Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Julie Tolentino, 2018 April 11-12

Funded by the Keith Haring Foundation.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Julie Tolentino on April 11 and 12, 2018. The interview took place at a friend's apartment in the East Village, New York, and was conducted by Alex Fialho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Julie Tolentino and Alex Fialho have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Julie Tolentino in the East Village, New York City, on April 11th, 2018 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number one. Julie, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born? And can you describe your family structure and dynamic a little bit?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay. I was born in San Francisco in 1964, in the fall. My parents were very, very young when they had me. They were not married. They were less than 16, both of them, so they weren't able to get married. My mother's family was first-generation from El Salvador, and my father's family first-generation from the Philippines.

My mother's family was very upset that she was pregnant, namely because the church threatened that if she remained pregnant, they would kick the family out of the church. Even though that family wasn't that churchgoing. But they felt that it was a kind of mar to their community or whatever. So my mother was basically held and cared for by my paternal grandmother and grandfather, which I will refer to as my *lola* and *lolo*. That's how you say Grandma and Grandpa in the Philippines. [00:01:57]

So, my lola and lolo took care of her—and us, ultimately—because she was basically thrown out of the house. She went to an unwed mother's home in San Francisco. And while she was there, they were kind of secretly trying to get her to—how do you say it?—adopt me away. And she didn't want to do that. They gave her pills at night to try to get her to give a sleepy signature. And she never took the pills. I mean, literally, it's like a movie. She hid the pills under her tongue, pretended she was sleeping, and then would refuse them when they would try to get her to sign papers.

So, in any case, the only reason why, probably, they didn't fight that to the end is because I was born so premature. So she had to go to the hospital. She didn't stay, and she didn't have the baby in the unwed mother hospital home or whatever. So I was born in a hospital called Saint Mary's Help, which I believe burned down a year or two later, actually.

Even though my mother and father weren't married, they continued to have kids. So, three years later, I had a sister. And then 11 months after that I had another sister. But while my father was having kids with my mom, he also had another woman who he was having kids with. So there was double families. And almost at the exact same time, both my mother and this other woman were having kids. So their family was multiplying even though they were barely even 16.I think by the time my mom was 18, she had three children. And by the time my father was 18, he had five. [00:04:00]

I'm just going to tell you all these kind of gory details, okay? So, for many years, we thought we had a cousin. But it turned out that he had had a child with his brother's wife. [. . . And then, my father continued to have other children. So there's other kids that we don't know. – JT]

ALEX FIALHO: What are your parents' names and your siblings' names?

JULIE TOLENTINO: My mother's name is Maria Angela Wood. Because she got remarried,

even though she's also divorced. My blood sisters are Rita Marie Wood, Deanna Lee Wood. My name—because we were adopted by our stepfather, who is also really quite young. He was 25 he adopted three children who were 12, nine, and eight? And then, I have stepbrothers and stepsisters. They have their own family names. But there are three male siblings and one female sibling in the other families.

ALEX FIALHO: And I know you've talked a little bit to me in the past and in other contexts around mixed identity—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: —and mixed heritage. Can you speak a little bit to that?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Sure. Because we were so young, we were very influenced by our grandparents because they were really the only adults in the room. So in a way, we really grew up with our Filipino grandparents. They took care of us on the weekends. My lola got my mother a job. [00:06:17]

So, you know, they worked together every day and she cooked for us. So we were very influenced by Filipino culture. My grandfather was a Filipino Mason. [He was an intellectual through that kind of process of philosophical thinking. –JT] He was also a veteran. He served in the Second World War for the American Army. So he was a little bit on his own. I mean, we were actually very, very close to him. But he was very, you know—he was just sort of a reader, writer. He played tennis and ping pong. So I think that there's something about their first-generation—like, they were very, very close with all of their friends that had come over from the Philippines around the same time.

