

Episode Title: Aashay Dalvi and Kez Vicario-Robinson Part I: Rainbow Reels and Queer Journeys

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Harkamal Ajrha: Hello and welcome to Hear Our Stories, a podcast by the City of Waterloo Museum for the people of KW. Sarah, Harkamal, and Julia are your hosts as we explore the 2SLGBTQ+ and queer community of the City of Waterloo and KW Region. Today we have myself, Harkamal, taking the hosting seat, and Sarah listening in on tech.

Julia Barclay: Hello listeners, just jumping in here to give you all a content description of this episode. This episode includes some light profanity and mentions living in a homophobic household and experiencing homophobia and racism. None of these are discussed in great detail, but they are mentioned. If this is something you might have difficulty listening to, we encourage you to tune in to the next episode of the Hear Our Stories podcast and explore the links in the description of this episode.

HA: We begin every episode with a land acknowledgement to express gratitude and show respect for the land and the Indigenous peoples of past and present that have resided here, acknowledging the land is an Indigenous practice, that's just one small part of dismantling colonial world views, an ongoing process that we, your hosts, must be mindful of as students and partners of a colonial institution. In a virtual and physical environment, it is important to acknowledge the land we and our supporting organizations each reside on.

HA: The settler City of Waterloo, home to the city of Waterloo Museum, and many of our participants is situated on the traditional Land of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Neutral People. The settler township of Centre Wellington, home of Julia, is within the traditional lands of the Attawandaron or neutral nation, the Huron Wendat Nation and the Grand River Metis Council. The land was negotiated as part of treaty 3 in 1784 and Treaty 19 in 1818, signed by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Both Centre Wellington and Waterloo or on land originally set aside for the people of the Six Nations of the Grand River, under the Haldimand proclamation of 1784.

HA: The settler city of Guelph, home of Sarah, is part of the Between the Lakes purchase and is the treaty land of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people have a unique, long-standing and ongoing relationship with this land and each other and the Attawandaron people are also recognized as part of the archeological record.

HA: The settler region of Etobicoke, home to myself, and Toronto, home to the University of Toronto, are part of the Toronto Purchase Treaty Number 13 in 1805, it is the traditional Land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Etobicoke, known as Adoobiigok, or the "Place of the Alders" in the Michi Saagiig language, is situated along the Humber River watershed, which historically provided an integral connection between Lake Ontario and the lake Simcoe, Georgian regions for the Anishinaabe, the Huron-Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee peoples.

HA: All of these lands are a part of the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. This treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee bound them to share in this territory and protect the land in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect. So, we would like to extend our gratitude again to the Indigenous peoples with whom we share all these lands today. And in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect, we hope that all our listeners will do the same as they listen to the stories shared on this podcast.

HA: One of our guests today, Aashay, has also requested to do a Land Acknowledgement, so I'll pass the mic to him.

Aashay Dalvi: Thank you. We live on a land of broken treaties and an ongoing legacy of immense harm. Those who are new to this land, those who are not native to this land are settlers, were, and will forever be known as settlers, and we need to work together to dismantle settler Colonialism and its impact. Learn more about the treaties and traditional territories where you live and work at native-land.ca. We bear witness to the subjugation and resistance of our Indigenous communities, and you may follow them on Media Indigena, Warrior Life, Medicine for Resistance, Unreserved, Metis in Space, and IndigNative.

HA: Thank you Aashay, and thank you for those resources.

HA: In today's episode, we'll be discussing Rainbow Reels, a queer and trans film festival in Kitchener-Waterloo, coming on and queer journeys, performing, books and community involvement. Our guest today, are Kez Vicario-Robinson and Aashay Dalvi.

HA: Kez is a gender queer, non-binary artistic performer, they have been performing as a stand of comedian for the last four years in festivals and venues in Toronto, Waterloo and surrounding areas. They're also an improv artist, a creator, a producer, actor, writer and queer history fanatic. Outside of performing has works with the SHORE center of Waterloo Region, Rainbow Reels and the KWcounseling services.

HA: Aashay is the Queer owner and chief curator of Rad Riot Books. He works with and supports the Waterloo Division of Ground-Up organization as well, which included helping to organize the Waterloo anti-racism rally. They're also actively involved with Rainbow Reels here in Kitchener, Waterloo.

HA: So, hello and welcome to you both, Kez and Aashay, you both had suggested to you this interview and episode together, would you like to let us know how you both know one another?

AD: Thank you for having us.

Kez Vicario-Robinson: So I- we both work with Rainbow Reels, and we both worked... I feel like the first time I think I was...

