

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

GELENI FONTAINE

Interviewer: Kamryn Wolf

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Transcribed by Alexandra Gray

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Kamryn Wolf: Today is Wednesday, February 6th 2019. My name is Kamryn Wolf. I'm sitting here in Third Root Community Health Center in Flatbush, Brooklyn, interviewing Geleni Fontaine for the New York City Trans Oral History Project. Geleni can you introduce yourself and just say kind of your constellation of your identities that you want to share with us and also what pronouns you use?

Geleni Fontaine: I like the image of kind of looking up in the sky and kind of [laughter] talking about who I am. Or I could look down at the ground too.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: I'm Geleni Fontaine. I use they/them pronouns and I identify as a queer trans non-binary Latinx person, first generation of Cuban immigrants, native New Yorker, Brooklynite, there's a lot of other things. Sick and disabled. I think of those as being some of my main planets in my constellations [laughter]. I could definitely add onto that— I'm somebody that does a lot of healing work, I'm somebody that identifies as an artist and a poet. Um...yeah. I'll start with those.

Wolf: Great. I am particularly interested in, as I explained, in kind of spirituality and care work and how those pertain to collective action and liberation. And I'm curious, just to start, if you could talk a little bit about the religious and spiritual groundings that you grew up in. And I borrowed that question from Krista Tippett in her podcast on *On Being*, so [laughter] shout out to Krista [laughter].

Fontaine: It's interesting because on the surface, the other kids who were in my community, I grew up as a Catholic kid. You know my parents were Catholic, everybody was always Catholic. But the other stuff underneath that was more complicated. I had people in my family who were *Santeros*, you know, who were definitely involved in *Santeria*, and different traditions who were not very well accepted by the rest of the family. So there was a lot of awareness of this kind of rift in my family because of that. And then, and this wasn't talked about too much either, my grandmother's sister at some point became a Jehovah's Witness. And my grandmother, who at the time was in her fifties, also converted, and became a Jehovah's Witness, just kind of out of the blue. We never knew why— it was never talked about, so, yeah that happened. I grew up in this very Catholic family that also didn't necessarily go to church, with a grandmother who was really very different from any grandmother that I knew, who was also kind of, she was kind of a witch [laughter]. You know she would wear black, she was an herbalist and a healer, she would dig up herbs in Prospect Park, she would make all kinds of poultices and things that would help us out when we had a fever. When we were sick she would lay hands on us, stuff like that. But on the other hand she was also a very rigid, you know, Jehovah's Witness and she would put tracks under my pillow to kind of like, get me on that side and try to leave the watchtower for me, and that kind of thing. It was really interesting. I had a sense as a kid that there was a lot of dogma that I didn't understand but that I really enjoyed feeling this sense of connection and community that I got sometimes when I was in church. That felt really good. But I didn't like the

kind of hierarchical top-down feeling that I got at the same time. I felt like parts of me were welcomed and parts of me were not even, you know, on the same board. So yeah...

Wolf: I'm curious, was that your mom's mom or your dad's mom?

Fontaine: My mother's mother.

Wolf: Your mother's mother.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: So you kind of talked a little bit about how her witchy-ness and healing religious practices showed up as far as herbs and these different things. What else in your-basically you didn't go to church very often.

Fontaine: Mmhm.

Wolf: How else did these things—your family's Catholicism, or the *Santeria*, how did that show up in the day to day life of your family?

Fontaine: Yeah. There was definitely a sense of us paying attention to the different saints that were associated with our birthdays, stuff like that. We did have some different saints in pictures up, but not as much as some of our friends did. I know that I was aware of things like, I would have to be aware of the evil eye, stuff like that I was told about when I was a kid. There were different things like that. Then there were other things that were family beliefs or what other people would call superstition. Like I wasn't supposed to walk backwards cuz the devil does that so cut it out, you know [laughter]. I would be told things like that as a kid.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: I wonder if that was just kinda my grandmother's thing or what it was associated with I don't know.

Wolf: Tell is a little bit more about what New York you grew up in, as a native New Yorker.

Fontaine: Yeah, well certainly, I mean, there's so many layers of different identities that the city's been through. And within any given year, so many different layers of identity within different neighborhoods, you know. It's—there's been so much change and it's kind of—I do think of it as layers or almost like a book that you're leafing through. You're always going underneath and underneath and underneath there's that last page it's the first way that the neighborhood looked to somebody a million years ago when the city was first developed and then who knows what happened after that. When I was a kid I grew up in Park Slope, in Park Slope, Brooklyn which is, you know, for people who don't know it is a very gentrified neighborhood in present day. It's a place where folks who are fairly really wealthy live. When I was growing up it was still a working

class neighborhood, it was mostly Irish and Italian and there was on the edges there was, there were a few different Puerto Rican families, a couple black families along the park side so I had a sense of, like, where all the Latinos were so there was a kind map in my head around the neighborhood where I could find everybody and most of those kids I knew and those families, went to school with them, you know, our parents hung out with each other. And it was a kind of place where we would all play in the street, after school, the doors would open and we'd all be out in the street and we'd just be out until it got dark and then we would go inside and we'd eat. So there was a sense of community, of different-when we had things like block parties they were huge. It was a thing that everyone really showed up at. I have a lot of good memories of things like that, that really felt like a good neighborhood feeling and the kind of thing that gets fetishized for a lot of people now [laughter]. You know, the kind of New York that people want when they, when they come to New York. When I see my friends come to New York, like what they expect. That's not really here anymore in the same way. Or it looks really different. It's much, much smaller, it can be like it's in the same building there's that feeling. But it used to be just the whole neighborhood.