And my lola was a war bride. She came over on the boat. She had all of the other women who were getting married to Filipino men. You know, she was traveling in that circle. They were constantly traveling in their Filipino circles, plus the Masonic Temple connections. And they were very, very central and a very caring group of people who helped people in their immigration—both legally and also as a sanctuary for families that were just coming from the Philippines—and helping people get work. There was a whole network around that. [00:08:02]

My mother's family from El Salvador—I mean, we knew the culture really only through food, I would say. My grandmother had multiple husbands. She also had children from a lot of different people. So that side of the family is also very mixed. We weren't that close to her. And I think she was always conflicted about having these young grandchildren and my mother being so young. You know, they had sort of a troubled relationship.

So there's a lot of independence and a lot of small molecule families in this larger context. I was very aware of the two sides of the family. I was very aware of the fact that they're all first-generation, so they didn't really want us to speak their first language. They wanted us to speak English. And they certainly did not want us to speak the other language. So, like, the Latin side didn't want us to speak the Tagalog, and vice versa.

So that had a huge impact on the way that I could take everything in. And also, I was the first. I was the firstborn. It doesn't seem like such a distance, but, you know, I was three or four years older than the next set of kids. And my parents were so young, so it was almost like I was a little bit—I don't know, it's like I was born an adult or something. And certainly taking care of my sisters early on. And, you know, definitely holding hands with my mother quite early as a comrade, and not so much as a kid, that I can remember. [Laughs.] [00:10:08]

ALEX FIALHO: And how about—Lola and Lolo were your father's parents?

JULIE TOLENTINO: That's right.

ALEX FIALHO: And you had close a dynamic with them growing up.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. Right. Exactly.

ALEX FIALHO: How did everyone—how did San Francisco become a place that the families ended up as first-generation families?

JULIE TOLENTINO: You know, I don't know much about my mother's family. Actually, not much at all. But like I said, my grandfather came in through the Army. And when he finished his duty, his last station was in San Francisco. I think he had had a choice whether or not he wanted to stay there or not. And then my grandmother followed on the war bride boat.

But in San Francisco, by the way—you know, I think even to this day it's the highest number of Filipinos per capita in the States. And also, for whatever it's worth, the mix of, sort of, Filipino-Salvadorian is also very common in San Francisco in particular. Just in terms of, like, migratory density. So people are usually—when I mention it from somewhere else, people find it a very strange mix. But it's kind of a super common mix in San Francisco.

ALEX FIALHO: How did you find San Francisco growing up as a space?

JULIE TOLENTIO: Well, when I think back on it now, I feel like I was very lucky to grow up in a small cosmopolitan city. [And also, I grew up in the '70s, and it was a powerful time to be there. –JT] People were really open. You could feel all the impacts of the '60s and the '70s. [00:12:09]

All the shifts of, like, black feminism, gay rights, eco-activist—like, all that kind of early—all of that. Anti-war protests. And also labor rights. Like, there are some really deep and very ingrained understandings of what it meant to be a person, and this idea that we had rights to define and to reconsider. I felt like there wasn't so much of a shame around poverty or being lower- and middle-class. Because you felt like there's something you could do about it. So when I think back, I think that's really important.

But also, you know, my mother was so young. So I was sort of watching her grow up. And part of her growing up was going to gay clubs and bringing home all of these different kinds of people. You know, our house I felt like was filled with, like, fairies and leather men and these beautiful fags, you know, and dykes. And it was just very, very diverse, just because of my mother sort of discovering herself and the city.

And—I'm sorry—and also, I mean, I also at one point—wait. Can I just pause for one second? Because I just lost my mind, my thoughts. [So, what I was trying to say is what I felt in the city. –JT] [00:14:07]

It was a very transit-oriented city. So you could just jump on a bus and see and feel different parts of the town. But, you know, one of those impacts of being a teenager and being in high school, and sort of being an adult-teenager or whatever, was that—and even when I was young, one of my sisters is developmentally disabled.