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KVR: Aware of you, Aashay, for like a while, which is... I feel like pretty common in the KW queer scene is just knowing of people, but we worked on a rainbow reels comedy show together. I think that was the first time that we really knew about each other... Yeah. A

AD: And that was last year. I think we met for the first time on Zoom when we were organizing the Festival last fall. Yeah.

KVR: Yes, yeah.

AD: That was my first time being a part of Rainbow Reels.

HA: And for those who are unfamiliar, what is rainbow reels?

KVR: Okay, I'm gonna do my best to encapsulate it. I'm trying to think of it, remember all the facts about it and now... But I'll just tell you what I know, which is rainbow reels is a queer and trans Film Festival situated in Waterloo region. It's been running for over 20 years now. It started at the University of Waterloo as a part of one of their student groups, but then it kind of emerged from that and became an independent Festival. We're called a film festival, but we do a whole bunch of other things, including markets, we do an annual comedy show. We do a July cabaret every year. We do a whole bunch of things, we've partnered with a lot of different groups in town, and we just do general queer events and such... Yeah, for 20 years now. For over 20 years.

HA: How long have you both been involved with it?

AD: I got involved last fall, so I'm very new to the involvement.

KVR: But has made such an impact. Aashay has made such an impact, so good.

AD: Oh, stop! Me! Little old me? Never!

KVR: I got involved in... I think I went to go see a bunch of this stuff and I knew the people who were involved with it, but I got involved in organizing things, I think in 2019 or end of 2018.

HA: And you said that you both did a comedy show together last year, on there? with Rainbow Reels?

AD: Yeah, last year, I think it was our first time. It was Rainbow Reels' first time doing an in-person standup comedy night to kick off the entire festival, and I had performed standup comedy before in Toronto, just a few shows, and this was my first time performing in KW. And I thought, why don't I just... MC the event. And it was glorious! It was the largest crowd I have performed in front of... We had 120 fully vaccinated, masked people at the venue, which was the parking lot of the Kitchener Market, and it was perfect!

KVR: Yeah, that venue is... It's really great. We actually had a comedy show there in 2020 outside, which was wild because everyone was still kind of figuring out how to do in-person events and stuff, and the crowd was a lot smaller, but the Kitchener market parking lot is like... It's sheltered, but it's open and it's outside still, so it's perfect. The perfect venue for late night events, and especially late night events during a pandemic.

HA: Did you perform then, Kez?

KVR: I didn't perform the one that Aashay hosted, but the ones... The two before that, I performed at and then this past one, I just helped out and did door stuff and all that jazz.

HA: Do you think you're gonna perform next time Aashay? Now that you dipped your toes in what MC-ing a bit...

AD: Yes, absolutely, because I was mc-ing... And I had my set scheduled right in the middle of the opening act and the headliners, I had to edit my set from 10 minutes to three minutes..

HA: Oh wow.

AD: So I would love to perform my complete set, and I really have to change a few jokes because I don't know how the same jokes will work for an audience who has already heard them. So very excited!

KVR: Yeah, Aashay definitely has to perform...

-10 MINUTES-

KVR: the full gambit this time around this year.

HA: Is it like an annual event? Is the next one gonna be this summer?

KVR: The next one's gonna be this fall. We usually do it in October and yeah, for the past couple years, it's kicked off the film festival to... So it's like we do a comedy show on the first night, and we have maybe a week or two weeks of films at different venues at local cinemas in town.

HA: And are the films by the film from local producers or is it more international or... Just regional?

AD: The films are curated specifically for Rainbow Reels, and during that curation, the films are sourced from international sources, but... also from local sources. Last year we had a short film that was chronicling stories from Land Back Camp here in Kitchener-Waterloo, and that short film was also one of the films that were... That played at the festival last year.

KVR: Yeah, yeah, and we also have... Like Aashay said, yeah, we try to do as many local Turtle Island films as we can, or even more specifically local to KW, but we also have had a bunch of international films in the past, just like any... That we can get our hands on that we really like...

HA: Was there a moment in this past festival, the one last year, that was the most memorable for you? A film or the stand-up or just anything that you experienced?

KVR: Okay, I think... I'm trying to think through ones that I really liked... I remember there were several that... I always really like the shorts that we curate, 'cause we usually have a night of short films all compiled together because it's, more often than not, a lot of queer and trans films

that we curate our shorts because that... Those are just more affordable to make as well, especially for marginalized groups, and there's just a whole lot more of them, we have Indigiqueer shorts usually, so we've done that, I think at least the past two years, and I always really liked those. I really liked... There was one about... There was one about a trans-man weightlifting competition in the States, that really stuck with me. From probably three or four years ago, that it's not even something that I'm interested in personally, but watching it, it really stuck with me. And it was just something I didn't know about... And also, there was one called something "the Monarchs," and it was about this alternate Girl Scouts group also situated in the States, that was just really amazing, and I think about that film a lot. Very, very cool.