Wolf: Mmhm.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: How did your family end up, kind of from Cuba, into that community in Park Slope?

Fontaine: My parents, back in the 50's, like a lot of Cubans actually would, before the Revolution come migrate to the U.S., up north and work in the sweatshops, get money come home and just have that money for the family. That would happen periodically, there'd just be waves of young people that would come up in the summer, just go up north. There used to be a ferry that would take you from... I don't know if it was from Havana, but it was from Cuba to Key West, and then you would just drive up, all the way up. And people would work at the sweatshops in New York. And we had a couple of distant cousins that were here and held down apartments and they'd warehouse, you know, just tons of relatives who would come and work. They'd have one of these, you know, like pretty big apartments in Washington Heights but there'd be like, 20 people living there [laughter] and working during the day and then coming home at night. So my parents-my mother was the first one of both of them to do that. And she worked in a lot of dress making places, a lot of factories that were putting together clothes, that kind of sweatshop. She also worked in a lot of paper flower...she talks about that a lot, like she has a really strong memory of that. These stores that would make paper flowers for gift shops. She worked a couple factories making these paper flowers and she'd bring home fancy paper that she'd hide under her jacket to make her own things. So yeah, so she convinced my father to come up.

Wolf: They met and married in Cuba?

Fontaine: Yes, they did. Yeah. And then they both came up together and what ended up happening was the Revolution. At a certain point they were here, they were working, and they were told they couldn't go back. They lost everything. You know, their families. They couldn't see

their families. They couldn't have their possessions. What they had was just what they brought with them which was what they were expecting to need over the summer. They were stuck here. And they stayed and it was years before they were able to bring my mother's mother over. It was very complicated because my sister...my mother had had my sister and my sister was a year old and she ended up spending months there with family before they were able to get permission to bring her up. They had to go through the Czech Embassy. There was all kinds of machinations to get my sister-

Wolf: The Czech Embassy?

Fontaine: The Czech Embassy, yeah. I don't even know why, but that was one place they were able to get in and get support from....it was really complicated times. There was this sense from them of having a lot of loss home, loss of family. Tremendous rifts that they could never repair. Some of them were political, some of them were really, you know, because of the experience and, um, and also the fact that then, in those days, it was really hard to talk to anybody in Cuba. You couldn't make phone calls for many years. And even then when you could you were really poor. Mail was very inconsistent, you know, it would take months. It could never get to somebody. Trying to send a package was ridiculous, it was impossible. It was very, very different than the way it is now. They lost access to their family and there was a lot of grief that they both experienced. So when my grandmother came over, and my uncle who'd already been here working, everybody moved in together. There was this sense that everybody's gonna hold on to each other. And we all lived together for a number of years, and yeah, tha—so there was that sense of like, having to make family, and having to hold on to that family that you have. And that was the main experience that I had from my family in those early days. And we lived in Brooklyn, we lived in different places in northern Brooklyn, around, where was it... was it in Greenpoint? No. It was uh...oh god, what's the neighborhood next to Greenpoint? I just forgot.

Wolf: Williamsburg?

Fontaine: Yeah, it was in Williamsburg. They lived in Williamsburg. I think that, just when I was born, they lived in Williamsburg. And eventually ended up in Park Slope.

Wolf: I'm really struck with how you kind of first talking about the Brooklyn block parties and this kind of boisterous everyone knowing everyone on the block and, I'm struck by kind of what it must have taken...your, kind of your parents to experience that, that rift, that break, suddenly, unexpectedly from...from Cuba, from homeland, from family, and kind of remake it in Brooklyn. I'm curious, did you find, was there, kind when you mentioned the Park Slope that you grew up in that it was like you knew all of the other Latinx kids. Was there, were there other Cuban families too or did you...that your family, that your parents, or that you kind of connected to or was it more a sense of like, Latinx solidarity? Was there... I don't know if-

Fontaine: There was a little bit-

Wolf: I'm asking that question right, but...