So there was a way that, like, I felt like I was always looking around to make sure everything was going to be safe for her. So I feel like I learned the city through her. Like: what she needed, how she needed space, how she needed to be seen or experienced. And that I wanted her to not feel any disparities. And so, I feel like that's actually how I know the city. Like: how do we move through the bus so that people would take care and not, like, knock her over? Or there were times when she was more and less verbal. So when she wasn't verbal, it was really important to make sure she had space and she was treated well. So, that's one way that I really felt the city.

And also, you know, I was in high school when Dan White murdered Harvey Milk and George Moscone. And in fact, at that point—I had very good grades, and so out of a diversity program I was accepted to a school that was all the way across town. And it happened to be a fancy girls school, Catholic girls school. And that was where Moscone's kids went to school as well. So that day that that happened was, like—I mean, you know, the whole city fell apart. But it was extremely impacting in the school. [00:16:16]

And what I also remember that was really hard is that Dan White was from sort of a sister neighborhood to our neighborhood in San Francisco. So I felt the jolt of the difference. The class difference, the—you know, Harvey Milk was a very beloved person in San Francisco regardless of how people felt about his being gay. So, like, to feel this kind of wretched—it was like a knife just stabbed the city and stabbed the community.

So I felt like, at that moment, I could say that that was probably—like, in a way, I think that my sister politicized me. But then at the same time, I would say that that event changed my life. And then I think about it, now, it makes me really upset, actually, and very teary. But I remember taking the bus home and getting off the bus on Market Street and just walking

with thousands and thousands of people into the Castro and just dealing with that for a sort of taking-back-the-night night, you know.

And, you know, there was a vigil of people who were upset. I just remember it. I remember the experience of it and the kind of overwhelm—and I think, and it's reminding me, that that's also how I felt—like, it did do something to me. Because whenever I'm in a large group of people, I get this incredible overwhelming rush. And I always start crying. Like, even when I think about it. [00:18:03]

So, it is—something viscerally happened to me. Like, something imprinted very deeply on that day. And it followed me. You know, it followed me all the way through. Through, you know, various types of experiences of being with people. Like, just any kind of congregating. I don't know. I'm just remembering that, actually, as a very, very, very specific imprint of experience.

ALEX FIALHO: It's powerful.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah [laughs], it's intense.

ALEX FIALHO: Do you have a sense of what that imprint is? We can take our time with it, too.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, I think—you know, I would say that—you know, I talk about this a lot when I teach, and I think about this a lot in my work. Which is that there's, like, this complete inside person. Like, each of us have an inside world that is fully possessed by whatever it is—how we think, and what we do, and how we might consider a word, or an action, or communication. And I often say that, you know, then your mouth opens or your body moves and whatever comes out is really different than what's inside, no matter how hard you try to express yourself. And I think what I remember about that—or what it's reminding me right now anyway—is that it was the first time I had ever actually felt that I understood somebody else's—and, like, a mass of people's—inside. [00:20:00]

So whether that was, like, understanding this kind of outrageous grief, obviously, and absolute fury over the impossibility of a very, very deranged violence—and selfish violence—to sort of be laid out in this kind of haphazard—like, in a lot of ways it just represents all of the violences that we're so familiar with. You know, it's governmental police-style violence. It was a class war. It was, you know, a straight white male looking in at what should have been his world that was being taken away by a liberal mayor and an obviously out and completely actively out gay person, who was representing a community that was in need. And, you know, there wasn't a person of color in that kind of violence. But he was basically also—it was very clear to San Francisco that his hatred and difficulty was against the growing immigrant communities.

And, you know, these were—like, his and all the neighboring communities around where Dan White was from were all kind of working-class, Irish-Italian neighborhoods that were shared by black and brown communities. So you could feel that kind of bubbling. So, you know, it sometimes for me really grounds me to understand this arc that we've been through, you know, for the last 50-plus-plus years. And it sort of marked right in that, for me. You know? Like, that particular violence, let alone all the others that were happening alongside. [00:22:07]

So I feel like there's something about when I'm in a crowd of people and you can hear a certain kind of voice or a certain kind of silence. It's really the two. That something really wells up in me and brings all of that back as being, like, this really deep understanding of being in some kind of solidarity that's both beautiful but really, really—you know, it feels dangerous. It feels difficult. The impotency feels really available. But then there's this kind of brilliant feeling of this deep armor that comes from within that you can kind of lock into. I mean, I'm just trying to pick that up again right now, like. But that's sort of what it feels like: a combination of something that feels really strong, but then, you know, just broken and riddled with trouble.

