

NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

TOURMALINE

Interviewer: AJ Lewis

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Transcribed by Laney Rasmussen

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AJ Lewis: Hello, my name is AJ Lewis and I'll be having a conversation with Tourmaline for the New York City Trans Oral History project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans identifying people. It is August 21st, 2019, and this is being recorded in SoHo Manhattan. Hi Tourmaline.

Tourmaline: Hi, thanks for having me!

Lewis: How're you doing?

Tourmaline: Great. Excited to be here!

Lewis: Um, would you mind just briefly introducing yourself for the recorder-

Tourmaline: Sure!

Lewis: Just whatever you want to share.

Tourmaline: My name is Tourmaline. I'm an artist, a filmmaker, um, I live in New York City, and yeah.

Lewis: Um, you grew up in Boston, is that right?

Tourmaline: Uh yeah, so um, I moved to New York, 17 years ago in 2002 when I was 19, and before that before that I had um- was living in Boston.

Lewis: Um, what part was it of Boston?

Tourmaline: In Roxbury, um and then in this place called the, West End.

Lewis: What was growing up there like?

Tourmaline: Growing up in Boston- I think my recollection always makes it feel more miserable than it actually was, maybe. Um, but I found Boston to be a like, an incredibly racist, conservative, um like, New England city. Where, also lots of like Black social movements had contributed to the cultural life, and the feel and texture of the city. So to me it's a city kind of at war with itself, and I didn't enjoy being there for the most part and I always kinda wanted to leave.

Lewis: Do you have any like uh, specific early memories of it being a city that was at war with itself, that stuck with you?

Tourmaline: Yeah, um, you know I went to- like growing up, I went to like a, Black Nationalist church, that had like this beautiful portrait of Marcus Garvey on the side, and you knew it was one of like- it was, my dad at the time was like, this outreach worker and the reverend, um

person, was you know an activist and someone who I like re-met much later in life through my activist work. I remember it being like, a hub for people coming together who were homeless, who- this was like the early days of you know, Boston experiencing the HIV/AIDS crisis. So, people who were positive, people of color... Um, but as soon as we kind of left the church, it was not that way at all.

Lewis: Was uh- May I ask what denomination the church was?

Tourmaline: Yeah. It was um, you know it was hard to say, I'm not sure. It was like, um, It was not- maybe it was like Protestant, maybe like, a person was Episcopellian? I'm actually not sure. Like I actually have no idea.

Lewis: Was a Black Nationalism part of your early life in other ways too?

Tourmaline: Yeah, [Laughter] it definitely was. I went to this program that was like, uh a Black Nationalist um, like young people's program during the week, and then in summer they had like a- During the week was like after school, and during the summer, it was everyday during the day. You would start the day, reciting the Kwanzaa Principles and you would learn a lot of straight black history that wasn't taught in school. Um, and it had a real profound impact on me because part of it was about the principals. Which were about like, setting you up to out and be um amidst a like, white culture and communities, and like go to school with white people, but not lose your groundedness in the umm, black community. So it was really interesting for me to be at a white school and then like know what I was not being taught and argue with my teachers about things that I had learned after school, or during the summer before the school had started. Um, then kinda later when I was in highschool- yeah when I started highschool, I like started a class- that my highschool still teaches on black history and um yeah, it was kinda a lot of like, finding myself feeling deeply alienated, but being grounded through history.

Lewis: Um, did you have like family or friends that were sources of support around you negotiating around these different context schools?

Tourmaline: I don't you know- my like, family was all negotiating it at different moments, but I don't know at the time if we really had a language to talk about it. Um we [pause], yeah I don't think that we were. I wish we had more of a language in order to support each other, but I think at the time- I know my experience wasn't like um- I probably wasn't being very supportive and I wasn't feeling really supported, I just felt really isolated I think.

Lewis: Can you tell me a little about your parents?

Tourmaline: Yeah um, so my mom grew up in Boston and was a community organizer, and a Union organizer, and also a painter. My dad grew up in Memphis and was also a community organizer and union organizer, and they met in this group they helped start called, Acorn, in Detroit, Michigan, Where my dad's uncle lived. They lived in Michigan for a while, and then for some reason moved to Boston, and I was born shortly after that.

Lewis: And did there- Since they had lives as political organizers, did that influence your own work.

Tourmaline: Yeah, absolutely. You know, so my dad in Memphis was part of this group that was kind of- It was called the Invaders, and it was in some ways modeled after the Black Panther Party and um, I remember-

Lewis: May ask around when he was involved with them?

Tourmaline: Yeah, so he was involved with the um, Invaders, around the mid-to-late 60's. He went to Vietnam, he did like three tours in Vietnam, starting when he was 17. He was born in 1950 so, and he was back and forth in the invaders during those times, and I remember he was there in 1968, when a Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, and was doing like a lot of organizing around that. And at the time there was a sanitation strike in Memphis and my whole family was involved in supporting that.

Lewis: I'm sorry maybe you just said this, but how did your parents end up in Boston again?

Tourmaline: I have no idea. I really have no idea really, I just- my moms like, "aww yeah, your dad always wanted to go to Boston" and I was like, "really?" Like I don't believe it [Laughter]. Um I know he had a challenging relationship with the South and wanting to leave it and feeling very- His experience as like a black person in the south was um really challenging, but I also then he felt really isolated and Boston like, not having any family, and he spent a lot of time when I was growing up at the VA [Veterans Affairs], and so he built a lot of community kind of out of the VA Hospital. I feel like it is kind of how I like to go- and I think that has kind of imprinted on me, you know how I like to go Callen Lord [Community Health Center] and catch up with people. I've been going there for um, maybe like 14 years or something like that, and so I just like- It's just like seeing people and having community and um, I think that, to me, it's like community that you create like in the institution and that being like, part of just your life. Yeah.

Lewis: Like what did you- like how would you describe what you were like as a- when you were growing up?

Tourmaline: Yeah [laughter]. Um, I was, I think I was like really unruly. I was like, also really miserable. And I think I told a lot of jokes, and it was like, really funny. And I remember, having lived in New York for a little while and being like, "oh", like, in parts of that coming back to me and then realizing like how pushed down I had become. Because I think that I was like, Yeah, I think I was like, you know, family comedian or like, the person that is very theatrical can have all these, all these kinds of things.

Lewis: Are you the youngest of your siblings?

Tourmaline: Yeah, yeah. I'm the youngest of the siblings. I grew up with, Yeah.

Lewis: I want to ask you about New York City. But I'm curious if there's like anything about like early life that you want to mark before we move on...

Tourmaline: Yeah. I mean, I think so when I was growing up in Boston, I think the, you know, it's like, um I found, queerness and transness and the, like, immediate world around me. So I remember like I lived- So I grew up in Roxbury and then it was like section eight housing. And my family was evicted from, because of some strange gender rule, where like, if you were assigned male, you couldn't be sharing a bedroom with someone who was assigned female after like a certain period of time. So there were three of us, me and my two siblings, and my mom, we all live together in a two bedroom apartment that we then had to leave. Because of like weird section eight laws of like, you know that I'm just like, wow, this is like the gender binary being reproduced through housing. So we moved to this like basement apartment and this neighborhood called, Fenway [Boston]. And we lived there for maybe like, nine months or something like that, and it was pretty miserable. It was like, no sunlight basement in the alley, next to a bar, so there was just like, it was just like not really that fun. But we lived next to like- definitely looking back, like a lot of like trans people were just like on the corner on the street hustling and I remember like, having relationships with them, like, just like hanging out and talking to them, and it was like our apartment than an alleyway, then I think somebody like, Kenny's pizza and a laundromat... Maybe it was like uncle Lou's pizza, some kind of pizza place and then a laundromat and with like a little arcade. And so I remember and across the street from that was like a video store where you go rent VHS's and that really, you know, are overpriced. Then there was like a park where, I think people were like hustling and like doing sex work. So I remember like, hanging out on the sidewalk, and playing, and just like meeting older trans woman, and my mom being like really curious about that. And then I remember my mom said my name- I think I got in an argument with someone who was a trans woman, and my mom was like telling me to come on and like said my name. And that person was like, yeah, go home or something like that, like it was really funny looking back and then-

Lewis: Do you remember what you were arguing about?

