near water, and so I try to spend some time each day outside, and I have a place where I go when I'm in California where I go to meditate. And something that's very important to me now is a gratitude practice, is just being grateful, because I've had two near death experiences in the last six years, and I'm just recovering from one now, actually.

Monique M. So the Coji recording ends...it brackets in two hour blocks.

Ibrahim F. Okay.

Monique M. So what would happen is if we're not done, I would just call you back and then just start all over.

Ibrahim F. Okay. So yeah, that's, you know...ecology, environmental stuff, that's important to me, healthy eating. And what people call alternative medicine in the United States. That's really, really something I enjoy and a source of spiritual learning, physical healing, what have you. And another great source of joy for me is accompanying people who are dying and preparing their bodies afterwards and what have you. That's a real...I belong to a group that does that, does burial preparation and what have you.

Monique M. Wow.

Ibrahim F. That's a great blessing for me, yeah. Because I did a lot of it informally in the, you know, really bad days of the HIV pandemic, and now do this as a...I did it as an act of love then. I do it as an act of love now, too, with great gratitude that I can do this and be with people in that way. Because I get to be the last religious voice sometimes and I get to give them a positive message when they've had negative messages that have scarred them during their life. These come up near death. So yeah.

And I'm just grateful – [*laughs*] – I'm very happy about being grateful. That brings me a lot of joy. And of course, like you said, being a father and having this marvelous, marvelous child that's been raised in a very, very, very, very diverse world and who's really astute and has a sense of the fluidity of everything. So that's a real blessing. And things like this is now and this is a new generation, so...

Monique M. Yeah.

Ibrahim F. And I'm grateful for everybody who went before me. I mean, I'm just grateful that I got to meet Audre Lorde and people like that. I'm really, really grateful for that. Audre Lorde told me – because I told her that I read her when I was in Switzerland and she helped me find my voice – and she said, “Now you have to use your voice.” And Octavia Butler told me the same thing, like, “Your voice can never be silenced. You have so much that's important to say.” So I'm really grateful, really, really grateful for that.

Monique M. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to share? We've had such a rich two hours and I'm out of questions, but really open to whatever else you'd like on record.

Ibrahim F. Well, I'm really glad that we got around to doing this, and like I said earlier, when I was talking about my time at Howard, I think it's just really important to know what the history of religious scholarship around queer issues and the black community has been and what that struggle was, like

to know that struggle and to document that struggle, and to acknowledge the sacrifices that were made on that path. I think that's really, really important because that's an important part of our theological history, it's an important part of our sociological history, it's our personal histories, our narratives. To talk to the...you know, who were the first out queer students at Howard Divinity School and talk to them, what their experiences were, you know, forming their little group within the divinity school.

And also people's lives have changed after being in my classes. I'm not saying that I changed their lives. I don't want to say that. But providing them with another way of thinking helped them change, and then they've been able to help other people change and other people change. And sometimes I'll be somewhere and someone will come up to me and they'll be like, "Oh, you don't know me, Doc, but so-and-so studied with you, and I was having a hard time with my sexual identity and in my religion, they told me about this professor they had at Howard" and da-da-da-da-da. So I think that's like...

*[Coji message.]*

Monique M. So that's what's going to happen. I'm going to hang us up here and then I'm going to call you right back and you can finish your thought.

Ibrahim F. Okay.

Monique M. All right. Bye-bye.

Ibrahim F. Hello.

Monique M. All right. I wanted you to be able to finish your thought on record.

Ibrahim F. *[Laughs.]* It's like, hold that thought. No, I think that for me, once I began to realize the extent of the depth of religiously constructed homophobia and how toxic that had been for so many people, I mean, people that I saw firsthand, people that I talked to, people that I counseled, the people that I saw in the hospital, that I was like, I actually have the tools to help move beyond this, and if I don't do that, I'm not stepping up to the calling to which I've been called and for which I've been given all these gifts and skills and talents. I can do this. I know Hebrew. I can tell them, no, that's not what the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative is about. I'll walk you through it. I can look at Paul with you. I know Greek. I can translate it. I can break that down. I can give you a context.

And so I did that work in the trenches, like I would go in congregations where nobody knew me and work with them, and I'll work with the old people, the church mothers in a basement, talking to them about Sodom and Gomorrah. And oh, that was the work, you know. That was the work. And I think my gratitude is in the fact that it actually did make an impact on people. I mean, but the mountain is so colossal – *[laughs]* – it's so colossal.

But when I was a doctoral student in Switzerland, when the first dissertation I had been working on for seven years, when I was told it was ready to go for defense and then one of the readers said no, it wasn't, and I got so disillusioned I was thinking about just dropping out of the doctoral program, but because I'd been doing all this feminist reading with my partner, feminist theology and feminist religious studies, then I was like, it's really an [unconventional] kind of queer version of this. At that time there wasn't. So I said, you know what, maybe I'll write another...I'll switch my topic.

Because what I wanted to look at was how religion supported homophobia in the state and how the state supported homophobia in religious institutions, how they both confirmed each other's power around that. And my professor said, okay, well, then write a proposal. Wrote the proposal, gave it to him. The professors of the theology faculty in Geneva said it was heretical and that they would never allow anything like that, so that got thrown out. And then the man for whom I worked at the World Council of Churches, he took it to every theology faculty in the country, and nobody wanted to touch it. So I thought, wow, and that was in 1981. And I had to shelve that and write on another topic, but that stayed in my mind and it became really clear, you know, like legislation around sodomy laws and what have you.

So then I was testifying before the D.C. City Council as a religious expert, and the chair of the council was like, "I didn't even know the sodomy law

had anything to do with Sodom and Gomorrah.” It was like, I had no idea. And I was like, “Where did you think the name came from?” I mean, just that work in the trenches. And that was where sometimes I felt really isolated because I know when I would go to these big HIV conferences and lead the workshop with the ministers...and I can just say things as they are, you know. Like I said, like, “I know one of the reasons why a lot of ministers don’t like to talk about HIV is because they’re afraid their congregants will question their sexuality.” And especially those that are not straight identified. And to just say that already made a discomfort in the room. And so then they stopped inviting me to conferences and said I was like too much, or I made the ministers nervous. I said, well, that’s good. I’m glad. That’s a good thing that I make them nervous.

But I guess I just wanted us to not be like, oh yes, we have to take care of people, or we’ll just overlook their lifestyle. I’m like, no, you can’t. It’s not a lifestyle. It’s not a lifestyle question. These are beings. These are people. And if you say you accept everybody, then you have to accept everybody in their fullness. And you have to acknowledge that everybody is...that you have a congregation of sexual beings. It’s not like you’re not sexual beings. That’s when they all gasped. So that’s what I dedicated my life to, and just work ceaselessly with that, and just continue teaching it in a different level. But what it was about was really about the interconnections of oppressions and how they work to silence and erase

and invisibleize. I think if anybody follows my written work from '85 until now, that's just a common theme.

But that's because that's a common theme that grows out of my life, that, well, if you're oppressed about this, and I'm oppressed for this, why don't we get together, because together we're more powerful than if we're apart. And we don't have to compete for crumbs. We can make a new cake altogether. And that's just carried through in the teaching I've done around the homophobia and what have you. Islamophobia is connected to other phobias and so challenging people on their assumptions, constantly challenging people on their assumptions.

Monique M. Well, I think that's a good place to stop the recording.

Ibrahim F. I think so, too.

*[End of recording.]*