Fontaine: I mean it was a little bit of both. Like there were a few other families who were Cuban and we were very connected to them. And there were also other families that were Puerto Rican, there was one family of Spaniards and we all just kind of glommed on to each other. When I was a kid the school that we went to, the Catholic school that we went to, was predominantly Irish, you know, so it was a lot of little white kids and it was—it would actually be years before there were black kids too. And other Latinx kids and Asian kids, but when I was there very early on, it was me and I really stood out.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: And from the first day there was all kinds of weird shit, [laughter] so yeah, and my sister had that experience quite a bit.

Wolf: Was it just you—what's your—it was just you and your sister?

Fontaine: Yeah there's two of us. Two siblings. She's seven years older than am.

Wolf: Did you go through Catholic school kind of K-12?

Fontaine: No, I went through Catholic school through eighth grade then I went to the high school that was associated with the grammar school and all of these schools—this was like three blocks away from my house, you know, everything was very close by. And then in the middle of high school everything was just kind of imploding. I-

Wolf: What year would that have been?

Fontaine: I didn't hear what-

Wolf: What year would that have been?

Fontaine: What year was that? That was... that would have been like '83 '84. Like around there. And I had this—I had been trying because my sister had been in this school before me and was a star student. And was gonna go to school to learn to be a teacher and she already knew that she was gonna do all this stuff. She was really brilliant and just really... people loved her. She was really wonderful. I idolized her and I tried to be like her all the time and really failed all the time. And I was trying to do that when I was in school and I just kinda crashed. I just couldn't do it anymore. I didn't know who I was, I didn't know what was going on. And as a kid I would—I was doing stuff like I was trying to get in trouble and be caught so I'd be thrown out of school so I wouldn't have to go to this Catholic school anymore. And it didn't actually work [laughter] although at a certain point I think that I was flunking out. And I think I flunked out and finally was able to transfer out simultaneously so I'm not even sure which way the record shows it, but at a certain point I was finally able to get out, and I went to public school and then flunked out of public school, did, a GED program, finally, when I was nineteen and I was the valedictorian of the

GED program [laughter] and got to give a speech and my mother came and I gave her a bouquet, so that was nice. Yeah...but it was, definitely there was this real different between me up until like fourteen or fifteen and me after.

Wolf: Hmm.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: What do you think was so...what made those school...kind of educational environments so challenging?

Fontaine: Well certainly the Catholic dogma was really hard. Um, certainly there was this sense of trying to figure out who I was and not having any language or any example or any sense of how I could talk about sexuality, and having that be really separate from, from the experience I was in with all these other young people trying to figure myself out. All the pressure to be different than what I was—I was never enough, I was never okay. That was really painful. I was also, you know, my home life was really difficult. I came from an abusive family. My father was an alcoholic. There was physical abuse in the family and it was complicated. I was always trying to escape home as much as I always yearned for home because I kind of inherited that feeling from my family and it was a very real thing. Home was still a dangerous place. But school was dangerous too, and I was bullied a lot in school. A lot, a lot, a lot. There was—people could really smell it off of me that I was uncomfortable. And that I was trying really hard to be something else. I had that sense—like I can't hide that I'm trying really hard. It made me a target in some ways. I don't mean to take that on myself, but I feel like that was part of the experience is that people had a sense of me in a particular way that ultimately led to me being vulnerable. I wasn't old enough to to know how to protect myself against things like that. And it took me a lot of years as a young adult to know what it meant to...to understand myself and my own identities and to recognize that, you know, these are—this is what people will do. And it's not what I have to internalize. But I wasn't able to do that then. It meant that I was depressed. I was really depressed and really anxious.

[car passing]

Wolf: I'm curious...you get your GED, you're valedictorian, you give the speech, you give your mom a bouquet-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: I'm curious, were there... um... new kind of—you alluded that sexuality was part of what was the struggle of finding out who you, who you are amidst a sea of people, whether they're Irish Catholics or your sister—like people who you are not, that I'm kind of curious, what was your first exposure or experience of a queer or trans community or queer trans elder or someone you could—who you maybe looked at and, oh that, maybe that's me?