Tourmaline: I have no idea. I have no idea maybe like, I was like riding my bike and they were annoyed about like, how much space I was taking up on the sidewalk- some, some kind of thing, you know, like some kind of classic, you know, being in the neighborhood argument. And I couldn't have been, u, I think I was nine at the time, something like that. And,- or what happened, we were- I was going into the video store some kind of like, strange thing happened. But just like classic neighborhood dynamics, and then my mom got home and was like, how does that person know your name? You know, it was like really interesting that, I think that was the first time and I was like, oh, Like, what? There's something, there's something going on here that I am not aware of, you know, and I think it's about transness. And I think it's about sex work, but I didn't have a language to put it into. I think that was my first introduction to both of those things, but at the same time, and then what happened... And then they would just talk to me all the time, and I would talk to them, and it would be really- it's just, it's so funny looking back, you know, and I was like, oh, like, these relationships were just part of the fabric of the community, you know. It

wasn't- it was just like, people, everyday people just kind of just like being together, you know, and having to go about their lives or whatever. Then at the same time, I was really close with this person, David Farwell. Who was positive [HIV], and we were friends. He was in his, like 30s, I think, but we were- and I was 10 or nine, and it was like an actual friendship. And my dad was like, really freaked out by the closeness of our relationship, and my mom used to talk to me about it all the time. And like, check in and like, "what's going on is everything, you know, okay?"- But he did this theater group at a church. And so, and like, everyone wanted to be part of his plays. I remember that was like my, like, first experience of having like a really close relationship with another queer person. And I just kind of like, look back and I'm like, oh, Wow- this is a different church. So we left that church when my parents split up, when we went to this Catholic church called St. Cecilia's, that was, like, full queer people and including David. He lived in the church and he like- we did theater. I remember like, kind of never getting the part that I wanted and always being like, disappointed that I went to someone else, you know, like, my sibling or just like whoever. And we just had- the relationship like, really had a profound effect on me. It was at a time when my dad was disabled and was frequently at Mass mental, which was like a psych hospital. That was like, right, kind of down the street from where we were. We were living in the kind of shadow of a lot of hospitals, because of like, my family having a lot of disabled people in it, and like needing care from the hospitals. So my dad was really kind of upset about my proximity to David, and I was kind of confused and just trying to like, make sense of the whole world. Then He died, I think in 1995, and that just had like a deep- or could have been 93'- it just had like, just a deep impact on me. And it's just like a thing that, you know, kind of like a friend, slash a mentor, slash someone who really liked turn the lights on in any room that he walked into, and he was like, such a theater queen. And you know that I think really defined my early early life in Boston. Then yeah, then those- that relationship was gone. No one kind of came back to fill that role, of like connecting me to like a broader queer, kind of trans community. Then we left Fenway and I never saw the people, who are my neighbors, like, again.

Lewis: Do you remember any of the trans women's names who were in your neighborhood?.

Tourmaline: No, no. Yeah. I mean, I probably could think, you know, after the interview, I probably will. It was wild, and you know, looking back, it was like a really kind of interesting block. I remember also my mom got really freaked out because, you know, at the time I was wearing like, quote unquote, like girls clothing, and my school started to comment on it. But they would frame it as like, Oh, that's interesting, like, sweater or those are interesting, like, you know they were just have a little comments, you know, all the time. And then I remember like, walking into church, and my mom being really freaked out about how I was walking, and me just being totally confused. I think I was like, You know, switching my hips back and forth or something like that, but she was really freaked out. And she was like, "can't walk that way into church". and I remember that was like an early form of like gender correction, you know, like gender policing and being like really stunned.

Lewis: Do you remember how it felt when she said that?

Tourmaline: I was just, like, totally ashamed. I was so caught off guard and really ashamed and also deeply confused, you know? And like, I remember trying to figure out like, how am I walking? Like, what about my walking is different from how everyone else is walking? You know? I think I was just walking like the people, who I was hanging out with were walking. But for whatever reason, like it wasn't how she wanted me to walk, or deciding how I should walk. I think it was the very- I place it as like one of those moments where I'm like, oh, I was really at odds with expectations around gender and like moving through the world.

Lewis: It's so hard, as in my experience with like, kids are like we tend to be like, so acutely aware of the many complex messages that we get all the time. We don't have the sort of repertory yet to actually, you know, think through what we're being told. Usually the reflect is that it just feels bad.

Tourmaline: Yeah, it just felt bad. I remember just feeling bad and me being like, really confused about it.

Lewis: How did you know that your church was full of queer people?

Tourmaline: Um, my family just kind of talked about it. My mom talked about it and looking back I'm like, Oh yeah.

Lewis: How did you end up becoming friends with David?

Tourmaline: I think my mom was, my mom was really close with David and maybe didn't know that he was queer. Then I remember my mom like sitting us down and explaining that David was gay and I was like, "okay" [laughter]. It just like, didn't really have that much of an impact on me and then I don't know what happened... We- He just started doing like taking, you know, like, being a babysitter person, child care person. Then I would do his theater groups, and then my mom would go away for whatever reason and he would stay with us, and we would have like, talk on the phone, and stuff like that.

Lewis: And your parents were concerned about the relationship because they were concerned that sex was involved?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I think that they're concerned sex was involved. But there was no sex involved. Yeah.

Lewis: And you? Let's see, see you came to New York City in 2001. Is that correct?

Tourmaline: 2002.

Lewis: Is that true? We came at the same time apparently [laughter]...

Tourmaline: Yeah. I came in August 2002. So it's like, exactly 17 years.

Lewis: Why did you want to come to New York?

Tourmaline: You know, and like I- everything was about New York when I wasn't in New York. Like, all the TV shows were about New York, all the music was about New York. And then I remember coming for the first time in 1998 and- or seven, and I was just like, holy shit. Everything is huge. Movie theaters are huge. That like, subways are huge, the buildings are huge, the billboards are huge. I just like I was, it was like, deep stimulation, you know, and it felt amazing. It was like, Oh my god, like, this exists. Like all the people kind of out and about. I don't know, I was just like, I remember just looking up at the buildings and just being so in awe of everything. Like going and looking up at the World Trade Center and being like, so, like in disbelief and I don't know, it's just totally wild to me that like something could be so big. And I didn't have words for it, but I just like, really wanted to be here. And then I remember also- Yeah, it's like when, I was listening to a lot of little Kim, and Biggie, and Wu Tang, and just like all the music was just all 100% New York City that I was listening to. I was watching some TV, and MTV was like all it was filmed in New York City in Times Square, Carson Daly. I was like, I was just like, wow, what is this place? Huge, like, you know, whatever. It just felt amazing to consume the image of New York. And so yeah, I was just like, I need to- Also it's like, you know, Boston in the wintertime is incredibly depressing. I mean, just year round it feels depressing. But maybe it doesn't anymore, for anyone else who's there [laughter]. But in the wintertime, I had a really hard time with it. And so I knew that I wanted to like be in a much bigger city. And like I really want to, like be around other people and have things to do when it was like, really cold. So yeah, just like New York was like really where I wanted to go for so long.

Lewis: And you came to Columbia University is that right?

Tourmaline: Yeah.

Lewis: What was it like when you first moved here to go to college? Like what? What did it feel like landing at Columbia?

Tourmaline: So, before school started, I was part of this program where people who wanted to do like, community based work. I forget what it's called now. But we arrived early, maybe like a couple weeks earlier, something like that. I was part of a group that like, did work at Harlem Hospital. And it was like my introduction to Harlem Hospital. So we were like going there every day. Just like learning about just, you know, all of the histories of Harlem, and that, you know, to me was like, one of the reasons why moving to New York was to like be in Harlem and spend time in Harlem. I had just like, grown up by hearing about it my whole life- the Harlem Globetrotters, like Eddie Murphy, and Richard Pryor, Harlem nights. Umm you know, like Malcolm X in Harlem, I just like my whole Harlem was like such a cultural reference point for me. And I remember it feeling like such a big deal that I was like in Harlem, walking the streets of Harlem, going to Harlem Hospital, and also kind of the intense history between a place like Harlem and a place like Columbia, and its immediate surroundings of Harlem and like all of the violence that comes with it, and like the gentrification and the like, you know, the tensions. So I remember just being like,

acutely aware and sensitive to that, and like really so hungry to be part of the community there and like, learn more. Also being really alienated by a lot of people I went to school with. Just like, being so- yeah, kind of confused.

Lewis: People you went to school with at Columbia?

Tourmaline: Yeah, because I think a lot of people like at the time, you know, no one- I just think a lot of people like we're not like trying to be part of the world around Columbia, you know, and people were just like, we're in New York and it exists from like, four blocks around us. And this is like really New York and yeah, it was kind of wild. And then what happened? Then I like got quickly involved in like, activist work. Yeah, I don't know. I think that I was like, confused about how I would be part of New York City, and be a student at the same time and I was confused about that for a while.

