

Transcript – Lynn Nottage, Class of 1986, and Ruby Aiyo Gerber, Class of 2020

Narrator: Lynn Nottage and Ruby Aiyo Gerber

Interviewers: Mary Murphy, Nancy L. Buc '65 Pembroke Center Archivist, and Feven Teklu,
Senior Leadership Giving Officer

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Mary Murphy: Okay, so good afternoon. My name is Mary Murphy and I'm the Nancy L. Buc Pembroke Center Archivist at Brown University. Today is June 19, 2020, and I am joined again by members of the Brown University community that are contributing an oral history to the Pembroke Center Oral History Project. This project records the experiences of women, trans and non-binary members of our community. This series in particular is part of our work to record the spirit, the experiences of people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and now subsequent civil unrest across the United States following the police killing of George Floyd. So I'd like to ask our two interviewees to introduce themselves. And I'd also like to ask my fellow interviewer to interview, to introduce herself. So please, maybe Feven, can I begin with my fellow interviewer?

FT: Sure. [1:00] My name is Feven Teklu. I work in the Office of advancement here at Brown University and currently I am in Harlem, New York.

Lynn Nottage: Hi, my name is Lynn Nottage. I'm a playwright, screen writer and professor at Columbia School of the Arts and I graduated from Brown University in 1986. And I also hold an honorary degree from Brown University.

Ruby Aiyo Gerber: My name is Ruby Aiyo Gerber. I'm a second semester senior at Brown concentrating in Africana Studies.

MM: Okay, so, the two of you present a really wonderful and somewhat rare case for us of mother-daughter interview team. We have just a handful of others and that's really wonderful. And so I would definitely like to ask you some questions today about being a multi generation Brown family. But before we get into what's been happening, and why we're here today,

currently in the United States, [2:00] I would like to just begin the conversation by asking us, if you could just share a little bit about a little further about your connection to Brown, and maybe why each of you chose to attend Brown and the significance of your connection to the university.

LN: Okay, so why did I choose Brown University? It's really interesting. I graduated from the High School of Music and Art in 1982 and a lot of students that went to, went to Music and Art either went on to Purchase University, to Juilliard, or to other professional training schools. And I was told by my guidance counselor whose name I can't remember, and I keep trying to remember it. But I was told by my guidance counselor whose name I can't remember, and I keep trying to remember it, but I was told by the guidance counselor that I probably shouldn't reach too high. And so I began by looking at the state universities. And I was really fortunate that there was a, an African American woman who lived in Brooklyn who took it [3:00] upon herself to organize tours for African American students in the area to various colleges. So we went down and we saw the historically black colleges in the south. And then the second part of the tour was going north and seeing universities in, in, in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and Connecticut. And one of those universities that we stopped at was Brown. And I remember arriving on campus and being greeted very warmly by the African American students there who had come from Brooklyn. And I remember seeing the beautiful brick buildings and just feeling very welcomed at that university. And so when it came to applying, it was my first and only choice. And I still remember my guidance counselor, guidance counselor telling me that it was going to be a huge reach, even though I was an excellent student, and that I probably should consider alternatives. But you know, the proof [4:00] is in the pudding.

MM: Interesting. And Ruby, what about for you?

RAG: I think originally I thought that I didn't want to go to Brown just because that's where my mother went. And I didn't want to like, be trapped in like a, the shadow of my mother. And so I think it was kind of, it was like a buzzword at the back of my head, Brown. And, but I began the college search, looking at all the schools being like Brown is there, but definitely not my top. But then when I visited Brown and I learned more about the open curriculum, I fell in love with it. I think, especially being a student with learning disabilities, having the opportunity to take classes

that feel good to me, is like such a like, important thing and like not having certain hurdles that like, I'm not I don't have a brain for math. Like I've never had a brain for math. [5:00] And just knowing that that wouldn't hinder me, my experience, at a university, like it just opened up possibilities for me and I fell in love with Brown because of that. And I also went to a class in which it was on St. Augustine's confessions. And they, someone was like this reminds me of a lot of like, rap music today. And I thought it was just like such interesting connections being made. And like, here's this like, very old white text yet, intersectionality is being inserted into it. And that was like really a foundational experience.

MM: And I want to follow this up and ask about the impact of Brown in your life. You carry it with you, Ruby. This is of course more present in your life right now. But maybe if you could [6:00] just share – and this does not have to be positive. This is not a promotional oral history project, we have a lot of people who have rough and tumble memories of being at Brown. But if you could or do want to share about the impact of Brown as you move out into your lives beyond Brown.

LN: So do you want, is that a question for Ruby or for me?

MM: For both of you again.

