

Cat Smith: It's recording now. Okay. So hey. [Both Raunak and Cat laugh]. Um, so to start, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself. So your name, your age, employment or what are involved in all those kinds of things.

Raunak Dua: Cool. I'm Raunak, I'm 21. I'm currently employed as both a debate coach, a high school instructor, as well as just doing various side gigs bartending and whatnot, currently at Wake Forest University, and, yeah.

CS: Okay. And can you tell us a little bit about your background, and like, where you grew up, how you grew up, what that experience was kind of like for you?

RD: So I grew up largely in the Bay Area, kind of all around San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose. But that was interesting, because I had a lot of exposure to queerness growing up, but also, I went to high school at a Catholic High School. So the distinction between those two experiences is really funny. Also, it's like, this randomly just came up on my TikTok For You page, but like, one of my friends was like, "You go into this Catholic hellscape and turnout gayer." [Raunak and Cat laugh]. And I was like, literally five minutes ago, it just popped up. And I was just crying at that, because it's hilarious, because almost all of my friends that I was friends with in Catholic school ended up being queer or trans.

CS: So do you think that there's like, some sort of relationship between the experiences that you had at that school and your queerness in sort of, like shaping that identity, or how your identity developed over time while you were there?

RD: Well, I think, going to Catholic school, it was interesting, because it it had to be something that was very, very deeply repressed. But because it was so repressed, you still found like, like, it was like, if you knew you knew, and everyone would just randomly coalesce together. And there would be the gays and there would be the not-gays. But then, when everyone kind of has, you know, their traditional coming out experience. That's kind of that usually happened after high school. So then it was like, Oh, that's really cute. Funny that we all found that. Um, yeah, but I think, I don't know, it was easier to describe the experiences of queerness, both, like just growing up at me, growing up in the Bay Area, you would literally be surrounded by things like balls, vogue houses and whatnot.

CS: Did you grow up going to those sorts of places?

RD: Yeah, so when I-, I think the first ball I went to was during my freshman year of high school, because one of my closest friends had just started walking face for the first time. And that was a really cute experience. And now they're a ball mother, or a house mother.

CS: Aw, so wonderful.

RD: So they're throwing the, they're planning for the height of the summer ball in Oakland to be thrown. Yeah.

CS: That's so exciting. That's really exciting stuff. Um, so speaking of kind of like just describing things in your background, how would you describe your own queer identity?

RD: So I don't know this is probably the most complicated question probably.

CS: As it usually is.

RD: So I guess we'll start on the gender portion of queerness. It's weird because growing up, I felt like the easiest word to describe it was non binary, or genderqueer. But I've grown increasingly frustrated with those terms recently, because it feels like, at least when it's used in common vernacular, or by predominantly white people, it speaks to like, almost this third gender, of otherizing of "they/them". And like, I'm not sure that can explain it. For context, like I'm Sufi. So the entire history of both like Arijas as well Sufi's complicated relationship with gender about like there being a broad spectrum of fluidity, that it isn't a static third identity, but it's something more malleable that one can go in between and without having a centralized masculine or feminine trait seems to be more indicative of how at least I experienced gender, uh, that it's kind of difficult to name because a lot of history of how to name such has been erased because of how colonialism, and particularly British colonialism has over produced and reproduced different narratives of queerness, particularly in both Pakistan and India. That had to be raised basically those genders that couldn't be nameable then alternatively.

CS: That makes sense. Um, do you feel like at Wake Forest, it's difficult to find community with people who can either empathize or understand that portion of your identity?

RD: Yeah, because like we go to a predominantly white institution, so like, the way that everyone navigates queerness is predominantly white. And I say that to be not just being like, "Oh my god, they can't understand like, you know, the cultural complexities of how gender is felt", but also that it feels that when people attempt to use queerness in Wake Forest or Wake Forest's community, they're able to, you know, shield themselves from a lot of questions about how race navigates interpersonal relations, by like, almost like a more "I'm not white, I'm queer" types of narratives without explicitly saying such.

CS: I see. And how long have you been at Wake?

RD: For three years now, so I'm a Junior.

CS: And why did you decide to come here?

RD: Largely because about the debate team, I had not known that Wake was primarily white, to be completely honest. Kind of watching a history of Wake debate talk about the intersections of queerness and race have been like, formative to why I want to come here. But much to my surprise, when I actually came here, it was predominantly white. And I think those was furthered by my graduation year from high school was during the height of the COVID pandemic. So I never actually got to see what like Wake Forest life would be, you know, when people come and

do tours and whatnot. It was largely just like, here's like, the institution and a virtual tour of the various buildings, but never about, like, kind of student populace or what student life would really be like.