Lewis: What kind of activist work did you get involved in?

Tourmaline: Yeah, so this was during the lead up to the Iraq war. And so there was like, a lot of, like, demonstrations that I was going to and marches. I remember meeting some students who came to do this speak out in Boston during my summer before I moved to New York, and they were Columbia students who were organizing against the Iraq war. They were like, getting me so excited about activism, like at Columbia. And so that was part of it, and also kind of like, Columbia was expanding into Harlem, so that was part of it. That was like, you know, like early activism and then activism around ethnic studies, which started at Columbia because of the hunger strikes.

Lewis: Hunger Strikes were in 96'?

Tourmaline: Yeah, 96' yeah. Or 98? One of those. Then you know, it's kind of interesting because I was acutely aware that some parts of my identity and life experience were alive and like, you know, being fed and also other parts were like, deeply pushed down. And then I remember going with you to the first trans day of action. And I was like, I think that was after we went to Queens for Economic Justice, and I met Jay Toole and Joseph DeFilippis,. My whole- parts of myself that I had just like I felt, you know that for whatever reason I had to, like really push down in order to move through the world. Were like, all of a sudden, like, "hey, like, remember us, like, we're- what's going on?"

Lewis: What do you mean, what parts you pushed down?

Tourmaline: Just like, what do I mean? I think that growing up in a place like Boston and leaving a community where like trans people were just part of the everyday fabric of the street, of the neighborhood. Then going to a place where trans people weren't and then having David die and losing a kind of really close relationship. I think I just like folded into myself and I got really serious, and I wasn't, you know, finding and connecting with other queer and trans people, and I wasn't like expressing queerness or transness. Like I felt really ashamed, you know, like, I felt this moment of like being really pleased and like pushed down by family and just like schools around

me. Then, you know, just like carrying that for a long time and then folding into myself, and then being like, oh, there, these parts of myself that I was like, made me feel shame/ashamed about the things that actually have so much to offer, you know? So I needed community in order to feel empowered enough to experience them, express them, and habit them in a way that wasn't like outside my bedroom, or on the internet, or you know, that felt like risk taking.

Lewis: At least on your Campus Life uptown, you were involved mainly in organizing around the war and gentrification...

Tourmaline: Yeah. Gentrification, the war, which I think studies... Yeah.

Lewis: So you weren't really involved in, like, organizing around LGBT issues?

Tourmaline: Not until like the last two- I would say not until like the last two years. So like, first two years I wasn't and then the second two years I was.

Lewis: Did you have like a queer and trans people or community in your life before going to QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice]?

Tourmaline: Yeah [laughter]. I mean, very, like- I think my first friend at Columbia was trans and was you [laughter].

Lewis: [laughter] Oh my god. We lived on the same floor.

Tourmaline: Yeah, we lived on the same floor and yeah. Then I think, you know, it's like one of those things where it's- when you're surrounding yourself with queer and trans people for a reason.

Lewis : There were a lot of queer people involved with like ethnic studies and gentrification organizing, like promptly setting me up with my first girlfriend in college. [laughter]

Tourmaline: Yeah, exactly. [laughter]

Lewis: And you majored in comparative ethnic studies?

Tourmaline: Yeah.

Lewis: Did you- Why did you choose to do that?

Tourmaline: Great question [laughter]. I think, you know, it's just it was about like socialness and the social life around the um, around what I was studying so I majored in comparative ethnic studies and I concentrated in African American Studies. And I just felt like- I remember taking this class 'Jazz and Political Imagination' by Robin D. G. Kelley, and then taking this other AFAM [African American Studies] class, and then taking another like comparative Ethnic Studies class;

Then being like, Oh, this is so interesting, like, people in one class are in the other and like, vice versa. These are also the same people who were in my activist groups, and then it kind of clicking on- like it clicking, that this was like, we were building community, you know, and that was like part of what we were doing. Which was different than maybe like, if we- if I was like to study physics, or math, or engineering. To me, it felt like we were intentionally building a kind of radical community with each other, and with an intention of like, getting deeper with ourselves and getting deeper with each other.

Lewis: And Robin Kelly was sort of an influential presence in your life?

Tourmaline: Yeah. A very influential presence in my life, and I worked for him for Couple years and I was just a research assistant. I took like every class that he had and read his work and then I remember, you know, like this moment where for my, like senior thesis or whatever I was writing about... Because by the time that I was at the end of Columbia, so I was a part of 'FIERCE' and doing work with QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice]. I remember writing about the fight over like private decision of peers, and their curfews on Christopher Street, and like policing of like young queer and trans people of color, and kind of just like the big fights that are going on around the at the time.

Lewis: Can you describe how you got involved with, The Queers for Economic Justice and what that was like?

Tourmaline: Yeah. I mean, you took me to their office [laughter]. Yeah, I think you're like, really wanting to connect me to community, and maybe consciously or not, sensed that I was like really needing it. And so I remember we took the train down to 16th West 32nd Street [New York City] and I started doing at the time... So years later, I worked for 'Queers For Economic Justice', but at the time was like a volunteer. I was doing volunteer support groups in the New York City shelter system. And then I was an intern there in the welfare warrior program, which was about, like organizing with people who were either currently or formerly experiencing poverty. And, you know, as someone who grew up in poverty and homeless and you know, on welfare and the whole whatever- it felt like really wonderful to be connecting with people who had similar experiences. That was definitely like a real turning point in my life. I remember in like, 2006, I was like, I'm actually like, going to kind of start going by, they/them pronouns and seeing others, was like, was similar to how it was just building community and how realizing like how much is possible when you have community. Like how much risk taking is possible, learning, like things that you didn't know, like the history of like queer and trans life in New York City and being really fed by that. Ans like meeting people who would help me along my journey.

Lewis: Who else was involved in welfare warriors?

Tourmaline: Yeah. Some people who aren't alive anymore. There was this person Kikendo, who's an amazing film maker. There's some people who are- who've passed away last winter. People who are alive, Egyptt [Miss Egyptt] who I worked with, and who was later and 'Happy Birthday Marsha'. I did a film called the 'Legacy of Bones', Egyptt was in later on, and the Welfare Warriors.

There are just so many I worked [with], you know I was interning and Welfare Wars for this person, Ola [Ola Osaze], who is an amazing activist and I just learned so much from and continues to organize. There's just like a ton of really, really amazing people. We worked in like a very tiny office and the group was new, and so that summer, we were building towards doing a, like a speak out about experiences of being queer, trans, gender nonconforming, like LGBTQIA+, non-binary, people who have experienced poverty or living in poverty, like many people who are in the shelter system. We did it in August of 2006 at the LGBT Center, and I remember there was performances, Ignacio Rivera, emceed it, This group Switch n' play performed, there was like a big speak out. And I remember feeling like, really accomplished that I had helped, organize something that was so powerful. And that like, Yeah, I just felt really proud of myself and like proud of my community, and it was so successful. I felt, I don't know, it really had a huge impact on my own life. But then the job ended-

Lewis: The Internship?

Tourmaline: Yeah the internship. Then I was like, without a job for a while and it was really stressed out. Then I started working for Critical Resistance, which was, and continues to be an organization that seeks to abolish prison industrial complex [PIC] in the US. I remember just like part of the kind of amazing radical community in the work that I was doing at Queers for Economic Justice was like held within the prison abolitionist movement and parts were definitely not and through that work is how I met Miss Major. And I remember going to this gathering that she organized and then I helped with a little bit called, Transforming Justice. And that was in the summer of- Fall of 2007. So like a year after, Queers for Economic Justice forum and what happened? It was really cool. It was like, mostly transwomen of color who had just gotten out of prison. Yeah, it's like people doing workshops and there's like a little documentary film that exists about it and online called, 'Transforming Justice'. I was just kind of breaking down the role that policing and prisons play in our communities and kind of starting organizing around it. It was a totally different era. You know, it was- it feels like many lifetimes ago. But then I went back to working at Queers for Economic Justice. I remember Ola I had left and then I became a welfare warriors organizer.

Lewis: And may I ask, Were there like other trans people involved in things like the prison abolition organizing you're doing at the time?

