

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF NAOMI WASHINGTON LEAPHEART, PART 1

Monique :

Okay. I always start out on record by giving the time and all that. My name is Monique Moultrie. Today is October 20th, 2019, and I am here with reverend Naomi Washington Leapheart. We are conducting an oral history for the LGBT Tran website and my research project, which at this point is kind of titled the Hidden Histories: Faith Activism of Black Lesbian Religious Leaders. What we are going to do is, in this oral history, we are going to cover several milestone periods of your life. It's meant to offer an overview of your life story, because my particular project is working on faith and activism, I am going to specifically ask you questions about that. You always have the ability to say, I do not want to answer that question, or to answer in whatever way you want. I will not push and you will have right of refusal. So once this interview is done, it will be transcribed. And the company I have been using has been rev.com and they have the ability of you blinking directly into the audio to amend the transcript.

Monique :

If you decided, "Hey, I told this story about this girlfriend and that's kind of mean, I don't want that on record." We can go in and we can excise that from actual audio, and then the transcript as well. Once that has been approved by you, I'm gifting these to LGBT Tran to put up. If that is not something you want, there's a way in the permission, in the consent form for you to note that and then the consent form also gives me the ability to use your narrative as part of the data for the book. Feel free to pass, feel free to elaborate wherever you want.

Monique :

We are going to go, maybe not in succession because, for some folks I have like clear, you do a good job in your Linked in of like you are putting in years for stuff. But there might be things that sort of happened before or after. If that's the case, if you start a story to answer a question and it's not that time period, that's fine. We will just date as we go. I have read that, you are proud of your Detroit heritage. Can you tell me about your early life? What type of community involvement, what type of neighborhood were you a part of?

Naomi :

I was born and raised on the West side of Detroit, in a kind of nuclear family. My mother, my father, and my younger brother who is six and a half years younger than me. And we lived sort of around the corner from my grandmother or my father's mother. I spent a lot of time in my house and in my grandmother's house. I remember that my mother was the primary breadwinner throughout my childhood. My father was in and out of work.

Naomi :

I remember he got laid off from the seven up bottling company, used to be in Detroit and he worked for seven up. I don't remember that, but I know that's true. And then he got laid off and a lot of my memory has to do with the kind of roller coaster ride of my father's sort of liminal place between full employment and unemployment. My mother was primary breadwinner and worked a lot. She was a banker, as a teller when she graduated from high school at 18 and then by the time she retired a couple of years ago from the bank was an assistant vice president or something, managing big accounts like the school district of Detroit account and I think the city of Detroit account too at that bank.

Naomi :

And I start to describe my family that way because the economic precarity that I thought we, our family had was a major feature of our household commentary, the way we related to each other. I think my mother felt very resentful about the fact that she felt like she was carrying the load by herself of the family's survival and my, the way she treated us and my father was a manifestation of her kind of resentment and, not having a place to process that, not having the language to, describe that, not having, I think the emotional intelligence to ask her what she needed given the burden that she felt she carried. I just remember that my childhood was very fraught with, we did not want to deepen my mother's anger and resentment for us. As I am telling that story, but my father was the nurturing fill the gap for me as it relates to being nurtured and being supported unconditionally.

Naomi :

He took us back and forth to school. He took me back and forth to the 82,000 extracurricular activities I was involved in... He would come to whatever performances or basketball games or whatever I was doing, maybe not for the whole performance, but towards the end and I would see him in the back or whatever, ready to pick me up and then had the experience of feeling like my father was a lot more attentive to my life than my mother was. As a grown woman now I am like, I understand what it means to feel a pressure to get it done and feel burdened by that and unappreciated and all of that. I am just saying as a child, I was just like, my mother does not really care about what's going on with me so let me find other mothers who can be that and they were the church mothers.

Naomi :

So parallel to my household growing up was my experience with my grandmother who lived around the corner and who insisted that we, my brother and I go to church with her and so for as long as I can remember she came to the house on Sunday morning to pick us up for Sunday school. We would go to Sunday school and then stay after for church.