LN: I was going to say I can, I can start because Brown has had a tremendous impact on my life as I had the good fortune to meet my husband, my senior year Brown University, and, and our union produced Ruby. And so I carried a little piece of Brown away with me. And I also had the good fortune when I was at Brown to study with two professors who were just absolutely instrumental in shaping me as, as, as a writer and as a human being. You know, the first being Professor George Bass, who is also the artistic director of Rites and Reasons theater. I believe it was my freshman year, but it might have been my [7:00] sophomore year. I took a playwriting class with George Bass that just opened my world to new possibilities. You know, he was a reverend and you know, he loved the sense of ritual, and invited a lot of fun into the classroom in ways that I didn't experience in my other classes. And it really invited me to learn differently and to use the university in a different way. I think that I began Brown as a pre-med student with

certain notions about – yeah, you know, it’s interesting because I got a scholarship to be pre-med even though it was never my intention to be a doctor. But I sort of rode that wave as far as I could in order to hold on to that, that scholarship. But, but what George Bass’ class did was allow me to exercise a different part of my brain which was that creative part, and meet students who weren’t STEM students, and meet students who were equally interested [8:00] in storytelling and, and creative ideas.

And so, and the second person who was really instrumental in shaping me because I’m a playwright was a professor who came at my very last year was Paula Vogel. She was a young playwright at that point. It was the very first time in my entire career that I had met a woman who was writing plays. Up until that point, I really thought that playwriting was the purview of men, you know, with the exceptions of folks like Lorraine Hansberry and Lillian Hellman. But those women were few and far between. But Paula really introduced the notion of playwriting as a career to me and encouraged me to apply for graduate school that really began my career. And so I think, in some ways, if I hadn’t encountered those two people at that moment in my life, I’d have a very different trajectory.

MM: That’s really interesting. [9:00] And, and Ruby, would you like to share?

RAG: Yeah, I think I won’t have a complete answer because I think while I’m still in my last stretch of Brown, I don’t know how it will impact the world outside, my experience of the world outside of Brown. But definitely during my four years at Brown, I’ve met so many people. I think there’s been a few professors who’ve really changed my worldview, but I think more than anything, it’s been my like my peers and the students and I think that was, has been the most inspiring thing at Brown. I think I went in expecting that I’d learn things that, in classes, that would really ground, would ground my interactions with the world, but it was actually my experience with my classmates that I then brought into classes that made me question things I was learning in classes and push professors and push [10:00] the material. And I think there’s like a certain kind of engagement where it’s like your institution has to work for you, that you can demand your needs. And that’s something I think I will take from Brown. Just seeing like being so inspired by so, so many different students of different identities, low income, trans, first generation, who are like this, this institution was not made for me and was not made to support

me, but I am going to bleed it dry, and I'm going to take what I need and build it to be a place where I can thrive, even if it doesn't want me to. And I think that's something I'm going to take from my experience at Brown and will hold really close to my heart, like for the rest of my life.

MM: I think it's really interesting that you're mentioning that, when you mentioned Paula Vogel and of course, just a powerhouse woman at Brown, and then Ruby you're mentioning this, this youth contingent on campus [11:00] which is also just so powerful. And I noticed in my research with the help of Feven, too, that I didn't realize that you were involved with, with Bluestockings magazine. And I think that that's really indicative of that of what you are speaking to. And that's really wonderful.

RAG: Definitely, yeah, it was. It's been really amazing. I really tried out lots of different groups at Brown. I was briefly president of Students for Sensible Drug Policy my freshman year at Brown. I was an editor for the indie for a while, Bluestockings, yeah. And it's been really amazing kind of seeing the university through student organizations.

LN: I mean, it's also watching the way in which Ruby navigated Brown with so much more freedom and agency was really quite delightful because I remember being at Brown and, and, and not fully coming into my voice until much later. And sort of approaching the university with some fear and trepidation because I [12:00] thought, who am I, you know, this African American young woman from Brooklyn who hadn't engaged with, with the material that was being introduced in the classes and also was not used to sort of the, the economic and social stratifications that existed in the university at that time. And so just watching Ruby navigating the space with ease gives me so much joy, because I remember fear being one of my guiding principles when I was there at that time, and not feeling as comfortable on campus and not feeling that I had the same sense of ownership that she has of the campus, still feeling very much like I was an outsider who would, quote unquote, be given permission to enter into the space. Whereas I think that Ruby's generation had much more, and I use this word [13:00] in a good sense, much more of a sense of entitlement and took ownership of the space.

RAG: And you're having this like intergenerational talk now reminds me of a student run

workshop I went to my sophomore year, which was an institutional knowledge workshop. And I think, especially of student activism, there's a lot of like, there's a four year turnover, where the mem, the memory is not held that after people graduate the work is forgotten, the ways they, they used like resources and funds in the university is forgotten, and those students have to learn it again. And a group of seniors my sophomore year, said, we're going to stop this and we're going to create a guide that helps students who are like, who are marginalized, learn to navigate this university. We're going to collect funds, we're going to collect themes to speak to, we're going to say like, these are organizations that have been doing this work on campus, this is their history, this is their legacy, [14:00] know it and own it, and pass it on. And I think that was really important.