Tourmaline: Yeah. So like definitely. I mean like Miss major was, but kind of up until this gathering that we had in 2008 in the bay called, 'Critical Resistance 10'. It was the 10 year anniversary gathering. There was just a lot of contention that was like similar to the like, Robin Kelly thing about like queerness and transness like, not being part of like your material condition, and not understanding how like queer and trans people, non- binary people are at like, an increased risk of policing and how like, prisons and jails like reproduce the gender binary and, you know, like Target like, queer and trans life and people. So it was like, it was pretty, it felt very contentious, you know, like, there were a lot of queer and trans people, but there wasn't like specced really necessarily to talk about how like, our community was particularly vulnerable to state violence like that, to me, felt like something we built together like an organization- did a lot of internal

organizing around and had to, and I remember like Miss major was going to do like a direct action at CR 10 [Critical Resistance], because of the transphobia that existed in the spaces and in the movement, and yeah.

Lewis: Did she do it?

Tourmaline: She didn't. She did like a beautiful speech, but she was going to like do a sit in on stage and then ultimately decided not to do it but we had like a really- I mean this just feels so wild, it was like, you know 11 years ago now because it was September 2008. We just did a ton of internal organizing and got a lot of- met with like, a lot of intense resistance.

Lewis: Was it- was Miss Major protesting something in particular or just sort of the state of affairs around?

Tourmaline: I think the general state of affairs and people thinking... You know, I remember like one person who had like, a lot of power in the space, you know- told me who's like, you know, continues to be like, whatever, well, you know, it's like the person who continues to have a lot of power in these spaces. It was like, you know, we, like people just got out of prison, you can't expect them to, like, be all understanding about like, trans issues and I'm just like, it's the wildness of like, how, you know, like, the erasing trans people from this movement of like trans people from being in prison. And it just, it just felt so profound to me what people could imagine also like, people being ready for you know, yeah.

Lewis: What did you think I Miss Major when you first met her?

Tourmaline: I was totally like, starstruck. You know, it's like, so it was like 2006 or seven years and totally starstruck. She was just totally unapologetically crass and you know, here for her community, all just like, talking about sex and I don't know, I just was like, Oh my God, who is this person? [laughter] Really Like unruly and really protective of people? Yeah.

Lewis: So I only interacted with her a couple times, but she's just like, like such a wickedly like funny dark sense of humor.

Tourmaline: Yeah, dark sense of humor. It's amazing, yeah.

Lewis: I had to ask you a question. I have to figure out how to formulate this as a question, but it's like, it seems like you have had these kind of like trajectories in your life where like, you know, like a really strong, like sort of family influences around organizing around racial economic justice and continuing that, you know, in college. Also like you know, coming into sort of like queer and trans community, but also having like that being a presence in your life in this in different ways. you're also describing the kind of likes or tensions around like, you know, gender and sexuality. Certain like racial justice, economic justice context. Was it- was it like QJE [Queers for economic Justice] sort of like a how you kind of like, police in your own thinking the first half that like integrated as two things which-

Tourmaline: Yeah, I think QEJ [Queers for economic Justice] was definitely the bridge QEJ and Transforming Justice. Like you know miss major, but yeah, QEJ was definitely kind of the way that those parts like came together and I was just so grateful that there was a space that existed where like poor people, people who had like live/grown up or experienced poverty people who had like class analysis, who had economic justice analysis were also like queer, and trans, and gender-nonconforming, and non-binary and like, saw those is like, inextricably linked. And we're also like, dare to have fun. You know, like, I remember Jay Toole was just like coming to the office every day like singing and performing and just like- it was like a really joyful space for a while. And it's like such a flashback, and you know, doesn't exist anymore- Which is also, like, you know, talking about in High Times, like, Oh, this moment in time, it was such a moment, you know, like now there's like a different kind of thing that's happening, but Yeah, that was such a like, that was such a particular moment, you know, people were organizing.

Lewis: And so you came back when you started working as a staff at QEJ [Queers for economic Justice], and that would have been 2007? What was your position?

Tourmaline: So I was like the Welfare Warriors organizer. And so- Okay, so there was this speak out that happened in 2006. And then between that and the time that I had come back, people and welfare workers were starting to do like organizing around the issues that came up in the speak out. So some of the issues were, like, you know, going to the welfare office and being turned away because you were queer and trans. So just like facing a lot of violence and harassment, or the social Security Administration, or a lot of our communities on disability, or like violence in the shelter system. And so you know, we were doing organizing around that, we were doing kind of weekly Know Your Rights sessions, where we would come have someone come in and talk about, like how to get enrolled on on food stamps or benefits, like how to win a fair hearing, how to advocate for yourself, you know, like, what- just kind of all of this stuff that was really needed all this knowledge that was needed. And then also, we started this group called, the Welfare Warriors Research Collaboration, that- it was like, we were doing research about our own experience as a way to kind of document our lives and share it and have an impact in our community. So, you know, it was like, also like research and documentation that didn't exist, you know, and afterwards it kind of hasn't been really like, replicated.

Lewis: How were you researched, like what kind of research were you doing?

Tourmaline: Yeah. So we had a survey that we took throughout the city about people's experiences of being, you know, homeless, or like in poverty, or going through the shelter system, and experiences with like homophobia, and transphobia, ableism and racism. Then we had focus groups, and then we had- we did a Like a documentary that's online, that you can watch on YouTube. It's called, 'Taking Freedom Home'. And then we wrote this document that's also called, Taking Freedom Home, that is also online and it's one of those kinds of early forms from that moment of like documenting our experiences like with all of these things.

Lewis: What was your role in making the documentary? I'm asking obviously since that is big something you continue to do.

Tourmaline: Totally! [laughter] So we were all like making it together, Kikendo was like the experienced filmmaker in the group. But we took turns like, filming, and talking about the direction that we want it to go and that kind of thing. And and what yeah- talking about different, like edits, and I think we all got like co- producer credit which is like, looking back I was like, Oh, that's kind of funny like now being like filmmaker, you know, like, because it was a thing that we all we all just made, you know, and I think Kikendo, was just like- I think there was like, you know, there's like moments of frustrations and in this work so I think it's like, you know, Executive Producer Director and, you know, musician, and then we got like, listed as the CO producers. So that was very funny. Because at the time I like, I was like, I don't know what a co-producer is, but it sounds great [laughter]. I was like that was really funny.

Lewis: Who else was on staff at QEJ when you were working there?

Tourmaline: Jay Toole, Joseph DeFilippis, me, Ola [Ola Osaze] came back for a bit to do fundraising, I think. Mary Guyton was also doing fundraising.

Lewis: How long were you working at QEJ for?

Tourmaline: So I um, kind of off and on. So, I started as an intern in 2006, and then I came back in 2007. I was working also full time at Curb Resistance at the time, so I had kind of two organizing jobs, which was I don't know how I did that looking back. And then I worked there, up until 2010, when I left to join the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Then I came back, you know, so Joseph [Joseph DeFilippis] left and then Kenyon Farrow became the executive director. Then we moved our office into this building that we like re-named, Miss major Jay Toole Center for Social Justice. And it was like Queers for Economic Justice, Streetwise and Safe, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Audre Lorde Project and FIERCE. We were all in a building together, which was really wonderful and vibrant.

Lewis: Where's the building?

Tourmaline: It was on 24th Street and Seventh Avenue [New York]. It was just really cool that we were like seeing each other every day. You know, we're all kind of really together. So then I went upstairs to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, but then I came back and I worked I think like a day- a week, which is like... I got paid for a day-week, but I worked more than that, maybe. It was just like, kind of classic to that world. In like 2011, I was with them Until they closed I think, but I forgot what year QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] closed.

Lewis: I forget too. I was wondering, I think that since you've, you know, worked at a few different like, you know, activist organizations in the city, I think a lot of us kind of feel like, you know, the shuttering of QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] is like, a big absence, you know, the kind of

political landscape. If you could describe, you know, what, if anything, you think, who was sort of distinctive about how QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] approached its work?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I mean, that's a great question. I think that QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] was really like, nothing about us without us, kind of, you know. So it really was like Jay going into the shelter system and organizing, you know, and bringing people together and starting these groups all over the city. And now I'm in New York, it's just changed so dramatically from when QEJ started and when the shelter work was happening. But I don't think anyone else before then or after that has done that work and that is really like, that's like- That's Jay toole, you know, going and making that happen and there was a lot of power in that and just creating space for people to be together. You know, and I think about it too. It's like, to the lines of like my own life. It's like when I had the space to be with other trans people, and feel the beauty of that, and the power of it, that part of my life like, grew and flourished. And when I did in that part of my life was really folded in on itself. And I think that is like, you see that, you know, that's like a microcosm for what the power of like organizing and community building is. You know, we're in this moment of, like, deep austerity, and, like, we're just like, things are really conservative and hard right now. You know, and, and so the landscape- it makes sense to me that QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] doesn't exist, right? Like, QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] really was fundamentally challenging. You know, violence and systemic oppression on multiple different levels and Yeah, and I think that the grief and loss about that is just so- like nothing has come up in the wake of that. Jay is still doing organizing work in this beautiful... But to have it held in a larger landscape, something that QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] was really doing.