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you for sharing that.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Sorry it was so intense. I didn't quite expect to think about that.

ALEX FIALHO: A sort of follow-up, but in a different thread, is: Do you have early childhood

memories or relationships to art-making or creativity?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, funny ones, I think. I mean, my father—even though he was not a model citizen by any means, he did have exceptional talents in music. So he had relationships to, like, Carlos Santana and his band when he was a young young person. You know, my mother met him because he was this very—you know, people loved his playing, so she followed his band. They were a young teenage band. And he had a lot of recognition for his musical ability. So I think that that let me know early on that that was—like, somehow I was sure that artistic genes were real. So I thought, "Oh, that's a good sign that maybe there's something creative in me." I didn't know what that could be. [00:24:25]

And my grandfather was very, very particular about penmanship. And for some reason, I spent—like, I didn't really play with dolls or toys. But I spent a lot of time perfecting my cursive writing. [Laughs.] And there's something about this idea of having a hand that I feel like I was somehow working with, without even knowing what the art language was, or what art was.

But I was painfully shy—like, absolutely, painfully shy—but a deep observer and a big reader. So a little, kind of nerdy, shy person. And something somewhere along the way—I hated dancing, but I remember I didn't mind sort of moving with someone. And I was always surprised about that experience. And then, somewhere along the way—I can't tell you how—I started taking a dance class. I think I started taking an Afro-Haitian class or something. And I considered it a church experience. You know, there was live music, people were singing and making—like, literally, joyously making noise. [00:26:00]

And I remember thinking that this was more of a kind of a church that I thought was supposed to happen. And it was very easy for me to reject the Catholic upbringing that we had. I also didn't get confirmed. So I think early on, I did recognize myself as someone who was willing to kind of go against the grain. So maybe those were just the clues that there was something going on there.

[And then, as I started taking more and more different kinds of dance classes, I—early, I received work study or a scholarship and I didn't know why. And I was, like, I don't even really like this, but I'm happy not to pay for that thing, that—you know, whatever. –JT] So I started taking different forms. I would take jazz, and I would take a little ballet, and take some modern—you know, whatever. Like, all the things that you do when you start dance training.

And I wasn't even sure that I was very good at it, actually. To be perfectly honest, I didn't know if I was—I didn't even know how you could become good at it. Because I had started later than most people. And I also didn't look like most people. Because in ballet and modern dance in those days, you know, most people were not brown. Even in San Francisco there weren't that many people of color in dance classes.

But I had, like, secret wishes. So I did collage when I was young. A lot, a lot, a lot of collaging. And I mean, I would, like, collage my entire room, and then pull it all down, and then collage it all over again. So I don't know, I was kind of collage crazy. But I didn't quite know that those would be considered, like, creative things. But I figured—I thought that it was me trying to, like, associate myself with creative people, or creative ideas, or something like that. And I think I did painting. [00:28:05]

ALEX FIALHO: And were you interested in thinking about a creative direction for your life at that point? Or how—

JULIE TOLENTINO: No.

ALEX FIALHO: In what ways were you considering that type of experience?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, I don't think that I—I didn't have—I can't tell you what—I mean, I know that I aspired to be a fireman.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Like, really specifically. Like, I thought, "Oh, it'll make a lot of sense. I just have to hurry up and get finished with all of this school that I have to do, and I will be a fireman." Like, I didn't have second thoughts about it. [Laughs.]