AD: That's a very, very good film. "Release the Monarchs?" Yes. Oh what a delightful film...

KVR: "The Radical Monarchs" or something?

AD: "Radical Monarchs"! That's it!

KVR: Ok Yes.

AD: Yes, yes, absolutely. It's very, it's such such a good film. It premiered at the Inside Out Film Festival two years ago, and ever since then, it has been making the festival circuit to critical and commercial acclaim, which I'm very happy to see.

HA: That's good to hear. Hopefully I can find it somewhere to watch or it comes somewhere to a festival near me. It sounds interesting.

KVR: It's very, very cool.

AD: If you've seen the recent film, "Moxie"...

HA: Yeah?

AD: It's like "Moxie", but more grounded, rooted, diverse and very, very shamelessly queer.

KVR: Yes, that's a perfect description.

HA: Basically checking all the boxes there. Pivoting a little bit, both of you identify as queer, what does it mean to be queer to you and how did you come to identify as such?

KVR: I... My identity has definitely changed a lot over the years. In high school, late high school, I started identifying as bisexual, which is funny to me now, 'cause I feel like that's just so far from what I would ever identify as now, and then I kind of identified as gay, 'cause I didn't really like the term lesbian, which I feel like a lot of queer women kind of go through because it has a lot of negative connotations, which...

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KVR: It's just a lot of anti-queer women, yeah wording, or with the word lesbian, even though it's a great word that I really love now. And now I think I identify as queer, or I know I identify as queer because it encapsulates my gender and my sexuality. And I love the term, and I love all things queer, and I love the history of the word queer, and I love... Yeah, I love it. I feel like it puts everything that I am into a term, and I feel free to explore within that term.

AD: For me, queer, the word queer means to question the status quo and challenge the binary in every form that we can... We are being told to act a certain way, to present a certain way, to talk a certain way, to walk a certain way, which requires us to strip ourselves of our humanity and mold ourselves to someone else's perception of us. And for me to be queer is to reclaim my own humanity. Throughout history, black trans women, two-spirit indigiqueer icons, even the Hijra community from India have paved the way to show how toxic, how hurtful heteronormativity can be, how hurtful patriarchal norms can be, and how painful white supremacy can be. And I have taken on the responsibility as somebody who identifies as queer to challenge that, to unpack the impact of white supremacy through my queerness.

HA: Wow those are very powerful answers from both of you there, and it really just kind of shows the vastness that the term, yes, it's a term, but this small word can mean so much depending on the lens you look at and adding your experiences to it, so thank you, for sharing that with us.

KVR: I think it's an identity, and it's also a noun, you know? And I love that. Aashay, after your words, I just wanted to snap with and I was like, "Oh no, it's gonna sound real bad in the microphone."

HA: We're all doing hypothetical snaps in the background? Yes.

AD: Oh thank you, thank you. To be queer, it can be very, very empowering, because as somebody who is Queer, Trans femme and gender non-conforming, I, by existing, want to remind people, I want to remind you, that you are worthy of love in all its glorious messy forms. We constantly chase this narrative that being queer is being othered, should be oppressed, should not be given the light, should be excluded, should be divided. It is my responsibility to show you that you are doing this, you are oppressing me as somebody who is queer because you haven't allowed yourself to unpack the harm that you have been through. You haven't allowed yourself the grace and the space to heal... When you tell me that I should not exist because I am queer, I tell you that I love you, I see you, I hear you. Let us walk together onto a road where we can heal each other. Instead of exclusion, let's include one another's experiences and experience the pure paradise that is love. Uncensored, unfiltered, joyous.

HA: Wow.

KVR: Write that on my grave stone. Oh my God.

HA: I want that quote like, written everywhere.

KVR: Yeah.

HA: That's true though. Love is so free of a word and it's such a free of an emotion. So, it's encapsulated completely in...

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HA: both of your definitions of queerness and just being queer, that was very powerful. Was you're coming out experiences, were they encapsulating the way you describe being queer, or was there any difficulties or surprises during that for you?