Lewis: Why did QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] close?

Tourmaline: Um I don't really know... I think part of it is just like funding, you know, like people-foundations didn't really want to fund QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] at... I think there's this thing that happened where like, you know, this moment a seems like not the Same anymore, right? Like this, like kind of organizing moment, but there's a kind of like a, there's like a trend in philanthropy where different groups, or issues are like the hot issue and get a lot of funding. Then that kind of, like support goes away and it I think it just like, it replicates. It's capitalism, you know, it's like, what is the hot commodity right now? So for a while, QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] was like, popular in a particular kind of like, small, like, sub cultural way and then it just wasn't anymore.

Lewis: What did you do when you went to work for SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project]?

Tourmaline: I was part of a movement building team with Gabriel Foster. So it was kind of similar to work Queers for Economic Justice, where we were doing like, know your rights, and trainings, and trying to really expand access to the world of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. I mean, like, again, you also introduced me to, at the same time as as QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] and so, yeah, that was our work, it was like, movement building. Then a lot of like- towards you know, I was there for four years and so, towards the end of it, a lot of my work was around the Medicaid campaign. Because at the time, New York specifically had a stature that specifically denied health

care to transgender, gender nonconforming people. At the same health care, that if you were a cis person you could get access to, you were denied because you're trans or non-binary, gender nonconforming. And so you know, it's like basic needs a lot of basic needs work. So access to housing, safety from policing and prisons, health care, welfare. That was like the work that I was doing.

Lewis: And Why did you decide to move jobs from QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice] to SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project]?

Tourmaline: That's a great question [laughter].

Lewis: You can say whatever you want to about that [laughter].

Tourmaline: I think you know, for a few reasons. One was, I liked that the Sylvia Rivera Law Project was collectively run, so like the decisions were made, not in a hierarchical way, but in a collective way and all by consensus. And, you know, all of that has its own challenges and problems, but there was like, a lot of intention around collective decision making and pushing back the idea that just because like someone went to school longer, or had a law degree, that meant that they liked inherently knew better or were in a better place to provide leadership on something when we know like just most often and it's like that's not the case, right? It's people who are experiencing something, are powerful and capable of changing the world around those lines. So that was really compelling to me. They also had just started the position of like movement building, and I had just been working on a campaign at Queers for Economic Justice to around you know- with SLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project], around stopping discrimination at the welfare office. And I had wrapped up the research work- was wrapping up so we had just like, finished our report and finished the film. I felt like a Lot of the things that I had set out to do when I joined, you know, like 13 years ago now, I really kind of seen through and then I wanted new kinds of challenges and like ways to grow. Also, I think, I also was just like, really wanting to be in a trans proud organization, that felt like really important to me at the time. Oh and I got Fridays off [laughter], so at the beginning it was just four days a week. And, you know, I was really excited to work with Gabriel [Gabriel Foster].

Lewis: Actually there are so many more questions I want to ask you about your time with SLRP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project], but we're going to completely run out of time to talk about today- up to recently, but like, Is there anything else that you want to comment on before I ask you about your life after?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I think also with SLRP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project], You know, there was the work with transforming justice about like, supporting and organizing with people who are currently incarcerated, and so I just want to be- have that be a bit more a part of what I was doing. Those were like, kind of the main reason, but then that work came with its own challenges.

Lewis: What was challenging about it?

Tourmaline: It began a period of my life when just like many people I knew were dying and being killed. And were like transgender and non-conforming people, and a lot of them I knew through SLRP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project]. So, you know, when I was at Queers for Economic Justice there were like a number of people I knew who were killed and who died. But SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project] was just like a whole other level. There was just a lot of grief in organization and loss, and people process that in different ways and Yeah.

Lewis: Was- did that shape your decision to leave nonprofit sector work?

Tourmaline: Yeah, definitely. I think I was like, really, really burnt out. And you know, we like, on paper one the Medicaid campaign. And like SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project] filed a class action lawsuit and the governor repealed the regulation. So I felt also in a similar way that I like, you know, like, I had kind of done what I had set out to do. It's like, at each of these places I, you know, did community building work and also campaign work. So like at Queers for Resistance, we did another kind of like, successful campaign, about stopping this jail from being built in the South Bronx that was like kind of a quote unquote, like gender responsive prison or jail that was like, environmentally friendly. It was just like the city in the state always tries to find a way to, like sell you the thing that you don't need that it's actually part of like hurting you, but in a way that's like trending. So like, you know, people were saying we need to close Rikers [Jail], because the conditions for people who are pregnant and like, have kids on records are horrible, like health conditions are horrible. And the city came back and was like, Well, our plan is we're going to build a beautiful pristine, you know, like jail for people who get pregnant and you know, and babies and then you know, we were like Rikers needs to end because it's impossible for families to visit their loved ones. And, you know, they came back and was like, you know, like, we're going to build a jail that's like, it's incredibly accessible to the community and, you know, like, that kind of thing. So, you know, it was a successful campaign and it was really beautiful. But yeah, I think that all of this campaign organizing was so exhausting and really, like, can really burn you out. Also just like the levels of loss that I was navigating were so intense that SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project] and I think there was not really a culture of dealing with loss and grief, you know. So, yeah, that I was just like, I really need to do something that feeds me. For me, at the time, it was like art making and like filmmaking, and like trying to figure out a way how to do that and like going into archives with you [laughter]. Every one of these things, it's like with you [laughter].

Lewis: We're only doing this interview so props for everything [laughter].

Tourmaline: Yeah totally [Laughter]. I remember you sending me those photos and like 2009, of the Women's Liberation Front. And then the Diane Davies, photos came out like later, like a few months later, at the New York Public Library, and I started doing like all this clause work. Painting like with marshes images and that set me up to be like I really want to like make a film about this.

Lewis: and you made art before?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I did the- so the documentary at QEJ felt like making art and we had like, art days at QEJ but it wasn't like at all in a kind of art world context in any way. In high school, I was

doing a lot of photography and in the early 90s, I was also doing a lot of photography. I got like third place in some national photography competition in 1993. I was like, really, I thought it was like my medium. I think it kind of was also something I was really intimidated to be a part of, because when I was around, like the kind um, political analysis or even if it wasn't about analysis, the intentions and values that were present and community building and organizing with like QEJ, or Queer Rersistent, or Sylvia Rivera Law Project], or Transforming Justice- were just not at all present in the kind of art world, even around like queer and trans people who are making art, and it felt really off putting and alienating, and kind of scary. My friend was like, and it made me really angry, you know? And then my friend was like, Oh, you know, like, a lot of times when we're angry about something, it's like what we want to do you know, if like, you're angry about other people making art than sometimes like, that means like you want to make art and stuff like that, and lead me to that.

Lewis: Did you have a sense like, because I remember we like went to that lesbian historic archives and stuff around that time. So you were getting interested in art making, and film, and also doing research and looking at archives. Did you have a sense initially that those two things were connected?

Tourmaline: Um did I have a sense that they were connected? I'm not really sure. I think that for a while, I was like, I had an idea that I was going to be writers like that, you know. I thought like, writing things for my community- There was a lot of blogs going on. You know, it's just like, everyone had a blog. I was reading Kenny Farrow's blog all the time. This is like 2006, and five, and seven. Like, everyone had a blog and I was like, oh like blogs are like thing. Do you remember this moment? It was so wild [laughter].

Lewis: Yeah the blog years [laughter].