But something shifted because in that dance training time, I started to experience myself differently. Like, suddenly—because I think when I—like, the subtext and things I'm not saying now is: I was obviously very, very insecure. Which is kind of interesting when I think of it now because I had so many kinds of friends. It was a very distinguishing quality about me. Like, you couldn't figure out what I did, but I could really do—like, I had so many different kinds of friends who did different types of things. And I felt very adaptable to those things.

So for the people who just wanted to read and whatever, do homework, that was—you know, I could do that. Or for the people who were kind of bad and, you know, doing bad Catholic girls school things. We did that just fine.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: And then [laughs], you know, it was very easy. Like, I wasn't very sporty. But then I had sort of sporty friends. And then suddenly I would find myself, like, empowered by my relationships with them. And I wouldn't feel so bad, like, being on the volleyball team, or—you know. [00:30:00]

So I felt like it was hard for me to figure out who I was going to be, because I had so many types of friends who had a lot of different types of ambitions. Or, you know, whatever good and bad qualities [laughs] that—or proclivities, good or bad proclivities—that I don't remember having, like, an ambition to do anything. Except at the point where I had started performing. And I felt like I also started performing a little bit before my time, probably before I was even skilled enough—like, I wasn't that skilled before I started performing.

But I think that performing was working for me because I felt different. And also, people were really drawn to the fact that I was performing already. So in a way, it set up something really beautiful about this potential for maybe something for my future. But it also set me up for a little bit of failure. Because then I felt like I spent all of my time catching up to my training. You know what I mean? Like, "Oh, you started late so you have a lot to do."

So even though I was performing well, I was worried about whether or not I actually could do these skillful things. And also I was very, very self-conscious about my body. I mean, of course, when now I think of it, I was pretty small and fine. But I definitely had a different type of shape. And I was also short. So, you know, then my cohort—

ALEX FIALHO: In what ways were you performing at that point?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I was sort of plucked for people's—like, you take class and there would be concerts or whatever. So, I was being chosen to take part in different people's shows. And very soon was also plucked to do these nighttime shows that had—you know, somebody was—I mean, I can't even remember. I can barely remember the setting. But, you know, it was—like, maybe someone was a choreographer who was asked to choreograph a show. Like, not quite a club show, but almost a clubish-type show. So I was probably always the youngest person involved in that choreographer's program. [00:32:23]

I just want to go back. Because I just remembered some other thing, just because I said the club thing. I mean, something also impacting in my young life in terms of opening into the San Francisco queer community and kind of trans, like, hyper—you know, gay-male San Francisco/clubgoing lesbian-type situation—was that my mom, when she couldn't find someone to take care of us—which, really, was just me taking care of my sisters when she would go out at night [laughs]—she would then take us.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: And I would, like, hang out in the coat check or under the piano [laughs] and just watch, like, legs, poppers—like, you know, anything you can think of that was going on. You know, I just sort of had this whole education from, like, the coat check. So there's that. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: That was going to be a direction to take the questioning, around queerness or how that developed, one. And then, two, do you have any specific memories of those early contacts?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, one thing I will say is that queerness was always

available somehow. Because, you know, it was just my mother and my sisters and I living together. So there was a way that a lot of gay people came in and out of our house. I think I said that already. [00:34:15]

I mean, one thing that was really significant to me is when my mother—I mean, she had significant relationships with men who were not good to her. There was definitely violence in the family. And there was also, you know, this kind of protection of the younger siblings. So there was something that was also built-in about, like, this possibility that a straight relationship wasn't a safe one.

So I think that was already lingering around. I think it was fair given our circumstances. It probably is not, like, a general term. But I would say, considering the kind of intensities and the kinds of people that she was wanting to maintain relationships with—you know, I was her advocate to say, "No, we can do it by ourselves." Like, I remember this as being this really impacting thing. So there's something about that independence that I could equate with people I knew who were gay. They could be on their own, and they didn't need these different things, you know? There's something about the heterosexual relationship that seemed really doomed to me. [Laughs.] [00:35:47]

But I would also say that—you know, through the club thing and, like, party people moving all around—I mean, my mother back in those days, everyone thought she looked like Bianca Jagger. So she was, you know, the quintessential fag hag on one level. And, you know, I remember things—and this is the thing; I will tell you that it gets very hard for me to pin this down—but, you know, she would go away for a day or two. I would take care of my sisters and it would just be—fags would, like, take her up to Reno. And they would go in a limo and, you know, show up at a hotel and, like, drop the window, and my mom would wave.