LN: It sounds really important. So each generation isn't burdened with, with the task of reinventing the wheel is that you can build upon the foundation of the previous generation, which is something that I have to say, when I came to Brown, it's like I knew that there were those foundational people there, but it, we didn't interact in the same way that I think that your generation does with the past.

MM: Feven, would you like to add anything at this point before I turn the conversation just a little bit?

FT: You know, I do hope that we can we can touch on a little bit on this idea of institutions, right? But I, especially thinking Ruby, and, and wondering what your ask would be of institutions like Brown right now. And I understand that that's a big question, but since you're living it and currently there. [15:00]

RAG: I mean, I think it's really hard because I, there are so many different asks I think students have been really vocal about. And so I think my biggest ask is that the institution like very sincere, sincerely listen to what the students ask for, because it's not like it's – the institution hasn't changed, not for like a lack of trying, like students have written letters students have asked and I think, a lot of accomplishments that Brown then takes possession of, it erases the hard work that students did. And I think that misses the point. They'll be like, look, we are, we're

disinvesting in fossil fuels. Like, look how green we are, when like students fought for that, like that was a student led campaign. So I think both listening and being like, and respect like mutual respect, I think is kind of what I'm getting at that. I think there's a kind of [16:00] fear in dealing with a big institution where it's like this, they have all the power and we don't. But I think the institution has to like come to realize that they're nothing without their students. And I think from that they will then start to listen because they need to listen, because the old, the world of big institutions is dying.

FT: Very much so. Go ahead Mary.

MM: Okay, so I think let's carry some of this wisdom over and bring the conversation to, to where we are now, or let's say beginning in February, March. And I want to ask, it's, I'm kind of losing the ability to know how to even ask these questions about COVID and now the demonstrations around George Floyd's death and so I just ask [17:00] my interviewees to tell me the story. Tell me the story of your life since February. Maybe where you were the first time that your attention was caught and you thought, okay, wait, what is, what is this thing called COVID? Maybe that if you, if you can help paint us a picture about when you boarded this airplane of the pandemic and now, subsequent unrest.

LN: Sure. Should I begin? Do you want to begin?

RAG: Yeah.

LN: Being the hypochondriac that I am, you know, the minute COVID hit China, I ordered some masks online because I thought you never know. And so when it finally did hit, I had all my hand sanitizer, my note, my toilet paper, and my masks ready to go. And my friends were like, what are you doing? You know, they looked at me like a doomsday prepper I'm like, I am just going to be prepared and I guess history has proven me right. But where was I in February? It was an interesting moment in my [18:00] life because I was poised to have the most successful year as a professional playwright. I had finally brought to the stage a production of an opera that I had been toiling over with composer Ricky Ian Gordon at Lincoln Center, which was a commission

between the Met and Lincoln Center, which was like a Herculean task even to get it to that point. We were, we had gone through rehearsals, and we were in the first stages of previews when the virus hit. I was also prepping for a massive Broadway show, which is called *MJ*, which is about the life of Michael Jackson, which was poised to be probably one of the biggest shows that Broadway has ever seen just in terms of its production values. I also had another show called ironically *Floyd's* which was going to hit Broadway in the fall. And so I was juggling a lot of balls [19:00] and very excited to finally be you know what felt like the apotheosis of a lot of hard work. And then I just remember the first time we were told that we might have to stop production, which I think was like March 11. The producers were beginning to get very nervous. The actors in particular, the actors and singers in particular, because of the nature of opera is that your mouth is open wide and you're, you're singing loudly and the spit is just flying. And the theater was, was rather small and intimate, and they were getting concerned because information about coronavirus was swirling all around them. And finally on March 13, the producers decided that they were going to shut down the production which was absolutely devastating and you move through all those stages of grief because you think about seven years that it took us to get to that point [20:00] and we didn't even have the opportunity to open up the show and get our reviews. And I, you know, I know how hard those singers had, had worked. And so I can just speak very personally is that I moved through all those stages of grief of letting go of that work and letting go of the audience and sort of mourning that, but understanding that there were going to, other people were going to have repercussions as a result of this virus that were going to be much more serious than mine. But then, over the course of the next week, I watched slowly as my life was canceled.

MM: Yes.