Tourmaline: Yeah, the blog years [laughter]. So I thought oh, like I want to have a blog and even that name sounds so kind of like [laughter], I was just like, yeah, I wanted to write for like, my community and share the things that I want that you know... But I think I knew that I wanted to make film like, I knew that there was something specific to like texture of art. That was so compelling to me. I can remember going to- my mom was a student when I was really young, at the museum school. School museum Fine Arts in Boston and I remember like on sick days or days when I was in, like, preschool just going with her to classes. Really like the two things that stick out were like, or there like three maybe. One was the smell of oil paints and that just feeling so, like my body kind of really responding to the smell of that. Another was everyone was like kind of a freak. And like people had like, different colored hair, and amazing haircuts. I think looking back I was like, oh, there's a lot of like, these are just like art school kids, you know. At the time it was like, what world am I in? And then I felt like I got to be like really expressive. She was like in this life drawing class and it was just like a naked person who she was drawing and I was like so blown away by like, like you go to school to like draw naked people and that was like amazing to me as a kid. I don't know- I can only imagine like, what other... How I was received at the time. I don't know that must have been really strange. But um, but it felt really powerful. So there's something about like making art, and as a kid I was making a lot of art. My mom was in art school.

It was like this very brief moment in my life where we would like, make art projects, you know, like paper, like a ton of paper mache. Everything was paper mache, this and that- Masks and sculptures, and like things that you've got inside with like chicken wire. Often that was like part of the theater group that David did. And it felt so alive, it felt really, really amazing. And then kind of life just got very constricted, like then she went and became an organizer again, and shortly after that my dad went to prison. The Clinton crime Bills were happening and funding for and- Welfare Act and funding for like, mental health care was like really slashed and I just remember feeling the effects in my community and how that was kind of also bound up with art making to me.

Lewis: What were you doing to like make ends meet initially when you left QEJ [Queers for Economic Justice].

Tourmaline: So when was that? Which time?

Lewis: Like when you sort of like left nonprofit sector working, during the blog years.

Tourmaline: Totally, I was doing a lot of stuff. I was doing sex work, I was doing random Craigslist jobs, I was like getting money from friends. I worked at the Door, had a short live job at the Door.

Lewis: What's the Door?

Tourmaline: The Door is a drop-in center for like everybody who was a young person, but specifically had these programs for LGBT people. And I was working with this person, Reid Christian who I met through Queers for Economic Justice, and I was an outreach worker. So we were working on the pier and doing outreach for the door. We were just we were at- our hours were like, I think it started at ten and ended at four, or something like that, or it was like, it was like an overnight kind of job. And I was doing that and then I had like, also a short live job at the New Press, which was horrible. I don't know if they still exist, but I'm sure they do good stuff now, but that was a very bad job [laughter]. I had like a really horrible boss, who I'm sure is like a great person now [laughter], but I did like publicity for them. I don't know, it was a really hard time in my life. I was like, I was really really struggling. I just like, I remember being hungry, like literal hungry like all the fucking time. And, like being at McDonald's a lot, and like growing up, my dad worked at McDonald's and I felt this kind of like, deep familiarity. So just like, go there all the time. I lived with my friend, Nell and this person Andre Lancaster, who died recently. And Andre was a playwright, and you know, an artist and was like, really unapologetic about how that was different than like activism and organizing. And we, like didn't really get along. But I really cared about him a lot. Then he, like, invited us to not live with him anymore [laughter]. You know, like, part of that I think, too, was like I was having a really hard time paying the rent and I was like, always late with rent. It was just really, it was a really hard moment. Yeah.

Lewis: Was the next film you started working on, Mudbound?

Tourmaline: Yeah, so when I left SRLP I was working on this film, 'Sasha Warsal' that turned into 'Happy Birthday, Marsha'. And then we shot the film in 2015, then we edited. Then I went down to New Orleans to work for Dee Rees, on 'Mudbound'.

Lewis: For some reason I thought 'Mudbound' came before 'Happy Birthday, Marsha'.

Tourmaline : So we split it up. It's like so we- you're right. It both came before and after. So we shot in 2015 and then we finished shooting 2016, so in between then, I went to mud bound. And 'Mudbound', working for Dee was the kind of thing that allowed me to realize like, I can do this like, I can... The film wasn't done to how we wanted it to be, like was our very first time making a narrative film. We had a really amazing cast and some amazing crew, and then there are some people who because of our, like, inexperienced, or like we just didn't know. You know, it's just like, and so there were a lot of production challenges and so, we like shutting, we like, shot half the film, or maybe like three quarters. Then there were just so many edits of 'Happy Birthday, Marsha', there was one, there's like a 40 minute version. You know, it's just like a bunch of scenes that don't exist that are really beautiful, this current version, there's a version with like a laugh track- That is amazing. Did you see that one?

Lewis: Yeah! Why did you decide to put in the laugh track, but then take it out?

Tourmaline: So it was the, it was really kind of a wonderful idea from our editor to kind of solve some of the problems that we were having. And also to put it in a genre of like, 70's sitcom. And we had watched this like amazing kind of Richard Pryor show clip where Richard Pryor's like impersonating Little Richard, and there's like an interruption in it, where this person talks about that like having a queer relationship, and it was like in the 70s and was wild- It was on TV. Then, you know, set a time also when we were like wanting it to be its own TV show. But also commentary on TV. And um, then I got really uncomfortable with the laughter because it was also it wasn't- we didn't write it that way. So it's kind different moments like a little kind of, felt like, really experimental in these really beautiful ways, but also pretty challenging in some other ways. So what happened? Also, I just felt like, you know, laughter is such a thing, like trans people are just like always being laughed at, you know, and so then I was talking to Gabriel Foster, who like, really hated the laugh track or just felt really concerned about it. And was like, I wonder- and, you know, so we were just having a lot of conversation about what it would mean, for the first time Marsh to be on stage, for her to be constantly being laughed at. And she was kind of, in her lifetime constantly being laughed at, so there was- it's not a kind of black or white, binary good or bad thing. It just was something that started to get really uncomfortable and you know, I have this thing where I always know, like one of the ways that I'm like, crazy or whatever it's like I always think people are laughing at me, you know, like I walk down the street and I just think will assume that everybody's laughing at me. I'll always think that people around me are laughing. So it made me kind of in this really healing and beautiful way to kind of confront the power of laughter and feel through that, and in the beauty of laughter. Then we like inverted the laughter at the end and it was really cool. But also think because it wasn't like written and built for that, and because it was the first time that Marsha was going to be seen on screen. I came to feel that I wanted the film to exist without, without that element.

Lewis: And how did the idea for the film itself originally come to be?

Tourmaline: So it came, you know, like from going through those archives like and reading the Star Statement and watching that footage herstory archives of like Sylvia [Sylvia Rivera] being booed off stage and really wanting the world to see the power and the pain and the, like, transformative work of these people. So it started off as like, an idea of like doing a documentary and then the whole like, David France thing happened and Sasha I felt like we needed to, pivot and like make something that was like, creative and maybe had non narrative elements into it.

Lewis: That was probably a consideration about like, like not really being able to compete with a documentary.

Tourmaline: Yeah, it's like this huge kind of Netflix. Yeah.

Lewis: Yeah, I'm asking obviously kind of self -interested question. Were you sort of describing kind of like, a sensory experience and like, art making, you know, spaces and cultures and stuff. I'm curious like how it felt when you first started looking at archival documents?

Tourmaline: It felt really cool. It felt really similar, you know. It felt like I was like holding- it felt amazing. Like I was holding a piece of paper that you know, like, like Sylvia typed on, or I remember Randy Wicker gave me like, this huge beer mug that was Sylvia's, that she left Randy's apartment when she stopped drinking. And, like, you know, I actually felt these things are like, the power in them, you know, just like, it feels really amazing. Also really painful to see, like, how much has changed, but how much hasn't, you know, like the same issues are happening, you know, every day. And so that to me was really interesting.

Lewis: What drew you to Marsha P. Johnson in particular?

Tourmaline: Um, you know, at the time, Marsha's [Marsha P. Johnson] was like, kind of work and legacy was not at all like it is today. Like there wasn't- You know, I remember trying to like Google "Marsha" [Marsha P. Johnson], but there wasn't anything online you know that there wasn't what exists now. I think that I was really interested in how she was a performer, an artist, and an activist and also beautifully unruly like the stories of her walking naked down Christopher street, also just like throwing clothes into the Hudson River. She just seemed like a freak, you know, I was like really into that. Also because her story wasn't out there like it is now. It felt important to- felt really like I was drawn to it and also I want to share it.

Lewis: So Sasha started work on 'Happy Birthday Marsha'- What was that, like sort of working on an official film, because you haven't had any formal film training? What was that, like sort of the process of figuring out how to put together a narrative short?