And so they were like, "Oh, you can just send them up to Bianca's room." So they had these kind of weird, shady hookups for things in hotels or whatever. And so they would go and party for the weekend, and then they would come back. So there was something that was sort of—I don't know, I thought it was brave to be able to just go and be whoever you wanted to be, and go do whatever you wanted to do, and go dance like that, and just feel so free and be naked, and wear beautiful outfits, and cross-dress. Like, everything that I thought was—I don't know, as a young person, I guess I thought all of those things were just absolute signs of escape or freedom or something.

ALEX FIALHO: Right. And how did your politics, or queerness, or creativity—those are the threads we're on at the moment—develop as you moved from your teenage years into your early 20s?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I mean, I would just say that what I'm describing to you is, like—you know, I'm still 12.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Do you know what I mean? Like—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: —it's not even like I'm not an adult. Like, I'm not even a teenager yet. I think what happened pretty soon after going into high school is— I was taking classes in the city. So I was actually getting on the bus and going specifically to, like, the San Francisco Conservatory for ballet and then, you know, these different studios all over town, in the Mission, that were the training centers for young modern dancers in the '80s, basically. Late '70s and the '80s. [00:38:34]

And then in high school I was taking dance every day. There was a way that I could sort of specialize in that. But then I was also part of this kind of rowdy group of people. Like I said, those little different groups of people. So I feel like I already had had this kind of multiple, layered life. On top of the fact that I was also still taking care of my sisters. And in particular, you know, kind of watching over the progressions of my sister. Because one thing that I learned really early is there's no such thing as this kind of linear progress. So that was sort of a—it kind of kept this liveness to me. And I also think that when she—

ALEX FIALHO: In what sense?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, if she was quote-unquote, you know, scare-quote, progressing. In other words, like, she could advance from a first-grade level to a second-grade level at an age, like 15 or something. When she was progressing I was freer, because she was doing fine, she could go to school, she would have something that was more like a schedule. But I felt like when she didn't have that kind of progress, I had to be around more. [00:40:07]

So in a way, I felt like I really maximized the times when I was away. And then when I was needed more, then I could just concentrate and, you know, I would sort of have to put my classes away, or whatever I would do with other people. So there was a huge investment in a community of people already when I was just in high school. That's when I could see that I could have multiple lives. But there was always the condition of having to be available, I think. And I think that really shows up in terms of what we're thinking through, formative things.

I think there's always this lingering thing in my mind that is always like that. I mean, it continues to be true about her. We're very, very close. I'm probably the closest person to her besides my mother, of course. But in terms of—you know, like, to this day—she turned 50. You know, which was amazing. She was never supposed to live past 18. And so, there's a way that she kind of still is that person, you know? And then I think other people have fallen in and out of being that person with her through the years.

Did I answer your question? Okay, I wasn't sure. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: You always will. Wherever thread we go is the answer.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: What happened after high school?

JULIE TOLENTINO: After high school I went to San Francisco State. I think by then I had abandoned my hopes for fireman school. [00:42:12]

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: I definitely knew I wanted to be a dancer. But I felt very compelled to know what else I was going to be, besides a dancer. And I thought that I wanted to go into architecture. So that was my plan. But it was the early '80s. And at that time, you know, structurally, if you went to college the idea was that there's no way that you were going to come out of college and be able to continue as a dancer. I didn't feel like I had that option.

And, you know—whether I learned it, whether it was true, or I had convinced myself—the only way I was going to find out if I was going to be a dancer was that I had to go to New York. And in a way it seems like it was—you know, it's pre-*Flashdance*. You know what I mean?