LN: The musical was canceled, and then my play was canceled. And I, I am a professor at Columbia School of the Arts and my classes were moved to Zoom and then my students theses were cancelled, and it just felt absolutely, like my whole world was being removed. And I, and I know that we're in these first stages, stages of getting [21:00] back to some sort of normalcy, but for us in theater, we recognize that we're going to be in the absolute last stage and that we're not going to be able to apply our trade probably for another year, which means for many of us that

we have no income, and we have a few other options. And so just trying to figure out how do I negotiate this new space was, was really, really tough at the same time, trying to support my, my students who were going out into the world without their thesis and without any sense of what was going to be there to greet them. Because for theater artists, particularly in graduate level, the thesis productions are their, their calling card. It's, you know, producers and agents and everyone comes to see it and that's their stepping stone to a career and so that was removed and there was a lot of panic. And so I spent a great deal of my time trying to just buoy their, their, [22:00] their spirits and to keep them positive and optimistic. And then when I finally was figured out a groove and getting back into writing, because over a long period of time I found it impossible to connect with my creative spirit. I just felt sort of paralyzed and, and confused and depressed and all of the bevy of emotions that I think a lot of people were experiencing.

Just as I was resurrecting my spirit, the murder of George Floyd occurred and it just, you know, sent me into a completely different kinds of tail spin and downward spiral. And my response in was very different than COVID. My response was, like many people is that I have to, I have to conjure the energy and figure out how do I counteract this, you know, this police violence, this ongoing brutality against [23:00] Black bodies, and how can I counteract it in a way that's different from the young people because I personally don't have the same level of energy to go out in the streets and March. But what I can do is take the pressure that I have to bear and place it on institutions that I'm involved with. And in this case, it was being part of drafting a letter called Dear White People, which was taken to task, you know, institutional white theater for years and years of racist practices, and trying to hold them accountable. And so that's where I've been putting my energy is trying to rally theater artists across generations and across disciplines to affect some sort of change in our industry. Because one of the things that I think is important because I know there's so much focus on police violence, but we forget that a lot of the national narrative is shaped by [24:00] storytellers. You know, it's shaped by television, it's shaped by theater, and that we have some complicity in what's happening. And I thought we as storytellers can choose to reframe how the American narrative is told.

MM: Can I ask just one follow up question, Lynn, and then I will go to Ruby, about the letter that you wrote. Can you tell us, can you paint, or contributed to –

LN: The letter was written collectively and very deliberately, you know, no one wrote it, it reflects the entire body of Black theatre makers you know, from the interns to the artistic directors.

MM: I think that's, I apologize. And I think that's where I was going. If you could, again, like, describe give us a snapshot, a Polaroid. Did, how, how did you come together, like where you via e – and I'm [25:00] like, like basically where you via email, were you on the phone together, when you are, when it's coming together,

LN: When it's coming together. I mean, it's interesting because I think that it, you know, everyone wants an origin story. And we've been very deliberate not to tell our origin story because we want the focus to remain on it being a collective. And once you begin talking about how it forms, then you know, suddenly there are leaders and suddenly, we don't want that because we want, we want to be seen as a collective body that's speaking, not monolithically, but speaking, speaking to all of the different aspects of our, of our of theater.

MM Okay great.

LN: And so, but, but how did we come together, we came together in a spontaneous way. One person called this person, another person called that way, and pretty soon there are all these people on Zoom. And we thought, well, how can we respond? And the way we felt was most powerful to respond was, was really crafting a strong, provocative letter [26:00] that forced white American theater to sort of wake up to some of their practices. And later down the line, there will be demands but we thought, rather than irresponsibly crafting demands, let's just express what our grievances are and what our concerns are in ways that are uncensored and honest and reflective of the profound emotions that everyone was feeling.

MM: Okay, great. Thank you. So, so Ruby, now to you. If we can just back up a little bit again, and if you are willing, please tell us your story as it begins end of February beginning of March.

RAG: So end of February I was at Brown, and I think it was really a slow like, kind of

acceptance. I think at first we were like we don't know if schools are closed, if Brown is going to close because all these other schools had closed but [27:00] Brown hadn't said anything. They hadn't updated us. So I think there was kind of just this anxiety in the air. Not so, and like the anxiety wasn't so much about COVID yet. It was more like is school going to happen? What will this mean? Will people be sent home? And then I think it was kind of, it was the weird liminal. "We don't know," and then suddenly the chaos of it's closing and people have a week to get out. People have a week to, to say goodbye. People have a week to arrange their future plans. I think that was really hard for, for the whole student community. I think both like mentally, physically, it was just really hard. I, I still remember like my final in-person class and it felt kind of like, like it was mourning. Everyone was mourning in-person class [28:00] because we just knew it wasn't going to be the same from that point on. And I think everyone was really scared. And then being a senior, there was also the element of people mourning their experience of college being like I don't get to say goodbye in a proper way. I don't get to have a complete, a complete graduation. I don't have commencement. I don't have senior week. I don't get to say goodbye to friends who are moving back home. And so I think that was definitely like the first wave of COVID; saying goodbye to people and mourning kind of a conclusion and feeling incomplete in the absence. And then slowly getting used to Zoom class, which I think was really hard for, for me personally, but also I know for like a lot of my friends at Brown, and just I mean, all my friends who were in school all over the country, but I think there was a lot of frustration towards Brown when it came to like the universal pass because I think students were asking for more [29:00] support and we were asking for, for help during these unprecedented times, and it was help we didn't really receive. And it was just up to individual professors, whether they wanted to change the curriculum, be more lenient. And I thankfully had a lot of professors who were very, very lenient, and were able to work with the students individually and make it work, but not all professors were. So I think that was hard and we, we all wish there were, there was more institutional support.