CS: And how would you describe, uh, student life or campus life now that you've actually been here in the trenches?

RD: Well, it's mostly dominated by like, frat and sorority culture. And then those are, you know, well, we can say predominantly are heteronormative spaces that various times pathologize queerness as the something to be like shielded from and afraid of, while simultaneously also being the basis of jokes and whatnot for a form of kinship, particularly in the white frats. But the other side of that is there's also like various small cliques in their areas like, you know, the sustainability club, the radio club, and whatnot, that seemed to be like having, like, more queer people in it, but I don't know maybe if this is the right word to say it might have queer people in it, but it doesn't feel like a queer community just because they're so based in both being like, like a such a professional understanding of queerness being, like the entire existence of their identity, and also a desire for both, like belief, like, respect from predominantly white institutions, or not even institutions, but like white people, so like the queer scene is dominated a lot by, like, even if they have queer folks of color, but it's the people that would really love recognition from like, you know, white indie artists, or whatnot.

CS: Do you think, or, do you feel like there is any room for these sort of communities to become more diverse in their understanding of queerness? And like, what sort of things do you think would be necessary? Both, or either, in these campus, on this campus or in these communities to make it more of a queer community?

RD: Well, I think it can. I just don't know how. I think it would first start with I don't even want to say like an understanding of like, Oh, my God, racism is real, because I think they've all had a little [inaudible] moment, but it's like, your discussion of queerness cannot be divorced from how you choose to situate yourself interpersonally. I feel like a lot of how people experience queerness is like, Oh, we're queer. We have sex, yada, yada, yada, or we're queer, and here's how it has politicized identity. But rather than thinking about how it structures or how it should structure, how they have interpersonal relationships with each other, and what then to theorize of care, to think about how to have friends that are queer, that aren't building to, you know, a cis-heteronormative ideal of friendship that is extracted, or even just being like there's a sense of community that people should invest in that they just can't also-, that matters in the fact that community in of itself. But I also think the other thing is that a lot of these people are like, it's both being wealthy and queer. That adds a different distinction to that, because they're able to be like their, their understanding of queerness always will come from a position where they have had, you know, social spaces carved out for them, or where social spaces do not have to be like practiced and fraught, because when they have to come into face with either race, or disabled people, it becomes just a whole different set of interpersonal relationships that they're, that they don't really have the skill set to attend to.

CS: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you for that. How would you describe either your involvement with the queer community at Wake, or would you say, would it be accurate to say that some of the things that you've described are something that makes it very difficult for you to feel involved with the queer community I wake?

RD: So I think it's a mixture of both. So first, is, when I was a freshman, I tried to go to, you know, the LGBTQ Center, the Women's Center, and some of these other clubs I had mentioned earlier. But as I was experiencing these things, I grew more and more alienated from it. So now a large majority of you know, the queer community would not kind of at Wake would not be, you know, be legible as a quote unquote, community, but it's probably some of my closest friends, that people I choose to hang out with, and whatnot, that is like a small group of people, but it's a community that isn't able to be viewed as one as a community. So like, there is some but it has to be found and created in your own way. Because the institutional way they're trying to define queer community just is very difficult to navigate.

CS: That makes a lot of sense. Earlier, you kind of spoke about how Wake debate was your first introduction to what you thought Wake would be like. Did you have any doubts or concerns coming into Wake despite that being your only introduction? And in retrospect, do you think you still would have came here after having the experiences that you've had here?

RD: Coming into way, the only real concern I had was that it was in the South like beyond that I'd usually been in the West Coast. So the South was and of itself, its own weird turn, because I just didn't realize about how hyper conservative people could be despite like, my preconceptions. But knowing what I knew now, would I have come to Wake? Likely not, I would have rather gone to more fostering of, you know, communities for queer folks of color who are trying to navigate real things. But on the other hand, I have also felt that like, despite the hellscape that Wake is, I don't know if any other you know, university would be particularly different just because of how all universities are structured. And I also am fairly positive that I wouldn't have gotten to meet some of my closest friends that I hold, like very, very near to me. So would I have preferred a different institution? Yes. But I do think there's still, you know, some upside, even if it wasn't like, even if it wasn't the goal of this university or the space that we're situated within.

CS: That makes total sense. Speaking a little bit more to Wake Debate, do you think or would you consider Wake Debate a safe space for queer people at Wake?