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: It really was. So I think that that feeling of having to really find out what you're made of, and that self-challenge, was prominent. And so somehow I—I don't know exactly the pathway, but somehow I took some classes at San Francisco State. I was sort of threatening to leave. Of course, the Filipino side of the family—I mean my grandparents—didn't want me to leave school nor the city. But my grandfather died, actually, when I was just finishing high school. I knew that that was something he really would want me to do, is try to stay in school. [00:44:01]

So I ended up taking maybe a class or two at—so, I did San Francisco State. Then I wasn't sure what to do. And then, I ended up just jumping in and taking some classes at San Francisco City College, just to prove that I would try to stay in San Francisco. But I think I signed up for a class, took three days of the class, and then just decided to audition for this program, this school, in Los Angeles. Just because it was available.

And because the school that I was always sort of meant to go to, of course, was Ailey. Because there was no other place for a brown person to go. And I didn't think I was ready for that. But also, at the time, I was also concerned about how I was going to make money, because I had no money. And this LA school was this very intense program that was supposed to give you this very round dance education but also prepare you, possibly, for a

commercial dance career. Which I couldn't quite imagine. Because I couldn't imagine actually how it would work. But I thought, well, if I had good performing skills that maybe I could do that.

So basically you go through this program. It's a two-year program. And you're meant to—at the end of each year, you are looked at by talent agents. And it turned out that I had one of these showings, like, maybe eight months into my time. And I ended up getting an agent from that showing. [00:46:04]

So obviously, I moved to LA. And I moved very unceremoniously. I mean, I just kind of left. There was a small cohort there. And half of us lived together in a little tiny studio apartment. And I remember I arranged the rooms and I painted the floors. I mean, it was the '80s so I painted them black. I remember just—already learning how to make space so that everyone could sort of have their own space. Something about that seemed really important to me.

And then, I had a weird injury. I was literally flat on my back for two months almost. And I was so panicked. I literally was panic-stricken. Like, one, that I had failed dancing already and hadn't even gone to New York yet. Which was just—it felt like a disaster. But also, the conditions in which I got this injury made me realize that I wanted to get the fuck out of there.

It was an audition at a record company office building that was—they just had us audition in the middle of the hallways, because there was nowhere to do the audition. And the floors were waxed. All the dancers were falling. You know, like, turning and falling—so many people were injured. And I was just like, "This makes no sense." Like, they were just putting everyone in harm's way. [00:48:00]

So I obviously didn't want to go in that direction, and then somehow managed to put some money together. I knew one person who lived in New York. And then I arrived in New York with $99. And in the first week I ended up finding, like, five jobs. They were all terrible jobs. But I found five—you know, I was hired in five different directions. Which made me think that I could probably stay.

ALEX FIALHO: What kind of jobs?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, my god. Like, the Clinique counter in—you know, like, somewhere. And then there was some kind of receptionist job in another place. They were just the worst possible kinds of jobs you can imagine. But they were, like, retail or reception-type things.

ALEX FIALHO: They weren't dancing, though.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, not yet, no. But I'm saying in the first five days. Like, I had $99. I needed money—you know what I mean?—right away.

So anyway. Strangely, just in getting those jobs is how I actually started to meet people. And I think I took, like, two or three of the jobs. And then, I ended up getting a—

ALEX FIALHO: Tell me before we go to that next step—I'm actually curious to dive a little bit more into that moving-to-New-York-on-$99 moment.

JULIE TOLENTINO: [Laughs.] What did it look like?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, what did it look like? How did you get across the country?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, right.

ALEX FIALHO: Why was that the time? It was, like, "Get me out of LA"?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Get me out of LA.

ALEX FIALHO: And it's like, "I'm not going back up to northern California?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I knew I was never going back to San Francisco. In fact, at that moment, I promised myself I would never move home again. And I probably am jumping over a lot of these kinds of threatening violences that were in our family, including a very, very dangerous father. [00:50:03]

And, I mean, even one of the things that happened—just in terms of trauma, where I knew that this deep trauma was keeping me out of San Francisco—was, you know, one time—he also had 100,000 jobs. He never really kept a job for very long because my mother—okay, so my mother and father did end up getting married. And it was only because the parents required them to get married as soon as they could in San Francisco.