Fontaine: Interestingly, my neighbors, right next door, the apartment next door, there were—there was a lesbian couple. They wouldn't call themselves that and they wouldn't to this day call themselves that. But, yeah, they were in their—when I was a kid they would have been in their forties and they were both school teachers. They'd served in the peace corps in the sixties, they were peaceniks and activists since back then and they did everything together. They'd been together for a really long time. They were introduced to us almost as if they were sisters even though obviously they weren't and they didn't even look alike or anything like that. And as a kid, they were just really nice to me. They were really kind. And they were really nice to my mother, who was often very lonely. If she needed something they would rush to help her, so there was a sense that like, oh they're really good to the family. They also, I mean interestingly for my father, who was also somebody who was really depressed and who was an alcoholic, the times when he was drunk and we would just kind of push him away there was an edge of violence, they would sometimes like be out sitting on the stoop with him and just start a conversation. And there would be a way that they would deescalate things a little bit. Not—I mean I don't even know if it was an intentional thing, but there was a sense of like, oh okay, things are a little bit more mellow. Now it's safe to kind of sit in the living room again. Or I don't have to figure out how to get out of the apartment and go to somebody else's house or out the fire escape or whatever. There was uh, there was a way they would kind of take a role like that. When I was... probably like twelve or thirteen they would pay me to feed their cats when they went away, which was my first job-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: It was really exciting. For some reason I remember, like, the first money I made from taking care of their cats I bought a cuckoo clock-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: From a mail order catalog [laughter]. I don't know. I got very excited about it. It was mine, you know, I got it from taking care of cats. I remember I came-I went to their house next door, took the key, I went inside to feed the cats and I was early. And they were standing in the living room embracing and they didn't have their tops on. And I remember going, oh, sorry! You know, and I walked out and I was like, oh that's funny. And I didn't really put it together and it was quite awhile and it was a process, but what I recognized was I kept thinking back to that. And try-I was trying to figure it out before I knew it was exactly a question for me.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: What were they doing? Who are they to each other? You know, what does it mean that they're affectionate that way? I think other kids would've, you know, at that age, gotten it much earlier than me. But I was where I was and how I was at that moment. That was my first...my first memory. I also, maybe a couple of years later, I heard about a cousin that I'd never met who was gay who was a school teacher in Pennsylvania and who had a farm and I remember really wanting to go and visit him. For one thing, a farm was really exotic in my mind, even though my parents were both very rural, you know, they were from farms and ranches when they were kids growing

up. But I'd never been to a farm I was like, I wanna go to the farm. And I think some of it was like, I wanna meet this gay uncle.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Who I never got to meet, you know. He died of AIDS a few years after that. He'd been ill, but I started to hear nice stories about him from my mother.

Wolf: Hm.

Fontaine: Not from my father who I think was uncomfortable with him. That told me something too.

Wolf: Mhmm.

Fontaine: That was like my first exposure to like, some queerness.

Wolf: Mhmm.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: I love that that's...this, the kind of story of your, at quote, you know, lesbian neighbors, kind of lesbian in air quotes cuz you said they wouldn't have used that term. I love that they kind of both were your first employers but also your [laughter] first queer figures-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: But also this kind of subtle family mediator-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: In deescalation. Kind of...it seems like they kind of touched in your life in a lot of different ways.

Fontaine: In lots of ways. And years later when I was-you know, I never went to college, so I I didn't have a college experience, a kind of coming out college experience that a lot of people have that often is part of what connects them to a politicized identity. I didn't have that. What I had was, in my early twenties I started training in martial arts and I got involved in a feminist dojo and I became immersed in this culture and it was a very queer culture and it was very woman-centric, very queer and we were warriors. There was a sense of like, the work that we're doing is absolutely connected to the work that we're doing in the world to change things for the better. We would do things-

[car passing]

Fontaine: Like we'd-

Wolf: What was the name of it? I'm sorry. Do you remember?

Fontaine: It was Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts which later on became a large organization that's the Center for Anti-Violence Education. [sniff]

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Which, that, you might know them by that name, C-A-E. And they would do stuff—we would do stuff like... we'd march on Washington and we'd do all of our *kata*—all of our forms, in front of operation rescue. You know, we would just put it out there. In the street. When we marched in PRIDE we didn't march. We would do, we would do our forms. We'd show up in our uniforms. So there was a real sense of, we take this into the world and this is part of the way that we're trying to change things. Any everybody was very political and doing a lot of different things. I was... I was getting involved in that in my early twenties and there were—I also remember these two neighbors at a time when there was—when I heard a woman screaming in the street. And this would have been—and I still lived at home, so this was the early nineties. And I remember running outside in my pajamas and my neighbors running outside in their pajamas and they had baseball bats and I had a bottle. We were like—let's go [laughter]. Like we're taking-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: Care of shit.

Wolf: [laughter] Mmm.

Fontaine: We were like, are you okay? What's going on? You know, there was... yeah, there was a sense of we're gonna take care of our community. And I got some of that from them. And I remember feeling a lot of kinship...at that time. In that moment with them.

Wolf: I'm kind of curious, you...so you mentioned this...well a lot of different—I mean, you mentioned how much New York City has changed-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: Since you grew up. But also thinking about how much language has changed-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: And kind of your neighbors who-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: May not, still to this day, identify as lesbian.

Fontaine: Right.

Wolf: And I'm kind of curious...what I'm hearing is that...what came first for you...was a...was like a feminist-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: Orientation-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Or a gay orientation. And I'm kind of curious when transgender, or kind of...yeah, when that kind of came-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Into the lexicon for you. Or when you became aware-

Fontaine: Right.

Wolf: Of or connected to trans people-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: And communities?