RD: I mean like, I mean yes, and no, there's a weirdly large conglomeration of Wake Debate that is gay, queer, neurodivergent, and whatnot. But is that a safe space? I don't know. Because there's like some members, that I would feel like it would be a safe space. Or maybe safe space is not the right term, because I'm even fraught of even using that term. Because there's no such space, that it's safe. It's more like a place that I think, could actually be a site of queer communities slash large gatherings of people that are intimately invested in your well being and thinking about things with you. But I also think there's another side to Wake Debate that is, so counter insurgent to all of that, where they want to have like, even the queer folks, that want to

have like a hyper professionalized boundary of what it means to respect another what it means to talk what it means to speak, what boundaries are too much to transgress versus not transgress, and then the ramifications if you do transgress such, like, yeah.

CS: That makes sense. As someone who has also shared space at Wake Debate, I completely understand what you mean. So it seems like a common theme about your experiences at Wake or in orgs, clubs, teams at Wake is that there's either a very clear line between like queer people who seek that sort of recognition, and then those who are doing the work that you're more interested in, which is a much smaller community.

RD: Right.

CS: Would you say that, that makes you feel isolated at Wake? Or makes it more difficult for you to exist as a queer person at Wake?

RD: Yes. But yeah, so actually, yes, isolation is a real thing that happens at Wake. Especially when you talk about things that are queer and gay and trans and you bring, and you're trying to navigate both their sexuality and gender in a way that doesn't feel like they're alone, or hostile. But what I will say is that also within isolation, there are moments of togetherness that I have to at least latched on to pretty dearly, and I think I would not be the same coming in, leaving from here.

CS: Do you have any hope that? No, I'm gonna scratch that question. Nevermind, not even gonna get into that. Um, okay, so let's talk a little bit more about the Winston Salem area generally. Are there any queer spaces in Winston Salem that you frequent that you feel are either better, or spaces that align a little bit more with what you're looking for out of queer communities?

RD: Well, so I think that's really interesting, because I don't know about queer space, but there definitely have been people and community members that have made it feel welcoming slash, you know, that show care. I think, if you want like the clearest delineation of a space, the best example of that would be Euphoria, where mad queer people come in and out. And it's not just drinking, but it's also just like a space of social gathering, which is helpful. But I want to say that Winston, because of its like, history, and being a tobacco plantation and the history of Wake Forest gentrification is largely split between, I want to say three distinct categories of queer people. It's like, one are going to be your white folks that go to like UNC School of Arts. Those people are like, actually relatively, okay, not as insane as some of the Wake people. Just because, you know, a school of arts is a is like just a breeding ground for queerness. So most people there have had to navigate that and are more accepting. But again, the similar issues raised earlier about how to navigate race then is very difficult for them oftentimes. The second half are like now these older white men that kind of come into a bunch of queer spaces, and are either very predatory or trying to groom people. And these people are just, in my mind, some of the more dangerous people in Winston not because queerness is marked with danger. But because there's such a small space for queer community in Winston Salem, their ability to have,

like prowess over younger children, and weaponize their sexual alienation becomes just a lot easier. And then third is kind of closer to Winston Salem downtown arts district, as well as a little bit more on the outskirts of Winston Salem. There's a decent amount of black, brown and indigenous people that are trying to navigate queerness in a more nuanced sense outside and within both the confines of the racial shit that comes with both UNC, Wake students as well as these white men. And they have opened a lot of space. They have like, you know, various gatherings at people's apartments, places that create community. So it's not like it's a staticized thing. But there is just like, communities coming in more intimate places that I think can be easily visible to the [inaudible].

CS: Do you think that the smallness of the communities that you're describing is attributed to how small Wake is? Do you think that, or, that's how small Winston Salem is, I should say. Or do you think it's something that's a combination of Winston being sort of a small college slash suburban town in the south?

RD: Well, I think it's both. It's like, Winston is small suburban. Yes. But it's also like the material forces that it's allowed for the very infrastructure of Winston Salem, like I was kind of getting to earlier. The history of gentrification and kind of development after the supposed plantation was gone, became the basis for just like a heavy onslaught of, you know, white Christians to be able to develop the kind of social arena of Winston Salem. And while maybe that's changing, I think that in order for some people to gain access to what we understand as representation, it requires them to make sacrifices to people that they should be holding a lot more closer.