AD: To me, when I get asked the question of "how did you come out?" Now that I think about it, I was born out. Only now am I allowing myself and those around me to be let in. I am allowing people and community members and friends in, and that is the joy of being queer. Instead of me having to come out of this heteronormative shell, I am showing you that this is a space of pure joy and care and affection and community and collaboration. I am letting you in... And this is me as a thirty something. But getting there was not easy. I knew that I was slightly transfemme without having the language, or those words, to identify as such... Very early on. My father was in the Indian Army my entire life, and as such, I was required to walk a certain way, talk a certain way, be courteous, be masc-presenting, be very machismo and I could see the harm that it was causing in a way that even the women in the family were becoming tools of patriarchy. And I remember that my mom told me that, "What you were doing is unnatural it.. If I were a better mother, you would not turn out like this." And I know other family members who have since allowed themselves to explore their queerness since I first identified mine, but coming from this very conservative Indian household, which is very, very patriarchal misogynistic...

HA: 100%

AD: Queerphobic, and so very, very, very colonial. My dad being an Army officer, even though he was fighting towards Independence, did that through the colonizers' ways. The Indian army is organized in a manner that is reflective of the British army. So I had to completely distance myself from the environment for me to introspect and retrospect what I had been through, what needed to change, what I needed to learn about myself. Now, here I am.

HA: I come from an Indian background as well, and what you said about the patriarchal society, the conservative society, fully resonates with me there. The whole, I guess, concept of "what will society think? If you do this," "you are tarnishing the respect of our family or of our community," etcetera, etcetera. If someone just decides to not...

AD: Exactly

HA: Go into the lines that they've been born into... Right, that's completely...

AD: Absolutely, and it is very baffling and fascinating to see that when there are institutions of discrimination developed by Indian- Indians that have discriminated individuals based on caste. And those indigenous to India have been historically oppressed and continue to be historically oppressed.

HA: And also, as you mentioned before, the Hijra community in India, they are a long-lasting tradition, like beginning of times, right? And everyone acknowledges...

AD: Exactly, exactly.

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HA: That they're there, but you- you acknowledge, but you don't accept... It's like that weird dichotomy of, it's good if it's them, but if someone from my family was trying to join that community, no! 100%, we don't allow that. That whole... It's fine if it's not in my family, kind of thing is very present.

AD: Exactly. It's very , very traumatic and it is a trauma response. It is, when you have been born in an environment that forces you to be divisive, that forces you to oppress your contemporaries, you make yourself do it without actually realizing what you're doing. Because it has oppression of the Dalit community, of the Hijra community, of the queer community, has been so normalized and very seldom is it challenged.

HA: Yeah. I would agree too, as you said with colonialism, that colonial mentality, because India was colonized for so long that even though we got independence, that mentality doesn't leave... It doesn't leave that quickly if you've been grown in that an ingrained in that all those years. So, even if traditions before we're more accepting, or I don't know if they were but... than the western way of viewing queer people or lower caste, things like that, it just maintains itself in that...

AD: Exactly, absolutely. Until the late 1800s, early 1900s Kerala used to have a matriarchal and matrilineal society, where there were indigenous women who controlled the lease of the land. And this was before colonization or even during... But you can see the impact of misogyny, of patriarchy, and the amount of effort that has gone into upholding the white supremacy and colonialism, and the very diminishing and degrading way of treating your counterparts.

HA: You said that it took you getting out of the system in a way to kind of, not come out, but let people in... You also mentioned in your pre-interview questionnaire that you'd wanna talk about immigration and the connection with that and queerness. Was the immigration aspect of your story that allowed you to do that, or how does immigration play into that... into your identity there?

AD: I knew I needed to move because I faced... The first kind of discrimination I faced growing up was colorism. That was within my own family, the second kind of discrimination I faced was from the queer community, that was in Bombay. Because I was new, I didn't quite fit in because I spoke a certain way. I was kind of looked at funnily because I was not as good-looking or as fair-skinned as some of the other members of the queer community, I was shunned away. And because I did not belong to a queer clique I was shunned away. But there were queer communities in Bombay who were widely accepting, but I realized that I needed to completely move myself away to find myself. As an Army officer's son, as an Army officer's child, as an Army officer's offspring, I grew up living in so many houses, but I found my home half-way across the world, because only halfway across the world did I have the language to identify myself, did I learn that I can be seen, I can be heard, and I can be validated just for being a messy human being. And the amount of growth and learning that comes from...

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AD: time and distance and education has helped me grow and heal from my own past.

HA: So I think sometimes just rerouting yourself and finding that new home, the new family, is helpful...

AD: Absolutely

HA: And what you needed to grow as a person and to grow and accept yourself more.

AD: Yeah! I grew up in a very oppressive volatile household, and I needed to completely distance myself from that to understand the value, importance and significance of a found family. To have a queer community that sees you and holds you and cherishes you and pushes you is the most joyous beautiful thing in the world. And I'm so glad. I feel so lucky and grateful to have found... Found family here in Canada.

HA: I'm so happy that you have. Kez, you mentioned that your identity changed a few times during your high school in terms of what you would call yourself, I guess, how did that play into your coming out story?