Fontaine: I mean certainly before I had any language for it, I remember how weird it felt to be expected to wear dresses and skirts which, if—probably weirder than it would for me now.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Strangely enough. I don't know. I felt like there was—the way I was being tracked into being was really confusing to me. And I never had the sense, within my own, you know, just my own sexual orientation and also within my own gender identity I didn't have the sense that I wanted to be a boy so much as I kind of wanted to move through the world a little differently. I wanted to be perceived differently but I didn't know how. I didn't know how to get there or how to be... how to communicate about it in any kind of way. I remember being really scared when people told me things like I don't walk like a girl. I remember being pressured around different things like that about the way that I should move around or the way that I should move around or what I should wear. And I would have a sense of fear that it wasn't okay to not pass as something, you know. I remember being confused. I remember a lot of different confusion and

questions from things like that, and...then, let me see... There was that... Yeah. That kind of continued through high school... I remember that back in the... back in the mid-nineties, I started meeting trans folks, more trans folks. Cuz I'd met a couple of people. I remember being intrigued and being interested in a way that didn't make any sense to me-

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: And having this kind of curiosity, and—but I didn't necessarily associate it with me. Me being curious about me or me trying to work something out about me, but I think that's what was going on. And I was working for CAE at that time and I was teaching self defense, and one of the—I think early on as a teacher, as a new teacher, I was called on to do this workshop for the Metropolitan Gender Network, which was one of the first trans organizations that I was aware of. And it was in an old union building on the west side, I think in Chelsea, and...yeah. Wow. Leslie Feinberg was there, Sylvia Rivera was there. And I'd known Leslie from another women's dojo, where Leslie was really popular. We'd met, but this was the first time we'd talked, and I'd never met Sylvia. And I got to teach them both self defense. I mean they already—I mean there's that sense you already know self defense [laughter]-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: What are the things that we do to-

Wolf: Mhmm.

Fontaine: To stay alive, you know, so the workshops would be explorations of questions like that. You know, like, here are some things that people have told me that they do. These are some things that I think about. What can we come up with together? That's really the way that I would facilitate, or any of us who were teachers would facilitate. So they had a lot to share. And I had this sense with Sylvia that, oh, like I felt very free with her. I felt like she was one of my aunts. I felt this big kinship with her. And I remember just being really excited to meet them both. And I knew who they were, like I knew who they were. But Sylvia wasn't famous then in the same kind of way. And Leslie was. Leslie was definitely—like the book was out. All of that.

Wolf: The book being Stone Butch Blues.

Fontaine: Stone Butch Blues, yeah. But, then over the years I, you know, I-I would see Sylvia at different events. We'd march together a little bit, and PRIDE. And she was living in Park Slope at the time with a group of different trans women, who I also knew from Metropolitan Gender Network and from the—from Identity House and a bunch of different places. And... and I remember...I remember just having a ton of questions that I didn't know how to ask. And it wasn't so much about, how do you identify? What are the words that you use? It was more like, how do we know who we are to begin with? How do—who makes those decisions? Does somebody make it for us? Do we decide on our own? Do we have the right to do that? [Laughter] It was more questions like that that coming up for me-

Wolf: Mhm.

Fontaine: But yeah, that was the first time that I was thinking about my own gender identity.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: I love that that... and I feel like this...continues to be really important in spaces that I've moved through, is kind of this emphasis on community knowledge, of—so when you're facilitating something at the Metropolitan Gender Network, you're facilitating a workshop on self defense but-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: You're asking the question to other trans-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Folks—what are we already doing?

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: What do we already know? How can we...assemble those and practice those-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Things together? I think is-

Fontaine: Mmm. Yeah, yeah-

Wolf: An incredible...power for leader—an incredible model for leadership-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: But also community building.

Fontaine: Yeah. It was...it was really empowering to be apart of those conversations and to facilitate them happening. And it makes me realize now in retrospect that all of my early trans people in my lives-my life were trans women, or kind of on the feminine spectrum. Other people would use that language. All my early folks. And then I think it was the first trans man was identified as a trans man at the time that I knew was Imani Henry-

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Who was facilitating a bunch of different workshops at the time around gender and, at the time, Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts was asking questions like, who are we for? What does woman mean? And there were—there were a lot of questions like, we don't know. Just trying to get some more information. Imani facilitated a workshop that I co-facilitated with him and we were asking ourselves some of those questions like, so when people come—is there anybody who isn't allowed to be here? And we had different answers to that question at different times, you know, and in retrospect some of them would seem enlightened and some of them not, just depending on what stage we were in as we were learning different things. But I remember being in those conversations and I was helping to facilitate them happening while I was learning a lot of stuff myself and feeling kind of clueless but also just engaged in those conversations.

Wolf: Where were those workshops that Imani Henry...would lead? Where would those happen?

Fontaine: Well-

Wolf: Or through what organization?

Fontaine: Yeah. The two that I'm thinking of happened at CAE, at Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts, so that happened after class. I think we did a two part workshop.

Wolf: I'm curious then, and we might be jumping some years here, but how you ended deciding to go to acupuncture school? And you were—I guess even before you went to acupuncture school you became a registered nurse?