But then the second wave of COVID after like, or not COVID, but of emotion of mourning after classes finished because I stayed in Providence because I was off campus. And a lot of my friends stayed as well. Was the mourning of future plans because I, I'm a second semester senior now, I took a semester off, but a lot of my friends were graduating, [30:00] and a lot of them wanted to move to cities where they weren't from and find jobs. And a lot of them

were looking for jobs and they were like, how am I going to support myself? I can't move here, I have to move back home and home might not be a very good place. It might not feel safe. And so I think we're kind of all still in that mourning, in that mourning place where our future, like though the future is bright, and I think kind of seeing the like, grassroots organizing that's been happening around the Black Lives Matter and George Floyd and Black Trans Lives Matter, that has been like a new inspiration, like has been really inspiring and kind of revitalizing but still there is that what are we going to do with our future we're entering a job market where there are just no jobs. We, so many in person internships and fellowships have kind of been closed. It's hard to move to a city, big cities, like New York or LA right now. [31:00] So I think it's been really a, a hard time for like both my mental health, but I also just think for my like generation, my class at Brown, I think we've all really been struggling

MM: What are you, can, if you could share, you don't have to but if you would like, list some worries, you know, like what, you know, you're worried about not finding a job, you're worried about, you know, what are your, what are?

RAG: Yeah.

MM: Paint us a picture of some of those worries for, and I think it's really important for listeners 100 years from now. This oral history goes into a collection that we hope to keep forever and make available. And so you think about a person listening in 100 years from now, trying to understand what – a youth perspective in this time and what that really feels like.

RAG: I mean, I think right now more than my like personal, like worries is like the fear that things won't change. [32:00] I mean, I think right, it feels like how could things not change in this moment because we're all working so hard to see this system completely changed. But there, I think there have been so many other like, social and political uprisings where the people have like, where people have fought, but we just haven't seen significant changes. And I think that's honestly like, my greatest fear is that things will go back to the way they were, which I, I hope they can't. So like that's like, my biggest worry is that we just won't see any change. And that systemic racism, the settler colonial culture, like it won't, it won't change.

But then like personal worries, I just, I, I don't know what my career like what to what next steps to do with my career because a) like, I write poetry and like, I want to be a poet, [33:00] but it seems really hard in this moment to support oneself as an artist. And I also –

LN: Always.

RAG: Always. But like particularly now, when there's like not, there's no, there's not really residences that are happening. There's not really workshops that are happening. And so that's like a really big fear. And then like, I think actually, a lot of my fears right now aren't so much for myself as much as they are for my friends and like loved ones in the moment, right, and like the world right now. I think there's just like, I have certain privileges like being like documented, being light skinned, being financially secure, being cys, that I see my friends who don't have those identities, who are also in the same graduating or like uncertain future, but they don't have those, those protections [34:00] and I think that that's my biggest worry right now. Seeing the, the Trump administration repeal trans health care protections, like that was a heartbreaking one that really like, was so devastating. And yeah, so I think those are my biggest fears. I feel emotional even just talking about it.

MM: Lynn, would you like to add to that thought?

LN: You know, I think I want to amplify what Ruby's saying. One of my big fears is that so much energy is being poured into this moment in terms of addressing anti-Blackness and white supremacy, and trying to push for some sort of changes. And what I fear is that this energy will dissipate once we begin returning to some sort of normalcy, and I hope that it doesn't. And, and so I think that [35:00] like Ruby, is like I want to stay activated and, and continue to push, to press for some level of urgency. I also do fear because I'm a professor, I worry a lot about the mental health of my students, because I do think that this is an unprecedented moment. And I think that they're negotiating a landscape that's completely foreign to all of us. All of us. It's like, a lot of times they look to me for advice, and I, you know, and I don't know what to tell them because I have never been in this terrain. I remember, I think it was the last week of classes, I was speaking to a student via Zoom and he's staying with an uncle in Virginia. And he

was lamenting the fact that his mother's trailer in Texas had just blown away. And he thought, I don't know where I'm going to go. He's like in the midst of all of this, [36:00] it's like my home is gone now and my mother doesn't have a home. And all I could do was sort of offer my condolences and my support. But I felt completely helpless in ways that I have never before because I always felt as a professor, at least I had some tools to offer. But in this moment, I don't feel that I have that full reservoir of tools because there is so much uncertainty. You know, and I think in particular, there's a lot of anxiety amongst my African American students and, and my, my, my, my trans students and my non-binary students who feel like when we return to some sort of normalcy, that they will be re-marginalized and are feeling you know, strangely, even in this sort of strange landscape that their voices for the first time are being heard and don't want to find themselves re-silenced.