KVR: It was interesting, I feel like I'm constantly coming out and I'm still not even... I think when I started to realize I was non-binary, I was gender queer, I realized that there is no end. It's not like, "Okay, this is it, and now I'm out and I'm finished forever." And an interesting thing about my coming out journey is I didn't really... I think I'm extremely privileged in the way that I got to come out, and the way that I get to come out continuously 'cause both... I have an older sister and a younger sister, and they're both queer as well, which is really amazing and... Right, and we all kind of started to realize that we were queer around the same time. And because of that, it was kind of like a very weird way that we came out to our parents.

KVR: I remember, I think the way that I finally knew that my mom knew that I was gay was I was seeing this girl and it was my first girlfriend, and we were best friends, best friends hung out together all the time, and then we finally started dating, and I was so nervous to tell my mom, I was so nervous to tell my parents, even though they were... And they have been activists in the Waterloo Region since the early 90s, they've been really involved in a lot of very great causes and stuff, and have a lot of queer and trans friends and have since I was very young. And I think I was in the car on the way to an event. And my mom was driving 'cause she's always drove me and any other... Theater kids who needed to go to a rehearsal or a workshop or something, and someone in the back seat, 'cause I was pretty... I just talked about having a girlfriend and I didn't really hide it too much, but someone in the back seat was like, "Oh right... Yeah, she's your girlfriend." And they said that pretty loudly, and then I was... I just kind of remember sitting in the front seat...

HA: Oh no!

KVR: Like, "Oh my gosh, my mom knows-" like it wasn't anything she had already known months earlier, she was- I talked... I told my sisters, I can't- I forgot what we were doing. We were on a beach somewhere, we were... 'cause it was a summer-time and I said, "Hey guys, did

you know that so and so? She's my girlfriend." And they were like, "Yeah. Did you think... We didn't know that, did you?" I was like, "Oh my God, but don't tell mom and dad," and they were like, "They know... I've overheard them talking to their friends being like, Oh yeah, I think Kez has a girlfriend now." And I was like, "What? No. They know?" like, okay. Which for someone, for me who has dealt with anxiety my entire life, it was very helpful to be like, "Okay, I don't have to have a whole thing, I can just... They know now, and I'm just gonna float through this," and the same thing happened with both my sisters when they both started dating women. Yeah, my older sister is engaged now, so I'm gonna... My sister-in-law is really great and they live in town, and then my younger sister has dated girls, and so it's a very interesting kind of dynamic in my family. Yeah, yeah, and a lot of... I don't know, it was very...

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KVR: interesting coming out to everyone, my extended family too, were all very... Neutral is the word I would say very uncaring, but in a good way.

HA: Like they didn't make a big deal of it.

KVR: Yeah, yeah, it was kind of like they just... They found out, they knew over social media. And I actually have a lot of regret, not a lot of regret, but certainly some regret over the years of not having a coming out per se, even with my gender too, it was just kind of something that slowly evolved and morphed and one day it was just more clearly there. But it had always been there, and it was slowly becoming more and more clear, and I do have a regret that I didn't get to have... 'cause I also, I'm extremely dramatic. And I'm a hard core theater kid. I am full on just so... Especially growing up in the time that I did, being like, Oh, there's all these... YouTube is new and there's all these coming out videos and there's all these... And you hear stories, but all these beautiful flash mob ideals, the time of that era of making public and very emotional and dramatic and performance. And I loved that, and I didn't ever do that. Not with anyone have I come out that way. And I do have a few regrets about that 'cause I always am like, "Oh, I really wish I had filmed it," and I wish I had like definitively said it and been like, "Okay, I need you guys to just sit down. I'm gonna tell you something."

KVR: And whenever I do think about that, I just layer it on top of... I go back to a place of how privileged I am that I didn't have to do that, and how privileged I am that even if I did do that, I knew that my life wouldn't be ruined and that I wouldn't feel broken afterward, like a lot of people I know and a lot of people in my past and present life who have come out and it's been such an earth-shattering thing and such a huge moment, and the story of... I will quickly tell you how I came out as non-binary to my parents. Both was being gay and being non-binary, it was kind of like... Before I realized that that was who I was, I looked at that and I was like, "Oh, I wish I was gay. I really wish I was gay. That would be so great. That'd be really wonderful, but I guess I'm not"... And I didn't realize that you could just... Just be gay... You could just do that.

HA: You don't need to sign up for a club or pay a subscription, right?

KVR: And no one... I'm also neurodivergent, so I feel like that also ties into it, if no one told me like, Oh... I think I assumed it was like, Oh yeah, you know, definitively, right away from age eight, you know. And no one had told me, so I was just like, "Okay, well, I guess I'm not gay..."