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: Is that right?

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: So kind of what... what made you shift gears-

Fontaine: Mhmm.

Wolf: Into...

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: That field?

Fontaine: I was a registered nurse for a few years and I actually got to a point at which I was really burnt out and had to stop working for awhile. And I was sick and dealing with health issues, and by the time I was ready to go back to work it was a slump in the job market and I couldn't find

anything. And I'd been out of work so I was out of practice and would've had to be retrained in different ways, so instead I had already been doing some teaching on a per diem basis at what was then CAE, and... I would continue to do that and I was making a little bit of a living there, and I'd just made a proposal that I could take on—I could create an off-sight educational program. Teaching, just organizing people to teach defense classes off-sight, which would happen but in a very disorganized way at that point. So instead I said, look I'll be the person on-sight to help recruit and just market this program and grow it in an intentional way and pull together curricula, and I made an argument for myself taking on that role, and then also what I would be paid would be generated from what organizations and institutions would pay us for these workshops. So that was successful and I made this job for myself as the person who coordinated our off-sight program. I did that for a buncha years and then also did the same thing with our youth program and worked with slot of different communities, and we went through this financial crunch, and this kind of financial emergency as an institution, and it turned out that the development person had been hiding some, you know, some issues and been covering them up so people wouldn't be alarmed, and then couldn't hide them anymore. We ended up almost closing and the board just kind of fled. And the community stepped in and, uh, saved the organization by putting together a fundraiser, and in a few weeks we were raising over forty thousand dollars to help the programs continue running. We worked—we volunteered our services, cuz we were all laid off as workers, through the end of the season so that, you know, I didn't want to let my youth down. So-

Wolf: What year would that have been? Do you remember?

Fontaine: That would have been like, 2003-4? Around then. And, everything had kind of fallen through in my life, and I thought well, maybe this is the time to go to school [laughter]. And always wanted to go to school to study East Asian medicine and I'd most been interested in herbal medicine traditions because my grandmother was an herbalist. That was...that was the way that she practiced healing. And I never got to learn that from her so I was always drawn to that. Um, but the more that I looked at different schools the one that interested me the most was actually a school that didn't have an herbal program, but was run by this really amazing Taoist priest, who came from this remarkable tradition, and I was very interested in being part of that program and ended up joining that. And I went to school, it was a masters program, it was three year-three and a half years, you know. And then, after that it was just getting my licensure and getting to work. Yeah that's how it worked out.

Wolf: Hmm.

Fontaine: And it was interesting 'cuz it seemed to make a lot of sense to me, to go from doing this educational anti-violence work and community empowerment work, to doing this healing work as nurse, working, doing community health, and going from that into the martial training that I was involved in, and then that into more healing work on a hands-on basis as a clinician, as an acupuncturist. It actually really flows-

Wolf: Mhm.

Fontaine: And I feel like everything helped everything coming after it.

Wolf: Mhmm.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Um... and so you did acupuncture school at the Swedish Institute, right?

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: And the—um, your teachers, the Taoist priest. What was that persons name?

Fontaine: Jeffrey Yuen. That's Y-U-E-N.

Wolf: I'm curious, what...I know you mentioned kind of your interest partly came—stemmed from your grandmother's herbalism practices, which... I imagine probably stemmed from Cuban...traditional practices. Is that right? Or-

Fontaine: I don't know-

Wolf: Where do you think she learned that stuff from?

Fontaine: It's a question that I have-

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: I know that my other said that she learned from her mother-

Wolf: Mhm.

Fontaine: Which is good. But it's not—yeah.

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: I don't know. I don't know. Like I—and it's interesting because I know that my family's Cuban. We're light-skinned folks. I know that there's different people in our family, that racially, you know, have different appearances. I don't know if this is an indigenous practice. There are things in our family that don't get talked about. There are things that get covered up and hidden. I have a lot of questions like that. I know that it wasn't standard, kind of first aid, you know, learning that she had. Um, it wasn't something that was kind of institutionally taught, as far as I can tell. There were very spiritual aspects to it, but I don't know where that all came from. I still don't know [laughter].

Wolf: I'm kind of curious, at—kind of under Jeffrey Yuen, you're kind of learning this...clinical modality of acupuncture...that also—and he's also a Taoist priest, so there's-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: Also kind of a very spiritual, cosmological underpinning to that form of medicine. And I'm kind of curious how that...transformed or shifted or shaped or challenged—kind of how it related to whatever spiritual practices you were bringing to it.

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: Or how it kind of shifted your understanding of, of spirituality [inaudible].

Fontaine: I think, um...

Wolf: If at all. Maybe it didn't at all.

Fontaine: Yeah, I'm not sure that I can articulate it-

Wolf: Mhm.