RAG: I definitely feel that and I think that especially with my generation, a fear we've been having is with the upcoming election, [37:00] the November election, because I think it's kind of a lot of us feel like we're stuck between a rock and a hard place, and that we, like we fought for Bernie and, some people Elizabeth Warren, but like, here we are with Biden, who is Trump, but under a different, different, like a different formation of Trump. Like I don't think he is quite the same articulation, but I think the money that funds it, I think, a lot of the sexism, a lot of the racism it's more insidious in Biden, but I don't know, like, I think that electoral politics –

LN: Yeah.

RAG: It's, it's, it's –

LN: The messaging just seems wrong that in come November 2020, in a nation that's undergoing so much turmoil and where folks finally feel like they have a voice is that we have an election in which we feel voiceless.

RAG: Yeah, no, exactly.

LN: You know, and that's, that's a tremendous source of frustration I think [38:00] for my

generation, but I can only imagine how frustrating it is for you, particularly how activated young people were around Bernie, and Elizabeth Warren. And what I fear is that they're going to be told that their activism isn't potent, because the outcome is, is, is Biden who isn't representative of any of their desires.

RAG: But I also, like I think there are like little, little beams of hope and light within that because I do think there are lots of younger people who are getting into politics who have, who are democrats that have been fighting the democratic like institution. Like I think of AOC, who was, who is from New York, who, who ran even though an older democrat said, "Don't do it. Don't like we want, we want the seat to be held by a more established democrat." And so I think like that is [39:00] inspiring to think that from within like the government there can be some change. But I think the November elections definitely kind of overshadow that.

MM: Feven, would you like to jump in here with anything? I want to make sure that before I turn to the last section of this –

FT: Yeah, sure. You know, as a Black woman, I'm especially conscious of opportunities like this where I don't want just Black pain to be the thing that is, that is remembered. And I'm also very conscious of how much is being asked of us, and our bodies, and our mental health right now. And so I also should mention, I'm pregnant with a baby boy and so feel very protective of, of all of us in general. And so I want to know, what are you doing to take care of yourselves? What are you doing to fill your own cup, [40:00] to make sure that your act of rebellion of self-care is present in this?

LN: It's so interesting that you asked that question because when we're talking amongst the collective for We See You, one of the committees that we formed was care of duty because we, because we are so hyper aware of how this trauma can move into our bodies and create, you know, create cancer and create all sorts of disorders, you know, from mental to physical disorders. And so I do think self-care is super important. One of the things that I do every single morning is yoga. You know, and what yoga does is forces you to reconnect with your breath for at least a few minutes every day. And at the end, you know, to sit in stillness, and also every

weekend, I, we, we, I have the privilege to sit with a mindfulness guru who is coming to Brown University, Sharon Salzberg, who [41:00] for 20 minutes just takes us through steps of loving kindness. And something as simple and gentle as that can be supportive, particularly in moments like this when I do feel under siege, when I feel besieged by the media, by you know, both social media and the formal media, I think that finding ways to care for ourselves are super important. So thank you for that question.

FT: Absolutely. And Ruby?

MM: Definitely. I think it's really, that was definitely something I really struggled with at the beginning, because I think I felt so activated that I wanted to push myself even when my body said no, or even when my mind was like, you can't do this. But radical self-care is so essential. And I think remembering that this is a long term movement is part of life taking care of yourself and like saying that if I don't go to every protest this week [42:00] or next week I will still be rested and I will be ready to go in a month because this won't be over. So just one thing that has really made an impact for me is taking breaks from social media. I think I felt really like I needed to always be on it to know what was happening, to educate myself, to share information, to like constantly be plugged in. But I found that it was like not sustainable and that it was okay to take breaks, it was okay to not always be informed in the news, to take moments away from like Black death and just watch a movie, or read some poetry. I think it's really hard for me to do self-care alone. And I think this moment has been really special finding like the other Black women in my life. We're all like coming together and we've been checking in on each other and texting and like also like other Black folks in my life who don't identify as women. Like my friend Roger is coming over [43:00] tonight for Juneteenth and we're like, we want to watch a movie. And it's not going to be about anything that has political significance. He was like, I want to watch a horror movie, or a comedy and something, but something that I don't have to think about the current moment. And I think like moments like that are so important to like, allow yourself to, to let go of some of the pain and like some of the trauma. I think it's a super traumatic moment. I think it's traumatic to see so many Black bodies in pain, so many Black bodies negated and rendered invisible but yet hyper visible. And allow yourself to like not always have to hold that. And to be like holding myself in this moment is a radical and

revolutionary act because they don't want to survive as Audre Lord said.

MM: Are there, can I ask, are there [44:00] specific pieces you've, you've read a specific poem, for either of you or just something that you read or watch that does give you uplift, specifically?