Naomi :

She made sure we were involved in the youth ministries at the church and so that meant we were on the usher board, the youth choir and youth missionary kind of activities, which meant we went to the nursing home that was in the neighborhood once a month to be with the patients or the residents there. We would go in the day room, like the sitting room where residents could come and watch TV or eat their meals or whatever and we would sing hymns, pray, read scripture. And my formation spiritually to me as far as I'm concerned, was connected to my grandmother's insistence that we be present and be leaders in the church setting. I had this whole other world at church where I was felt seen and supported. I felt like I had these old church women who told me all the time, you are going to do great things or there's something special about you.

Naomi :

You are Mother Leapheart's granddaughter, you are her namesake. And I was very acutely aware of the legacy that I was expected to continue giving my grandmother's leadership in the church, not just the local church but in the region. I mean she was going to the Michigan state Baptist blah blah blah, and would take me with her. And I would sit there and my white and watch her do her thing and she was grooming me to be the youth leader of that Michigan state Baptist, whatever or to enter the oratorical contest or to sing a song. I mean once I started singing kind of publicly go up there and sing a hymn or whatever. And so leadership development, spiritual formation to some degree training and speaking

publicly and singing publicly all came from my grandmother's nurture and the church, women's nurture of me.

Naomi :

I think, I feel like I had a full social life but it was all in church. It was all based in church. The other piece, I had home church and then school. I went to a private Christian word of faith school from kindergarten to eighth grade. The school was at first on the East side of Detroit and I have lots of memories of driving, my father driving us to school from the West side to the East side.

Naomi :

They eventually moved from the East side to the suburbs. I have memories of once I got to high school, my father taking first my brother to school there because he went to the same school and then dropping me off downtown in public school for high school. But anyway, this school was on one hand, academically stellar. They insisted on putting us at a grade, giving us materials that were grade level beyond where we were in terms of age. Having the forethought to push us and challenge us even as by default that they can do third grade work if they are in second grade. So give them third grade materials. And it was a vigorous education academically.

Naomi :

And we were also using Christian curriculum, it was the Abeka curriculum, which would describe things and they would be like, this is what God was doing. And the textbook would say that. We were learning everything through the lens of a Christian perspective. I mean, I think this did not apply to math, but certainly history, literature, I am trying to think, maybe even science. I mean it was very creationism driven.

Naomi :

Which, the theologies were embedded into the material. So vigorous academically, but also very indoctrinating in terms of how we were learning how the world works via God's, providence. And we had devotion every morning. We had a grade. And devotion because it was scripture. We learned scripture and devotion. The teachers would teach devotion. They were not trained clergy at all, I do not even know how that passed as a Bible teaching, but it did. We also had robust extracurriculars at this school, so they put an instrument in everybody's hand and second grade, third grade, and you had to choose an instrument and we did not know anything about instruments, so I chose the clarinet because I was like, I guess I play the clarinet.

Naomi :

And by fifth grade was in the band. By sixth grade was traveling all over and band competitions. By seventh grade they had formed an orchestra and because they had strings at that point, and we had orchestra and seventh and eighth grade I was first chair clarinet in the orchestra and looking back I am like, that was really sophisticated. We were really doing some extraordinary work related to music and related to sports. I do not think we saw it that way at the time we, thought we are doing all about gifts should be given to the glory of God. And so we were doing this to the glory of God. We were not doing this to develop a profession or develop, I mean there was no sense of you guys should do this for a career or music can be something that you do to make money.

Naomi :

It was like this, we are doing this to the glory of God. By the time I graduated, eighth grade. I was in a symphony orchestra, I was on the basketball team playing point guard. I had won science fair competitions at the school and then in the city, you would go to the city science fair and compete with all the other kids around the city. I had done that. I had one, they called them speech meet. So like oratorical contests in our little school in the school. And then we would do a Michigan state speech meet. I had done public speaking competitions, I was fully prepared to go to high school as this well-rounded kid. And I was also thoroughly indoctrinated with all kinds of theology, like the rapture.

Monique :

And did that parallel what you were learning in your Baptist church?

Naomi :

No, I actually think that my school was a lot more conservative than the church was. The school was very [crosstalk 00:15:11] Much, you have to speak in tongues. Tongues is a sign of the indwelling of the Holy spirit. And they made us speak in tongues. Now we were kids, we did not know how to speak in tongues. And I remember very distinctly in devotion one morning they were not going to dismiss us and to everybody speaking in tongues and the people who were like, insubordinate got taken into a room, closed the door, and they would come out speaking the tongues.