I'm not attracted to boys, but I guess I'm not gay." And same with being non-binary, I was like, "Oh, I wish I used they/them pronouns. Well, too bad." I really wish I use they/them pronouns, that seems so great. That seems amazing. And then I did, I hadn't told my parents and I hadn't... I kind of started to tell a few people after I graduated high school, and then I was doing my first stand-up comedy show, or my second standup comedy show. It was in Toronto, my parents came to see it. It was a queer standup comedy show, and the person who was hosting the show, they asked everyone ahead of time like, "Oh, what pronouns do you want me to use?" And I was like, Oh yeah, they/them pronouns. So they announced me on stage and they were like, "This next performer, they are amazing, their name is Kez Vicario-Robinson and hear they are!" And I did my set and it was very fun and great, and then afterward, I kind of realized, I'm like, "Oh, my parents are here. Oh, okay." And as we were leaving the venue, I was feeling kind of nervous, I was like, "Oh, are they gonna ask about it? Oh no." And they were like, "Kez, do you use they/them pronouns?" I was like, "Oh, yeah." And that was the end of the discussion. But I did, yeah, that's how I came out to my parents as Trans, was by someone else on stage at a comedy bar in Toronto.

HA: I mean, that kind of fits in your whole thing about a bigger production though, you know. You were on a stage...

KVR: Yeah!

HA: Someone, probably videotaped it.

KVR: Yeah! Like it's-

HA: You got kind of a theatrical approach there!

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KVR: Like, it is very much the way I view my gender and my sexuality is as a performance and as a display, and I also very much... I think the way that I present myself to the world, the way that I exist within the world is very much in a way of like, "Okay, I am queer and I am like, I am present. This is how I'm dressing, this is how I'm talking and speaking and interacting with things," and I decided a couple of years ago, or kind of I realized that I've been doing this already, but now I'm very adamantly I'm doing it of... I want people to be excited to come out to me. 'Cause several years ago, one of my high school- One of my really close high school friends came out to me, and he said right afterward, he was like, "Oh, I was so excited to come up to you, I just I couldn't wait, I was really excited." And I loved that response so much, 'cause I knew that he was really nervous to come out to his parents and other people in his life, and he was like, "Oh, but you... I was, as soon as I realized, I was like, Okay, I can't wait to tell Kez." And that has stuck with me so much, and that is very much how I live my life now and govern my decisions of... I want people to be so excited to come out to me. And that's really what I focus everything around now.

HA: Such a happy emotion too, the fact that they're like, "You are the one who I know will always support me, will be celebrating me," and just to be that person, it's probably... Amazing. Yeah.

KVR: Yeah, and it can be a very nervous thing, and even now when people realize that I'm- when people in my life learn that I'm trans or learn any of those things, I still feel that anxiety, but I really want people to always be like, "Oh, Kez is gonna be so excited once I tell them this." And that's how I want it to be.

AD: Aww, that's so beautiful. Kez Vicario-Robinson is a celebration. Is joy personified.

KVR: Oh my goodness, you're gonna make me cry. I want- it's just queer joy!

AD: Earlier you said that you felt like you were broken in some way, and I wanted to say that broken, whole, smashed, complete. You are glorious in every form, in every time, and allowing yourself to feel all the emotion of being a human being in its glorious messiness is beautiful. And you should be celebrated because your existence is so very valid.

KVR: Wow. I mean, everyone who's listening right now knows this already, but Aashay is just a poet... Just an absolute poet. Just a speaker of beautiful and powerful words. Incredible.

HA: I feel like you need to write these down in a book, so I could read it every single morning to feel better, about myself.

KVR: Yes.

AD: I mean, okay, let's take a moment Harkamal, because sitting with me, creating a space where we are unpacking the trauma that individuals from Indian households have had to endure and have had to unlearn, and in doing so, you are showing... You are creating so much space for your own self to grow and heal. And it's beautiful to watch and witness, and the joy and smile and light that emanates from you, every time you allow yourself to see that light with you, it's just glorious Harkamal, you should be super proud.

HA: Thank you, I'm so happy this is being recorded, so I can replay that later, but... Wow, thank you. Now, you both have also brought in some objects with you today that relate to your queer journey or have some relationship with your queer identity, do you mind showing your object and describing it for our listeners and then just explaining what the relation is or what it represents for you?

KVR: Of course. Okay, so I actually, I have two objects and the most jewelry, which is ironic because I'm Butch and transmasculine and I don't really like jewelry...