Tourmaline: So It was challenging because the whole backdrop of why we needed to stop doing the documentary, but it was also really liberating. So when I left SRLP [Sylvia Rivera Law Project],

I applied to a job to be a writer for Transparent that I liked you know, it's like a finalist four. Part of the process of the job was this kind of weird, real world trans version where like we all lived in a house all the finalists lived in the house together and we had to like write a script together with Jill Soloway [laughter].

Lewis: That's Amazing [laughter].

Tourmaline: And they payed for it all [laughter]. And option the script that we wrote together. It was about- it was called like, I hope someday someone makes this because it was a really interesting idea... So we wrote a pilot, and it was like called, 'The House of Lady Snow', and it was about like, a ghost trans woman who, like ran a brothel. And like all these, like younger trans people end up living in this big house that she was a ghost in. It was, I don't know, it's really interesting and had all the kind of problems that you can imagine that whole thing would have. You know, it's kind of similar to work Dee [Dee Rees], at Mudbound. That experience even though I didn't get the job. Like, I was like, "Oh, I can do this", you know, like, there are people who don't have whether... Like, I felt like I was, Oh, you know, like this experience lets me- It gave me confidence to start like writing a script. So I remember you know being- working on the script with these people and Faith Soloway, and it was like, having these conversations about you know, finding out the route, like really are going to have to pivot to, or deciding together, or just realizing the landscape in which we were making the film. Other people's films were going to happen about Marsha [Marsha P. Johnson] and feeling like you know what, like, this can be like a real big opportunity to write our own story of Marsha, because so much of her life has really been erased. And so you know, it felt really hard, because I didn't go to film school like I applied to film school and I got rejected. But it felt also really amazing and kind of liberating. So then I remember you know, we like fundraised, and then we like had a shoot. I remember the first night it was like, May 2015, And the last day of may or something like that, and Sasha and I, we did a ritual together. And then we started filming, and then I remember feeling like this is like the only job that I ever want to do. When I was like looking at the monitor and directing us, I felt like oh my god, it was so wild. That took me so long to to like, find out this is exactly what I want to be doing, and it felt like so many things were coming together. With set decoration design, with the writing, with the casting, with costumes with you know, Arthur Jaffa was the DP (director of photography) and it just felt like so amazing like how things were coming together. Also like, really just like learning on the job. And yeah, it just felt both incredibly challenging and really like something, I'm like, "Oh, wow." Like I really want to be doing this.

Lewis: What ritual did you do with Sasha before you started shooting?

Tourmaline: We did like, put flowers into the Hudson River for Marsha [P. Johnson] and Sylvia [Rivera] and, like set up an altar, and yeah.

Lewis: I wanted to ask, something that a lot of people have commented on is that your films look really good, like they're beautiful, and you've also commented on sort of like the role of style and glamour in your work, which is true for, 'Happy Birthday Marsha'. Also I'm curious, what was the aesthetic you really... What is it, like you were trying to create with the film?

Tourmaline: Right, that's a great question. You know, I think it varied at different moments. And I think it was, you know, I think part of it was kind of like 70s clammer moment. Part of it was these like, you know, cilicia and different edits in 'Happy Birthday Marsha', the kind of supersaturation is something that I used to kind of draw attention to how art isn't like a neutral thing and the power behind glamour, and the depth of superficiality. You know, like, I think that for a really long time when I was organizing like, superficiality, glamour, the surface work, was written off as like something that's not important, you know, and then it will start slow kind of learning for me about actually these things are like, deeply important and can be even more like, deep than the kinds of politics that other people are talking about. You know, and then, I think then that's when I started to, like really find the power of like, makeup and just like, fashion and the history of fashion policing. You know, like the being written into Stonewall you know, and like, part of it is, you know, fashion isn't a light thing you know. Fashion as something that is criminalized, you know, like people's fashion risks, and fashion expression, and fashion self determination, or collective indeterminacy is like deeply criminalized and policed. And to me, that is a way that it becomes erased, how surface work is actually really powerful, you know? So yeah, I think that's a really important part of the work that I do now.

Lewis: Did you have particularly like glamour style role models that influenced you?

Tourmaline : Yeah, for 'Happy Birthday Marsha'? For 'Happy Birthday Marsha', really like a lot of it just came from just looking at photos and Marsha [P. Johnson] and being like, Wow, this is amazing. And you know, like, she, I think had different style moments too, like, her style and the Hot Peaches was one, her style of the fur coat at the NYU direct actions was another, you know, like her style. She played the Queen of Hearts-there was a in the in the 70s kind of the same time that the Soviet stormed stage, Marsha was doing these hot peaches plays and how they would be... So Jimmy Camicia was the director of the Hot Peaches, and Jimmy Camicia was in 'Happy Birthday Marsha', and was Marsha's director. So it was really amazing to work with Jimmy and he was in the live... So we did a like, a live performance of 'Happy Birthday, Marsha' at the kitchen and he was in it. Did you come to that? I'll have to send you a link. And you know he has this poem for Masha.. But anyway, so he are organized a, It felt kind of like similar to like David [inaudible], where he organized a play that went up or down Christopher Street. It was like Alice in Wonderland on Christopher Street. And it would incorporate, like the the characters, the everyday people who were on Christopher Street into the actual play. And so like seeing, you know, one would happen at the like cigar place, you know, and then it would end maybe at the pier. So I always thought you know, if I did a feature length version of like a Marsha film, that, that would be like an aspect because her fashion, you know, it was like ever changing and really amazing.

Lewis: I kind of have to ask you related to glamour. I was wondering if you could comment a little bit about the role of Enchantment here?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I mean that... I remember going to see Justin Vivian Bond at the Kitchen in 2011, and we did a play about by glamour enchantment, and like having to lose your glamour in

order- There's a character that had to lose their glamour in order to go to the underworld to like, go on a journey, and then come back up and all of the like, you had to, lose your shoes, and all of these kind of superficial glamorous aspects had a profound magic to them. And they were like stripped away from the character. That, to me is really about, is what is like part of. There is like serious magic in movie magic, you know and so the like medium itself, to me feels like it is a portal and it's working in that way. Then also the objects that appear within them are like very intentional.

Lewis: What's the... Do you think that queer and trans subjects in your work have a particular kind of relationship to glamour and enchantment?

Tourmaline: Yeah, definitely. I mean, Marsha in the ways that we talked about. I think that in, 'Atlantic Is A Sea Of Bones', Fatimah's character, you know, acquires more glamour, the more that she hangs around from being, like, dug up from the underworld, and that was like very much intentional. Egyptt [Labeija] has a kind of similar, like journey in that, as she like moves from a place of like loss to a place of like self actualization and kind of dealing with her loss, and grief, and power. Then Mary Jones, you know, the story- Have you seen it?

Lewis: No.

Tourmaline: So the piece that- So the Brooklyn Museum and Highland commissioned me to do this film about Mary Jones, and just went into the Brooklyn museum's permanent collection, which feels like really cool. And it's about this, Mary Jones who was like a transfigure in the 1800s. And, you know, so during the process of like, researching about her, Chay my sibling, found like, the actual court transcript between Mary Jones and the court officer, have you read that? It's wild. It is so, it is just... And it's all in this hard to read cursive from 1836 and it's just as like... So anyway, so the films, like all of them, I do a lot of kind of- Part of my writing processes is a lot of research. So for the latest one, kind of like changed the character Mary into like, you know wanting to establish it within the genre of like black fantasy, and specifically stories that I grew up on, people could fly and like folklore and fantasy of about like, fleeing slavery and like fugativity. And so Mary becomes a witch in the in the film and like does Magic, and fights, you know, with magic and does these kind of rituals to like save Seneca Village. There's one edit is called, 'Salation', that's at the Brooklyn Museum, it's a looping film. And then there's like a longer more narrative cut called, Mary of Elfame' that's gonna- that we're finishing right now.

Lewis: Can you also talk a little bit more about just like, the process for, 'Atlantic Is A Sea Of Bones' and what that was about?