LN: A specific – I will confess that in this moment, I haven't been doing a lot of reading because I've been doing so much activism and I feel like I've been I've been on the treadmill 24/7, you know, except for those moments when I do take for myself. And I will say, like Ruby, is that I'm very much looking for escapism. I know that everyone has these long lists of reading that they're doing to sort of illuminate themselves about African American history. I feel like I have lived this. I have done the work. And so right now like Ruby said it's about radical self-care in the moments when I am not engaged I am totally disengaged, which I think is important.

MM: Okay. [45:00]

RAG: Oh.

MM: Ruby please do share if you have a specific thing that's giving you uplift.

RAG: Yeah, I think right now when I create is like instances of Black beauty, of Black complexity, of Black love and the movie that comes to mind that is so beautiful is *Daughters of the Dust*.

LN: Oh yeah, that's true.

RAG: And that's like a really beautiful, like highly recommend, really beautiful film that was like also so intentional because it was shot in film, but they were like we're going to find film that will show the beauty and complexity of every, every melanin [inaudible] sister in this film. Like we're going to show all the different shades but beautifully.

LN: It's interesting now that you say that because I said I do have an escape, which is Black

cinema. I have a Black cinema club where a group of us [46:00] who are theater artists and filmmakers get together every Sunday, and we watch films that transport us. And so our film list includes films that take us to different landscapes, and in particular foreign landscapes which have an African Diaspora presence. So we've watched *I Am Not a Witch*, which is a beautiful film. And then we watched *Baccarat*, which is a Brazilian truly bizarre, but sort of be Brazilian film, which is Brazil's most successful film ever. We just watched the *Burial of Koyo* and we watched *Uncle Bumi* which is not African Americans, it's Thai, but just finding cinema that is totally transports us to other landscapes and in these landscapes, landscapes that are rich and beautiful, [47:00] and there are telling narratives that are very different than our own and holding African, African Diaspora narratives that are unfamiliar to even some of us who are connected to the African diaspora.

MM: Feven?

RAG: Another media that I've been revisiting that is like a little more like plugged into the current moment, but I think it, it works because it adds humor and beauty is *Random Acts of Blindness*, which is the show by Terence Nance on HBO, which is really beautiful. And it's just a collection of like, I think he has many Black artists work on it. And it's a collection of like, all the different experiences of Blackness, like from queerness to, to like sexual trauma, to the notion of the white savior, which is like there's a whole section on the white savior that's like really funny. It's like it's getting at the root of like settler colonial and like colonial like [48:00] history in like film, and also like white gays, but it's hilarious. Like it's a hilarious sketch. And so like, that's a really amazing current show.

MM: Well, so I think I think we have about 10 minutes left. So I always want to make sure at the end of each of these interviews, that it's a basically a free share. I want to make sure that I maybe completely missed something that you wanted to make sure to get on the record. So please do take this time, either of you and for these audiences, for these researchers, for these students, 100 years from now, what do you what do you want them to know?

LN: Yeah, there is one thing that I wanted to put on the record, just because I was listening to

Ruby talk about how, you know, the institutional memory is four years and, you know, there is, is, is this forgetfulness about what [49:00] folks did in the previous generation. And I just want to mention something because I think it's, it's worthwhile having on the public record and being a part of Brown history is when, after my freshman year, I was part of a group of people that formed a ferority which was sort of a fraternity sorority. And our intention was to bust Wriston Quad which, at the time, was a frat row. Do you Wriston Quad, which –

RAG: In front of the Ratty.

LN: Which is in front of the Ratty. And so when, when I entered Brown, it was still at a time when students could drink when they were 18 years old. And so weekends were these kind of grotesque, free-for-all where frats through these parties that were absolutely reprehensible, you know, in which women did not feel safe, when people of color did not feel safe, and the university did very little by way of protecting us. And at the end of the freshman year we began raising questions with the university. Why do the frats still have [50:00] this stranglehold on the center of campus? You know, that in order to get to the Refractory, you know, everyone had to pass through Wriston Quad, which felt like the least safe place on campus to just do something as basic as eat a meal. And we thought that's not fair. And so we went to the university, a group of us, and said, "Well, how can we live there so that we can diversify this space?" And they said, "Well, you have to form a ferority or a sorority. And so at that time, we decided, well, we'll do it and then we're like, how do you do it? They're like, "You have to find a national charter from a fraternity or sorority that already exists, and they have to give you permission," which we did. And then there was a house where, which was the football frat at the time and they were thrown off. And they said, "Well, if you can get 50 people to live here and sign up, we will give you the house." And we did it. And it was multicultural. It was an inclusive house so LGBTQ [51:00] folks, probably for the first time on campus felt comfortable in a space. And we lived there for one year under siege. You know, every weekend, the fraternities would break out our windows. And on the weekends, we deliberately had alcohol free parties, so that people who did not want to drink but wanted to hear music, or read poetry, had spaces that felt safe and inclusive. And I feel like people forget that that happened. And that's how that space was diversified. And I still remember because I was one of the presidents along with Sheryl McCann of the of the ferority