Fontaine: I think that it did in the sense that there was this understanding—like there was—well say, like...one of the things that's sometimes frustrating, as somebody who studied acupuncture is, there's a way that Western acupuncturists go through school and people study as if they're at Hogwarts, you know-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: They're like, I'm learning magic! [laughter]. There can be a little bit of a weird something that people articulate that's a little frustrating. But, having said that, there is a sense of being connected to something else. It's not something that is separate from who we are already. It's something that's there and it's something that's apart of everyone. But there is a sense that when you do this work and when you cultivate this practice, that you're able to access that in a way that you're able to pass it on to other people without diminishing something for yourself. So, in a practical sense, I feel like that's what I learned through the program. And that's what I'm still learning.

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: Yeah. I don't know if I can explain it more than that.

Wolf: No, that's...yeah, that's beautiful. And I can kind of speak from some experience as someone who used to be your coworker, but who is also—had the privilege of being on your table and receiving treatment from you, that there's a sense...kind of listening now about your

experience, your kind of history of growing up and kind of beginning...well not beginning your professional career 'cuz that started with the cat sitting [laughter]-

Fontaine: [laughter] Mmhm.

Wolf: But as an educator, very much the way that I feel like you approach acupuncture is...is still in that kind of community empowerment, kind of educational perspective of, I'm gonna do these points and this is why and this is how these things connect and, very much, my experience of your treatments is a sharing of those tools and a sharing of that wisdom. And a co-creating of the session-

Fontaine: Mmm.

Wolf: In a way. And I don't know if that's intentional or conscious, but it makes sense to-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Me, how you described it.

Fontaine: Yeah, definitely. I'm glad.

Wolf: [laughter].

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Then I'm curious...how and when you got involved at Third Root. And kind of what Third Root is, if you can share a little bit about that?

Fontaine: Yeah. Third Root is a holistic health care center that's cooperatively run. There are currently three collective members and two constituent thought partners. So that's our team of five people right now. But there have been different numbers of people in the collective over the years, and our main modalities that we offer here are yoga, acupuncture, massage therapy, and herbal medicine. We offer all of those services, including an herbal education program. Our main mission is to be able to create access to these services and to this information in an empowering way. So we try to have policies that'll create access. We have sliding scale fees for all of the different services, and we do it according to people's household income.

[car passing]

Fontaine: And there's more. There's more that we try to...we try to create together. And...so that's Third Root. And I got involved in Third Root in the beginning of 2011. I was on a Healing Justice panel at the...what was the name of that place...? I forget, but I was on a Healing Justice panel with Jacobi and with some folks from ALP, the Audre Lorde Project. And I can't remember who else but there were a bunch of us. And we were talking about Healing Justice and I was

actually representing at the time, I was representing the CAE, so I was talking about anti-violence work. And, it was an interesting conversation, and I had been working as an acupuncturist on my own, doing a home practice, but I was interested in working with other people, but it would have to be the right environment. I didn't wanna work in the kind of [laughter], the kind of like, really difficult, almost acupuncture mills that people get into when they're first out of school. Where they throw forty people at you and you're not really able to do enough for anybody, you know, and it can be very difficult. I was on this panel and it was really interesting to talk to everybody, and I shared contact information with everybody 'cuz we needed to talk about the program, and I got a text from Jacobi saying, hey, would you be interested in talking to us about practicing acupuncture at Third Root? And I said, yes, I would be really interested in talking with everybody about that. I got to meet the collective, and I had an interview and got all of the information kind of broken down for me. And I knew that I was interested, and I was interested in having my home practice and then having a practice here, and yeah. And I got involved [laughter].

Wolf: Mmm.

Fontaine: That's the beginning of that [laughter].

Wolf: How would you describe...what Healing Justice is for you? I mean you said that it...

Fontaine: Mmm.

Wolf: It, there were a lot of different people coming from a lot of different perspectives on that panel.

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: But I'm curious what, for you that-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: Looks like?

Fontaine: I think I approach it from a very, and it makes sense, from a kind of clinical perspective, like what it's like to work with people. And work one on one as well as with groups, so for me, Healing Justice is a sense of understanding that, for, for all of us in communities that are working for social justice to create change to right something that's wrong and to create new systems that, as we're doing that we have to pay attention to our own individual healing in order to be able to move forward. So that we are nourishing movements when we're nourishing ourselves. When we're addressing our own pain, our own need to heal, we're really addressing our wholeness as well as the wholeness of our communities. A sense of these things being interconnected and inseparable, and just as important, each as the other. Yeah, that's that's the main way that I look at it, I know that it was at a time that a lot of us were talking about what it was like-this was, this was before Occupy Wall Street, what it was like to be really involved in

direct action stuff and seeing people who were just exhausted and getting sick all the time and, you know, and then also people who were dealing with new disabilities, and injuries and how do I keep doing this? So that was a way these questions were starting to manifest-

[car passing]

Fontaine: At the time. Yeah.