-45 MINUTES-

KVR: But the main thing is this earring that says Dyke on it, it's got little letter beads on it that say "Dyke." It's my mom's from when she was in high school, actually.

HA: Oh wow.

KVR: Yeah, both of my parents. I've talked with them more recently, and they were just very involved in the queer scene when they were younger and when they were in high school, when they were in their 20s, and... Yeah, it's something that they both identified with when they were younger, and now they just don't really wanna take us space, so they both just kind of identify as straight. But they- yeah, this earring is my mom's, a family heirloom if you will. And the other piece of jewelry is this beaded bracelet that says "queer" on it. I got this at a Rainbow Reels market that we had for our- during our annual film festival in the fall, and it has stars on it and hearts on it. And I bought it for like, I don't know, \$3 or something from a vendor there, it was the last bracelet that they had... And this was in probably 2018, I think, or 2019, and it's something that I wore for a really long time, and it brought me to a place where I really started to like... I started to like jewelry a bit more after that. A really hard part of being a trans-masc is letting yourself be feminine and not feel gross about that, and gross in the sense of gender dysphoria, because there's so many... 'cause I was extremely feminine when I did identify as a girl and I loved it, so very much, I still have most of the dresses that I wore and I love so many feminine things and femme things and I feel a lot of gender dysphoria now, when I get myself involved with any of that, which is quite hard because I love it, and it's a huge part of my history.

KVR: But wearing this kind of... I wore a lot right after I bought it, I think for months and months, and it made me feel a little bit more settled and safe and grounded in allowing myself to be femme and still be queer and still be butch and... Trans-masc. Yeah.

HA: Would you say that the way that you receive both of those pieces, so one is from your mother that shows her support for you, and also for the queer community, and the other was from a queer event, would you say that has impacted the feeling that you have that you can still accept these- as you said, jewelry pieces, which are... And that the feminine aspect that is attached to that word of "jewelry" while still feeling that you are not going against the way you identify as or your own identity? Like that connection with the queer places and the queer aspects they came from...

KVR: Yeah, no, I love that. I think that's such a beautiful... that's totally- It's really interesting, and I love the way that you phrase that. Actually, I think it's really... 'Cause jewelry is such a queer thing, I think... And it's a thing that I want to incorporate more. And I only have one ear pierced, so the dyke earring, 'cause it is just one earring, the other one was lost many years ago, but it kind of... It's nice 'cause it's like I can wear it and it's... One is old and what is new, and I love that too, and I love that it's connected to like my history and my family and the queerness of my family, which is really cool, and... Yeah, yeah, and it kind of also- both of these things are very freeing, I think, and they allow me to be less constrained within my queerness, and remind me that queerness is freedom, and it is not holding yourself back and it is not staying stuck in one spot. And I think they're just a really big metaphor for that, because I think, yeah, a very... Like I said, queerness is freedom, and these two pieces are something to remind me that like, "Okay, I can do this," and I can, I mean we can all just be whatever we want, and that is a freedom that we do have and a freedom that queerness and transness allows us and we should sink our toes into the sand of that and really just cover ourselves...

-50 MINUTES-

KVR: in the warmth of that.

HA: You worded that perfectly.

AD: That's so beautiful, and you're absolutely right when you say that jewelry is very, very queer... It has moved from the hands of Maharajas and Maharanis, of Pharaohs of Jalaludin's and Begums from different civilizations, across civilizations, across continents, as a way of acknowledging and embracing your own identity. And that- those ornaments, the piece of jewelry allows you to find yourself... To love yourself. And I love that.

KVR: I love that. Yeah, they allow you to love yourself... Yes, yes.

HA: Aashay, do you have an object as well around you?

AD: My object is more abstract, it is this space. It is the space that the four of us have created where all four of us feel safe enough to want to heal and grow together, the space that the four of us have created that allows us to feel vulnerable that allows us to feel embraced. The four of us have created a space where we are community, not competition, where we are in this together. Where we are loving and embracing and celebrating our own identities... After this conversation, I'm going to go to bed thinking of all the things I learned, and I want to learn, and I want to heal, and I need to know to grow. So I am so grateful to this space. To have provided a platform, to have provided a community, to have facilitated a conversation. This space of collaboration has been incredibly heartwarming, and I am so grateful to all of you...

HA: Thank you for that. I would say both you, Aashay and Kez, you have enriched this space though with your stories, with your willingness to share and just be on this podcast, so thank you for both of you for making the space as safe and as comfortable and as much of a learning experience.

KVR: Thank you for welcoming that and for encouraging that and allowing us to feel that way and open up... Aashay, that was beautiful. It was so nice. Just, I'm soaking in that right now, that's really good.

HA: I'm telling you Aashay you need to write a book.