which was called Phi Gamma Lambda, is we got to sit on the frat council and it was all white men and two Black women in this space, which I think no woman had ever entered, which was the fraternity meeting. And I just remember these men yelling at us and telling us how we had made a sham of hundreds of years of tradition. [52:00] I still can hear their voices just shouting that we did not belong there and just taking the abuse. And then they never told us after that first meeting when the meetings were again, we never got to go back, but at least we made ourselves present. And in the end, because we wanted to have something that felt democratic in process, we didn't want people to be hazed or, or we didn't want people to be rushed. We invited everyone to sign up and the frats, to break us, had the first 50 people sign up the white men. And so at that moment, we decided that we were going to disband the fraternity and we gave our house for a sorority on campus.

MM: Holy moly. That is one story. I have never –

LN: I know. I just wanted it to go on record. And there who were part of it, you know, including, you know, the people who are now like provosts at universities and documentary filmmakers. All these sorts of phenomenal people [53:00] who were part of this fraternity. And I thought it's a little piece of history that is forgotten, you know, which was sort of traumatic for those of us who gave up our sophomore year in order to transform that space, and we did it.

MM: Wow. Do you think that other members of that group would do an oral history together?

LN: I think so. Yeah. I mean, there are other I know, I know some other people and certainly, I can put you in touch with them.

MM: That would be amazing. So I think that's really incredible little vignette. And I just love oral history for this reason, like, sure enough, there are these really important gems of history that we need to be documenting. So thank you for sharing that.

LN: You're welcome.

MM: And please, let's think about this. And for Ruby and free share for you.

RAG: I, I don't know if I have anything for the free share. But if you guys have any last questions about Brown currently, I'm happy to answer.

FT: I'm just curious Ruby, we [54:00] talked a little bit earlier about intersectionality and I'm curious, what, what you hope we don't leave out right now, in this moment in this fight for Black Lives Matter, in this in this fight for Black Trans Lives Matter. You know, in the past history has left people, you know, behind when trying to move forward. And I'm just curious about that for you right now.

RAG: I think like, specifically thinking about the Black Lives Matter movement, like kind of, and I think this has been like on the top, on everyone's tongue, but like the complexity of Black identity. I, I've seen that a lot of complaints that a lot of Black Lives Matter rallies that weren't organized by trans folks don't include the murder of trans folk, of like Black trans people. And so I think that's a huge one. [55:00] But the really powerful thing I've been seeing on social media is members of certain communities like the Latinx community or the central, like Central American community, like communities like calling out anti-Blackness within their own communities. Because I think that is like a huge thing is that within certain communities, I think it's easy to like, say like, oh, Blackness is complex, and there's so many identities, but then within individual communities like blackness has been a race. And I think that's like the really important thing is that even though we have these conversations about intersectionality, it's so important to go into like the specific communities that you occupy and have some kind of accountability. Because I heard someone say the other day that you can't really hold, like to hold someone accountable or institution or community accountable you have to be in community with, with that person, with that institution because then there is no accountability. Like that is not accountability, [56:00] like they are not part of your community so they can't hold you accountable, or you can't hold like yourself accountable or like, I think that's been a huge thing with people apologizing to like Black folks for past racism where it's like we're not in community, like you can hold yourself accountable within your community, but don't try and enter my community. And so I think that's like a really important thing. I've been seeing that as a

Black Jew, that that's been something that's happened in the Black Jewish community, in the Jewish community, that they're saying, we have to talk about anti-Blackness within the Jewish community, like why do we erase Black, Black identities from Judaism? And so I think that's like a really important thing is like, remembering in your individual that we all like as individuals occupy lots of different identities and communities and we can then bring these conversations and these fights to those, to those spaces. Something I think about during my time at Brown was the Black Student Walkout that happened [57:00] last year that didn't, that ended up not really working, that there was then co-opted by the university and the mission didn't fully, like it fell apart. And there was a, there was a forum in which Black students were able to talk to the activists who organized it and there was a lot of, a lot of my emotions were really high in the meeting because people were saying, "Why didn't you ask us? Like for the, about these demands." Because it was like five students who like felt like, I think they did like really great work, but they weren't in community with the entire Black community. And I think that was the issue that there were, there was like, the Black athlete community who was like, "our demands aren't seen in this and we're not we're not part of this." There's the Black STEM community, there's the Black Greek life community, like there's just all these communities where it's like, you're not, this is not asking for accountability within our community. So therefore, we are erased within this [58:00] bigger, this bigger call to action.

MM: Okay, well, I want to thank both of you so much for joining us today. And we can just wrap up for one minute after I stop the recording. So I'm going to do that now. So thank you.

LN & RAG: Thank you.

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