CS: Let's talk about that last thing you said a little bit more. The second point to the last question I had asked was about instances of older queer men being predatory to younger queer people. You just spoke about people needing to hold each other a bit closer. Do you think that there are instances where certain communities or certain people do a bit more work to ensure that younger queer people in Winston are protected? And if not, what are some necessary changes in the spaces that you frequent and have seen this that would be necessary to ensure that younger communities are protected?

RD: Yeah, so I think the more the best example of this is, one night, I was at this, like, this queer house party type thing. And there was a man who was basically, you know, making his rounds older, white, trying, very obviously, now that he was grooming a lot of the younger kids there. And after he talked to me, he offered me a drink, we drink, whatever. And then, one of the older butch lesbians who was Hispanic pulled me aside, it was just like, hey, I need you to know that this person is sus, a lot of people don't come back after meeting with him, yada, yada, yada. And I think that there is internal to community organizing, or at least being communities, people that are willing to look out for you. But it's just because we've become so both socially alienated as a result of COVID as well as because of the spaces that we're in, that we kind of don't know that people who we trust. But I also felt in that moment that I could trust them. And I don't know why. And I'm glad I did, because now we've become like relatively good friends. And it's like what I was saying earlier, right? That there's this feeling that you just get that if you know, you

know, and you can understand that this person is actually looking for you while this person is [inaudible].

CS: That makes total sense. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on about queer life either at Wake or Winston Salem, before we dive into a couple more topics about you specifically?

RD: Um, well, I guess, no, not really.

CS: Okay, okay. Well, let's talk a little bit more about you circling back, kind of like how we introduced it. So you spoke a little bit about your relationship to gender over time. Can you speak a little bit to your relationship to your sexuality and how that's changed over time?

RD: Yeah, so I think earlier, when I was younger, I thought I was definitely... well, okay, so I had my gender crisis before I really had my sexuality crisis, which I think is weird, because a lot of the queer people that I've talked to have had it flipped. But so after I was like, having my gender crisis, basically, one of my closest friends at the time was like, wait, so this is me, anyone you get with is now gay? And now I'm like, Hmm, let me sit with this. What did that mean for me? And I was just like, because I thought I was straight until like, high school. Unfortunately, that was not true. But you know, what I got when I started having these questions, I was like, Well, what is really the difference in my sexual preference? And I couldn't I really just couldn't find a clear delineation between the people who I enjoy being with first and based upon gender. So basically, like, anytime after that, anyone would ask me, like, what's my type? I would just queue like the Rae Sremmurd midsong no type across genders. Because it's like, I just like what I like.

CS: Right. Have you labeled your sexuality in any way? Or is it similar to the way that you think about gender, in that it's something that's difficult to define or place parameters around? Especially given that, you know, you've said, you know, you like what you like.

RD: Yeah, I think I've just used the word queer because it feels like the easiest one to explain. Because, I don't know, all these micro labels are just so like, not just confusing, but I feel like it's such a desire to be like, I'm this particular identity, ergo, nothing else is essential about me. And this is how I've defined my entire life. And it gets into really useless, like debates over particular labels that I feel are both, you know, start random drama for no reason. But also just don't add anything to explanation.

CS: That makes sense. That makes sense. How do you feel that you express your queer identity in your everyday life? So at school, at work, when you're forming relationships with people, etc?

RD: I don't know, actually, because I just think that people when they look at me, they're just like, oh, you're gay. Like, it's like, maybe various mannerisms? Maybe it's I don't have it's such a toxic sense of masculinity? But it's like, I don't know. It's people are just like, yeah, you're gay.

CS: Do you think that there are times or spaces, where you feel the need to change the way that you present yourself to either hide those portions of yourself or for your own safety, be like this is not a space where I can carry myself in the way that I carry myself, that makes me easily identifiable as queer?

RD: Yeah. Like, most of like, I know, at least freshman year, when a lot of our friends were taking us out to, you know, frat parties to kind of get the first experience, like, it was very clear that you had to kind of straighten it up. And like, the guys will be guys girls will be girls, you have a staticized identity. And who was like you had to dress either hyper masc or hyper fem, depending if you're a guy or girl, or what they would perceive you as. And, yeah, so like, I think frat parties were probably the easiest place to draw that example to. But also, it's like, when you're going out to a place that you haven't been before, you will take, you know, extra precaution to make sure you don't look to a effeminate to make sure you don't seem to, you know, yadda yadda yadda. And see what happens.