Tourmaline: So for 'Atlantic Is a Sea Of Bones', a lot of that came from my conversations with... So Egyptt Labeija was the coordinator of Trans Justice at the Audrey Lord Project when I was working at Queers for Economic Justice and then Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and we became friends because she was Part of the welfare Warriors for a while, and you know, I remember one day she came into the office with this like coffee table book photos of the Meatpacking District in the 90s. And she was kind of turning the pages and talking about how just like, you know, every

person that was in the book was dead. We were kind of talking about what it felt like to be alive when other people who we knew and loved aren't anymore. And then she was talking about also what it felt like to be like instrumentalized by these photographers, because no one asked for her permission to be in like a coffee table book. And so to me and her, like the conversation, a lot of it became about, like, how those are deeply entangled with each other- being instrumentalized and being in a community where, you know, you're navigating tremendous loss and death all the time. And so you know, at the same time that those conversations were happening, I was watching Lexus [inaudible] like read, Lucille Clifton, 'Atlantic Is A Sea Of Bones' poem. Lexus has, like, reading of it on Vimeo. And just that poem has really stuck with me about like the haunting and haunts of landscape, and the violence that is a part of it, well after it's considered, like, you know, a moment has ended. So whether it's like, slavery, or the HIV criminalization, you know, just like all these things, or the policing of the peer. Like, none of these things are over. They're all declared over, and the afterlife with them continue to haunt all of the interactions that we have. So it's just kind of like, it was just... And I got commissioned by Visual AIDS to make a film. And so, yeah.

Lewis: Can you tell me a little about water in 'Atlantic Is A Sea Of Bones'?

Tourmaline: Yeah, I think water in all of my work is really important to me. You know, I think a lot of times, water in many different ways. Water as its connection to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Water as just like, a place that New York is like a collection of islands that we're hanging out on and I think that to me, as the climate collapse happens, I think we're going to become more and more acutely aware about how New York is like a collection of islands. But I think there's a lot built into, like people not having the experience of how we're surrounded by water and history of like, colonization of this land. And so to me, like water is like really important, also I'm a cancer and there's like a astrological component to the work as well, and water as a symbol for intuition, and emotions, and being tied to the moon. And Neptune who Marsha had a relationship with the...

Lewis: That's right. I have a lot more questions about your recent work, but I also do want to be mindful of time. What's the reception 'Happy birthday Marsha' been like for you?

Tourmaline: Um, you know, it has been really amazing. I think that I feel really lucky that people were so responsive to... You know, it's like many, many, many filmmakers, or artists ,or people loving create something that they want a lot of people to experience, but that doesn't happen you know? And so I think the reception has been really powerful thing. It's like, Marsha's [P. Johnson] story can't be undone it's like, there's no way that you can't like Google about Marsha [P. Johnson] anymore and have nothing come up, you know. I think that's just so fucking cool. And you know, her story is out there, and it just feels amazing.

Lewis: I was wondering if you could talk a bit about like- Because like in your writing, you know, have critical positions on visibility. Yeah for instance, you know, you were an editor for the Trapdoor Anthology, which is mainly a kind of critique of trans visibility. And you've also like, play an important hand in that kind of visibility boom around these historical figures, and you are now

yourself a visible public figure and a transgender [inaudable]. I was wondering if you could comment a little bit about what that sort of... What it has been like sort of living in that contradiction as it were? Or what the navigating sort of like having a role in a moment of visibility, while also having critiques of that?

Tourmaline: I think it's all about you know, my friend Tina [inaudable] talks about double dutch you know, it's like how-It's like you have to... In order for double dutch to be the kind of beautiful dance that it is, it's like you have to have one foot in, and one foot out. It's this kind of beautiful movement and I think the thing about it for me... I used to think that like, when I first started organizing, I used to talk about how, like queer and trans people of color were being targeted by the police and prisons. And then I remember my friend/mentor, Kai Lumumba Barrow, was like "we need to stop talking about our community as objects, we need to start talking about us subjects." So instead of saying we're targeted, we should talk about what we're doing, not what the state is doing. And that was a profound shift in me. And kind of, you know, I had started thinking about, like, the power of my grammar and how we're understanding ourselves, and how we talk about ourselves and how that matters. And how our, like, objectifying yourselves and- this is what I was thinking about time- and how, you know, it's important for us to be subjects, you know, to be virbing, talking about what we're doing, rather than what's being done to us. And I think then, so did that for a long time, and then I would kind of loosely put that in the parameter of like, being a somebody, you know. Like, an object is a nobody and a subject in the sentence is a somebody. Somebody's do things and objects have things done to them. And then I started to think about how actually, it's important to be able to move back and forth between being a subject and being an object. Like, you don't always want to be virbing. Sometimes you want to be receiving, you don't always want to be the person doing the thing. And sometimes it's really important to not be, sometimes it's really important to be invisible. And so, then I spent a lot of time thinking about the beauty of the nobody and the life of the nobody. Me and Tina and Cyrus Dunham wrote- I gave a commencement speech at Hampshire about the beauty of the nobody, but also the importance, which can be can easily be like, translated into questions around visibility, right. Questions about the afterlife of slavery and objects that can resist and the beauty of being objectified. And to me, I think it's like really important to just pose and keep being in question and then study around these issues. So for example, like when is visibility and like representation attract. You know, like, when does it seek to only further the like profit margin of like a TV studio? And when at the same time, can that also be something that like some people get something out of. When is it really important for our survival to not be physical? When do we want to be able to be objectified? When is it important to be verbing? And I think, to me, it's really important to just be asking these questions, and asking about the aim of visibility and representation because for a long time, like, you know, people were just talking about how important Those things were without, like questioning like, what are we, Who are we being visible to? To what aim? And what, like apparatus are we gaining representation in? Like, do we really want to be gaining more power in an institution that's not here for us? You know, So to me, those are really important questions. And then yeah, When is it like, important to do the double dutch or move to one thing over here, another thing here?

Lewis: I guess it strikes me that like, in some ways in in your work, like visibility, is like, it's a source of pleasure, right? Not so much like representation, per se, you know in the sense of it being accurate or not. It's partly like the visual dispute of having it happen and pleasure.

Tourmaline: And like pleasure can be our medicine. You know, like in these moments when we're dealing with so much, you know, I like pleasure and visibility can be really medicinal.

Lewis: I want to wrap this up before we both completely run out of steam [inaudable], but I was wondering if you wanted to- I wanted to give you opportunity to comment on other aspects of your your recent work that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

Tourmaline: No, I think we were getting into it.

Lewis: What are you working on now?

Tourmaline: So right now, I am working on a cut of the like longer form of the Mary Jones Seneca village film, working on like a feature script about these characters and working on a art show that Maybe be like more sculptures, that'll happen in like the early spring.

Lewis: What kind of, I guess this will be my final question, [inaudable]. I'm curious, I hadn't asked this earlier about it, I don't think, but you know, the, big big big like sort of theme across all like, your work is the historicity in memory you know. I'm curious, I just want to ask you a comment on like, what, like, what is it that you think film? Like, I guess like how you see this sort of relationship between like film as a medium and like historicity, like what you try to use film to do with memory in the past?

Tourmaline: Well, I mean, I just I think that like, film can be Really Neptunian. It can be transporting, it can be enchanting, like the actual magic, you know, like, take so much the actual movie magic in part is the magic of erasing how much labor it takes to have that kind of experience, you know, and like the number of people who work on creating what you see in the frame, you know. It was wild to experience, and like also how long those days are, and just like what that does to you the like, an inherent ableism of the, of the work. It's like it is a real kind of magic to create something in a frame, you know? And also there is such- there can be, you know, we can find, I can find, such pleasure in that reflection. I can't go around New York City anymore without experiencing the 60s and early 70s because I made film about those moments, you know, like in, in front of Stonewall on K Street. There's something truly transporting about that experience. Similarly, like to the 90s, and Egypt and I can't look at like, what is going on with Hudson Yards or the Whitney and Christmas tree peers without seeing what came before and with Seneca Village film and Mary Jones film, it's like impossible to not feel what is buried beneath Central Park. You know, like there's literal grave sites still in what is now Central Park you know from Seneca village because that whole community was just like raised. And you know, I can't like walk around Green Street without like looking for where Mary [Jones] lived and like and feeling those and being attuned to it.

Lewis: The company of ghosts.

Tourmaline: Yeah, exactly.

Lewis: This is my last question. What Do you want people to take away from your work?

Tourmaline: I think that I want those of us who like never experienced getting to see ourselves in you know, in like, receiving pleasure filled with glamour, having moments of joy, navigating violence, like being with each other. I want to provide that kind of reflection and I want it to be pretty unruly to what is like, you know, the moral of the state. And I wanted to ask questions about like, when is it fun to be objectified, when is it like powerful to be the subject of a sentence? How do we work towards having and creating moments where we self determine where we get to do and how we follow that.

Lewis: That's awesome. Well Tourmaline, thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you and you have been so wonderful.

Tourmaline: Thank you for listening to me.

Lewis: Thank you.