Naomi :

I and a couple of my friends were like, we do not want to know what happens in that room. Let us cook up a plan. I think I started counting backwards in Spanish or something I started doing something to make something come out of my mouth. It sounded like tongues. It was gibberish but it satisfied whoever. And we did not have to go in that room. I mean, that is kind of thing that happened at school not at church.

Naomi :

There was an insistence on salvation, accepting Christ, becoming baptized. But we did not do much evangelizing we did at church, there was not this insistence on tongues. We were sort of a charismatic Baptist church, but it was not, I mean my Pentecostal friends now I am like, we were not Pentecostal. Because, if that's was Pentecostal that we were not there. But we were certainly much more animated in terms of Baptist tradition. We were in Detroit. There was kind of like the COGIC churches influenced us and we influenced the COGIC churches. There were not parallels. And I don't know how I reconciled the fact that Monday through Friday I was in a school that took seriously the rapture and, word of faith, which would morph into prosperity gospel. And the fact that on Sundays I was in a church where tongues, if that's your thing, fine. But there was no expectation that that was a sign of anything.

Naomi :

And we did not talk about the rapture at church. I do not know how, I thought of these as distinct spaces and, I did not expect any consistency, between the theologies I learned in school or the ones in church.

Monique :

What would you say the messages, if any, you were being given at that time period about social justice or working in the world? Either home, school, church.

Naomi :

At home, I remember us watching, my mother and I were watching the Malice Green trial. There was Rodney King and OJ. These were big kind of national moments that we were paying attention to via, TV or whatever. I remember when the OJ verdict came down, I was at school that day and we all had to go to the cafeteria and somebody welding the TV and an old school and we, and I remember.

Naomi :

Everybody was excited. So I was like, I guess we should be excited that OJ was found not guilty. I remember that. Nobody though provided any commentary about, what does this mean? How was this racialized? What about violence? What about there was not any meaning making, but they, took us out of class, put us in the cafeteria, wheeled in the TV and we saw the verdict read and the teachers were excited. And we thought, this must be a good thing. School did not have any, anything beyond sort of the charity model of we should give back to the community and in whatever ways we have been blessed to be blessings to other people. At home though, there was also the Malice Green trial. Malice Green was a Detroit er or who was stopped by the Detroit police and in the middle of the night and they told him to get out of the car. He had his hand clenched and would not open his hand and they beat him to death right there on the curb.

Naomi :

And I just remember that trial was televised, these three white cops and this black man who kind of had a record and maybe was living with addiction. And the way they dragged him through the trial. There was a black woman attorney for Malice's family who is now the prosecutor. I mean, she moved on up and is now very high profile. But we were fascinated in my household with watching the Miles Green trial and this black woman trying to argue that these cops needs to go to jail. And I just remember my mother's color commentary about white folks and racism and we need to stand up because these white folks cannot keep killing us like this. And I, there was a very kind of black pride sentiment in my household. But in terms of the idea of justice seeking as a vocation or connected to a gospel mandate, I would say that was not part of my story until I really want to say until post-college, like pre seminary. I was 30 by the time,

Naomi :

I felt led to connect dots between what the Bible says, what Jesus did and the vocation of social justice or the work of social justice.

Naomi :

It was not part of, personal salvation was the emphasis in all of my religious spaces growing up. Black pride was, emphasized, right. I was proud to be black, proud of the heritage, proud of the, and that was due to my, family, due to my mother, predominantly the rest of my extended family.

Monique :

Let's go to high school. You have left the Christian environment in New York and a Detroit public.

Naomi :

Yes.

Monique :

School setting. What were those experiences like?

Naomi :

I went to Cass Tech High School in Detroit, huge... 3000 students. Came into a class with 1500 students, the freshmen students. Huge, versus the 200 students from K-8 at the small Christian school I went to before. I was a little overwhelmed by, how huge it was. But I was also fascinated because this meant then that I could meet people who were not Christian. I could meet people who were... White. I mean, I...