CS: That makes sense. I guess, my last couple questions are just about. Well, I feel like you've answered this one. And the last one I have is how do you think you've changed in understanding, embracing and recognizing your queerness? I think you've spoken a bit about that. But if you were to put it into a couple of sentences, how would you describe that change in the way you embrace your queerness?

RD: Well, I think I've just been at least more bold and being like, the things I will choose to be okay with and not be okay with. Because, you know, when your alienated first you are willing to accept, like, very mediocre and shitty conditions to just be together with someone to be in relationship, to be intimate with someone? And I think I've just been like, No, I will hold things certain and true. And if I don't, and like, yes, we can show space for each other. But also, there are certain boundaries that are like, I was telling a one of my friends this the other day, but like, it was once, like very recently, this man who's hitting on me, da da da, always being, we're going to be intimate. And he said, put on the head wrap up on before you fuck me and terrorize my ass. I'm like, Okay, yo, stop. Leaving. This is not okay. I'm good. And, yeah, so that honestly, is a pretty good summation of the white queer people. It was a tale of, because it'll also it'll be like, you know, the overt racism being like, get away, but then also simultaneously, a weird racial fetishism. And I think being realizing that it's okay to say no, and back away even when it's like so limited, has been one of the more important things for me.

CS: I'm very sorry that you've had that experience and that it seems like something like that is very common here. That's not only terrifying but also-

RD: Right?!

CS: You know? Um, that is very wild. Do you think that, it's, given that so much of the queer community in Winston Salem is white, what have your experiences been like in queer in color communities? Or have you had many experiences in predominantly queer of color communities given how small and limited they are?

RD: I actually think if you had asked me this question two years ago I would have said almost none. But since I've been, like, trying to be a little more social and go to more of queer of color spaces when some of my friends invite me, it has really been a blessing. Even when it can't be at Wake Forest, it is helpful to at least know there are people who actually intimately care for you that are deeply, that just want to see you be happy and be intimate and have relations and think about things with you. And that has just been, it's not, that's why every time I was trying to explain earlier that it's not easily visible, and it would be even a misnomer to even call it a community. But it's like, you meet people, you have a conversation with them, you hang out with them and their friends, and you realize, oh, this is a person that actually cares for me and is looking out for me. Or a person I choose to be invested in. And it's very much an if you know, you know. And it's not like everyone is conglomerated together, it's you create the communities you find.

CS: So, less of a community, and more of an intimate collective that you've been able to sustain?

RD: Right.

CS: That makes perfect sense. Um, I guess my last question before we try to wrap things up. How would you say your relationship with your family or your family life has changed as you've come out and embraced your queerness? Are they accepting of you?

RD: Yeah, so it's funny, because my dad side that is meant to be Muslim is like, less so accepting. And my dad, and I've been on pretty hostile terms for years now. And we barely, if ever talk to each other unless it's about my younger brother. But my mom and I are on pretty good terms. And she's pretty accepting. Because a lot of her work, as of late and recently has been finding shelter for homeless queer kids and being able to give them like their own space and mental health resources in both Oakland and San Francisco.

CS: When you leave here, or when you leave Wake, what are some of the things, I'm assuming if you end up returning home? What are some of the ways that you want to either continue that work or have already planned to be involved in that work?

RD: Yeah, so my mom and I are already planning on going to the shelter and doing and doing basically what she does on a daily basis. But beyond that, I think, like, for me, the most formative things growing up was literally going to balls, my, my best friend would invite me to, and because they're going to be throwing the summer ball, the house, the the [inaudible], it's going to be like, I have to show up, and they'll be cute. It'll be wonderful. And I'll get to meet people again, and we'll get to meet people that I haven't seen in years. [inaudible]

CS: That's very exciting. And I'm really happy that those are spaces that you're able to be a part of outside of how isolating it is here. Just to wrap things up, is there anything else you would like to share? As a reminder, this is something that's going to be in the archive at Wake Forest. So

there's anything you'd like to speak to generally about Wake Forest, Wake life, recommendations, thoughts that you have just whatever you'd like to speak on.

RD: I guess I can just say that queer people here gotta get their shit together. There's not many. But damn, y'all are willing to sell out for any little bit of recognition. And it's important for us to remember that there are people who precede us and will exceed us that have created a space for us to even exist to have things here. And we have to hold the communities we create as well as the communities that are left in exile with a sense of intimacy and tenderness that I don't think it's currently being practiced.

CS: Beautiful words, beautiful words. Well, thank you for sharing your time and some of your thoughts and story with me I really appreciate that. That concludes what I have here. So thank you again.

RD: Yep.