KVR: Write a book! Please! I'm gonna read it every night I'm gonna read it every morning.

AD: It's a lot of work!

KVR: Yes! My gosh, just start crowdfunding now!

HA: You know, you just gotta write down the thoughts that you're having... Yes. We'll all support that.

AD: Well, thank you, thank you. Yeah, thank you. I don't know if- I don't know how to do it, but I would definitely think about it. Thank you so much with the encouragement

KVR: Even start with the Zine... Just start with a zine of Aashay quotes, Aashay words, and it's just, it's just some beautiful words from that beautiful mind of yours. Just some little tidbits. Like miniature poems, just... yeah.

AD: Yeah, thank you. I'll be the local Adele just...

KVR: Exactly!

AD: Without the voice... but a different voice. You know, I'll be the local Beyonce without the last name. Just a one word title. With words to share.

KVR: Absolutely, yes.

HA: Yes! So, you both live now in the KW region in Kitchener-Waterloo, how is it like to be queer in this region in the space?

AD: It is empowering. It is embracing. It is welcoming. It is inviting. It is glorious. It is messy...

-55 MINUTES-

AD: It is connected. It is communicated. It is beautiful. Please come and join us.

KVR: Okay, so just transcribe those words and just put it... Right into a book. Right into a book.

HA: You just wrote a whole one there! One poem out of the book, there you go!

KVR: I think my experience being queer in KW is... It's changed a lot over the years. I think my high school was really great with... I don't think I've ever really... I've been fortunate enough to not, at least when I was in high school, just not really had just to deal with too much harassment or prejudice, and there was a lot of... When I went to my high school, there was a lot of queer teachers, which was really great, that I didn't know were queer at the time, but after I graduated, I was like, "Oh, wait a second, actually, Ms. so and so has a wife. Yeah, of course she's queer." Yeah, I've felt very welcomed within the queer community in KW, I wish there was more physical spaces for us to meet consistently, I wish there was a queer bar, which there just hasn't been... It does actually... KW does have a long history of having a lot of queer bars and queer spaces in town, especially with... This is where the queer history fanatic comes popping out, 'cause it is... We are a double university town, so we have the University of Waterloo, University of Laurier and both of those spaces for decades now, have had a lot of queer spaces within them. But as someone who didn't go to those universities, there's still spaces that you can access within that, but I just wish there's more physical spaces that we can go to. And then on top of that, the pandemic, and now there really are any physical spaces we can go to, but there are... To kind of balance that out, it's this beautiful community that is so welcoming and is so thriving, I think there's so many queer and trans people in Kitchener-Waterloo that have been so amazing, that runs such amazing... There's so many organizations, there's so many organizations that if not explicitly being queer, are really involved with the community and very opening and welcoming to the community, and so willing and wanting to collaborate on anything and everything and... Yeah, I'm gonna second what Aashay said as well, just it's messy and connecting and every other beautiful word that they said, it was so good.

HA: Do you have any piece of advice for a younger you or a queer youth in terms of finding themselves or finding their space in this weird... this messy, this connected world?

AD: Just love. Shamelessly. Messily, unconditionally, gloriously. Love.

KVR: I think advice I'm thinking of specifically to my younger self. Be fully. Exist fully.

AD: Love that.

KVR: And entirely, and unbridled, and unrestrained. Exist. Exists so much and as fully as you possibly can, because that existence is so untouchable and so beautiful.

AD: All of you...

HA: That was amazing.

AD: Should be loved, deserves to be loved. All of you deserve to be embraced. Your entire whole is beautiful. You are complete. You want to be complete, you are willing to be complete. And that wanting, that being, that willing, is a glorious journey towards inspiration and education for many. Be all of you, all the time, everywhere. All at once.

KVR: Yes, and you are worthy. That's what I'm also gonna... You're worthy of all of that, and you have been worthy of that. And then you will continue to be worthy of all of that.

AD: Yes.

-60 MINUTES-

AD: You are valid.

HA: Beautiful words from you both there. That was amazing.

JB: Hello, Hear Our Stories listeners, thank you so much for tuning in to part one of our episode with Kez and Aashay. Since this is a two-parter, we will be back next week with Part 2 so you aren't waiting too long to hear more of Kez and Aashay's stories! While you're waiting though, please check out the description of this episode for local organizations and groups related to this episode's content where you can lend your support and give a follow! You can also go to the City of Waterloo Museum's website at waterloo.ca/museum to explore the virtual exhibit of this podcast series that features some extra bonus content! You can also follow the museum on Instagram and Facebook @waterloomuseum for updates on each episode's release. Thanks for listening and we'll "Hear" you all next week!

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