Wolf: What was the role...where in this landscape of...the emerging orientation of Healing Justice in social movements, and this kind of...interconnection between...the health of social movements and the health of individual bodies. I'm kind of curious, where...what you think the role of trans people was in those movements, or kind of-

Fontaine: Mmm.

Wolf: I know Jacobi and, I think, another founder of...and so it's Jacobi Ballard who is a-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: A yoga teacher and-

Fontaine: An herbalist. Yeah.

Wolf: An herbalist. Are trans-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: So I'm kind of curious if there were other folks involved? At that, at that kind of pre-Occupy Wall Street-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: 2011. And, a separate but related question is...do you think your queerness and your transness...how do they effect your work as a healer?

Fontaine: Mhm.

[door shutting]

Wolf: How do they influence your work as a healer-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: As an acupuncturist?

Fontaine: I'm not able to think of individuals who had really specific roles, but I know that, I mean my own experience shows me that trans folks have always been at the forefront of these kind of emerging responses from community and that sense of Healing Justice. I think about Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson putting together STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries). Always from that sense of like, how do we take care of ourselves? And that our own individual healing is part of all of this, and our own sense of do we have a home to go to? Do we have a family? Do we have a place to eat and a place to sleep? Do we have the very basics of what we need in order to be okay? In order to do this work and transform and question systems and push back. I feel like trans people have always done that, in some sense or another. And I feel like all the kind of DIY culture that other people have had to, to learn, has just kind of always by—because of need, been something that that trans folks have been part of. At least ones that I know, like trans communities—especially trans people of color communities, and I also think about, like many, many people in disability justice community who are, who are people of color, who are trans as well, doing that same kind of thing. Thinking about how we create access as being connected to all of our political work. I think that that's not really a concise answer, but [laughter]-

Wolf: No, yeah, I think that... I'm kind of curious, this sort of...it makes sense that there's a DIY emphasis to it and I'm kind of even thinking back to kind of when you were talking about the workshops you would lead as part of CAE as like, how do we take care of ourselves?

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: How do we we each other alive? How do we eat? How do we—where do we—do we have a place to stay?

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: And even kind of thinking about how that connects to some of your feelings of fear and confusion that there's a sense of...the answers lie within our, within ourselves. And it's a matter of...what I'm hearing is that it's a matter of finding other people who can affirm that-

Fontaine: Mm.

Wolf: And who can problem solve that together-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: And then make it happen.

Fontaine: [to unidentified person] Hey.

Unidentified Person: [inaudible]

Fontaine: Bye, [inaudible name].

Wolf: Were just about at time, so I'm curious if there's anything that you feel...that you feel like you want to mention that we haven't kind of talked about before?

Fontaine: I feel like I could talk about all of it for a long time-

Wolf: [laughter]

Fontaine: No there's nothing.

Wolf: So I guess then, kind of as a, as a closing question...I'm curious kind of, one, what do you do to take care of yourself as a...queer trans fat disabled-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: Latinx healer? Like, how do you...how do you take care of yourself-

Fontaine: Mhm.

Wolf: Doing this care work for others?

Fontaine: You know, I ask myself that a lot, and I think asking myself the question on a regular basis is always a really good practice. And seeing what answers I come up with, cuz they change over time, for sure. I think some of it is remembering that when I'm taking care of myself, I'm doing justice work. And that, that's a big thing. I had my fiftieth birthday party...last year? I didn't really do a big party this year. But last year when I had my fiftieth birthday party, there was a trans person of color, who was also disabled, part time chair user, who's a year younger than me, and was really really adamantly in my face about like, yes, it's your birthday! Happy birthday! And said, it's no small thing that you are and you're fifty years ago. That means something to people. And you too, you know, but it means something to people. That was something that I remembered and that I carried with me. Just that sense of... It's a big deal. It's a big deal to get to where I am, and to just remember that the love I send to other people is something that I always need to reflect back on myself. One of the practices that I've been doing lately is just actually asking myself when I'm in the middle of a hard spot, like what would I tell someone I cared about who was relaying this kind of circumstance to me. Who was telling me they needed this, or they made this mistake. What would I say to them? What would I say if it was a person who I was treating, you know? One of my patients, you know? How would I respond to them? What would I offer them? And I always come up with something that I might not necessarily come up with some other way-

Wolf: Yeah.

Fontaine: So, yeah. So it's a reminder to myself that I deserve that just like other people do.

Wolf: Mhm.

Fontaine: So I try to keep doing things like that on a regular basis.

[inaudible talking in background]

Wolf: Well, thank you so much for your time, Geleni-

Fontaine: Sure!

Wolf: It's been a real pleasure. And, I agree there's a million different things that I would love to ask you-

Fontaine: [laughter]

Wolf: We could probably talk for hours, but, it's 9:30 [PM] and it's been a long day, and a rainy one at that-

Fontaine: Yeah.

Wolf: Thank you though for your time tonight, but also for your time and energy that you taken caring—that you've taken care of the world, so-

Fontaine: Thank you. Thank you for doing this.