So, going back, sorry. They did end up getting married. But they never lived together. And my mom and I and my sisters lived in the basement apartment of my paternal grandparents' house.

ALEX FIALHO: And that was because they wanted to support your family and your mother—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Because she wanted to support her first grandchildren. And she didn't want my mom—I mean, she really took care of my mom. She got my mom a job. And my father was very unreliable. And he kept having 100 children and it was driving them insane. And so, I don't think that they ever had any hopes that they would actually get together. But they definitely—my lola really was taking care of my mom.

So, why am I telling you all that? Oh, because my father had a weird role in our lives, I guess is what I'm saying, right?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: He was hardly ever there. When he was there, he was sort of up to no good. And it was very difficult for all family members, but because I was older I could sort of just hold him back. Like, one time I remember—I don't know, do you want to talk about this?

ALEX FIALHO: Up to you.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, it just gives you a little idea of what my spirit was like.

So I was having a piano lesson, and he was trying to help me with the piano lesson. Not that he had ever come around ever. But he would, like, try to teach me something, and I guess somehow I was doing it wrong. But I would just say, "I need a second." I just remember it, like it was yesterday, like, "I need a second, and I'll get it." And he slapped me in the face. He was, like, "You don't tell your father that." [00:52:19]

And I was like, "Father who?" [Laughs.] And I slapped him back. So I think [laughs] this tells you a little bit about what I was like. And I remember I charged right upstairs and I was like, "Lola, your son just slapped me. And I just slapped him. I'm just telling you." And I left, and I closed the door. [Laughs.] So, it tells you a little bit about what I was like, kind of in the beginning. And I—

ALEX FIALHO: I mean, what it was like and what your response was.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, exactly. And also, another thing to my mother's credit is she always said—mostly to my sisters, because she knew I knew what he was up to. But she said to my sisters—and I feel like it's really impacting to this day—she said, "You have a father because that's how it works. You have to have a father. But you don't have to like your father. So it's up to you to decide if you are interested in this person or not." And so that really was helpful for me because it gave me a sense of choice.

But for the other siblings—I mean, obviously my sister Rita, who didn't have a lot of those kinds of awarenesses, she—or, it seemed like she didn't. She just avoided him. He would walk in the room and she would run to me. So she had her reaction, you know? Like, she knew that was bad news. But the other kids, my youngest sister and then the other stepsiblings, they spent their entire lives trying to work out a relationship with somebody who was really not available to them. So it created a schism in how we all could be a family. You know, I can kind of feel like I don't have a lot of experience in families. [00:54:00]

And I don't really use, like, family and the domestic as a way to describe the kinship that I feel in being queer. Do you know what I mean? In queer community. So, I don't use—I just think that that is also very telling about me too. That I don't know anything about families. Like, I have no idea about them, really. Except that I do know what happens when you have an open one. So I do have an open one with all the difficulty, but at least open to my personality or to my sexuality and the fact that they can't contain people's desire. Do you

know what I mean? So that's the open side. And then—but I don't really—you know, we were too young to be a family in a way.

ALEX FIALHO: Though it does sound like you have really familial connections. Siblings and—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, to my sister, you know?

ALEX FIALHO: Right. That's what I'm thinking specifically too.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Exactly. Specifically, to my sister Rita. And, you know, it's not that I'm not close to my mom. But, you know, she will also say that I've been like her mom. Like, I remember the first time she lived alone.

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: You know what I mean? Like, she called me 100 times, and I helped her get an apartment. You know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: So we have a strange relationship, you know. And probably strained at times. But I think we're both becoming more open about talking about what that strain is. But that took my entire lifetime, probably, to get close to it. And, of course, it's all wrapped around my sister.

ALEX FIALHO: In this moment of you moving to New York, or you moving to LA—but particularly making the big move to New York—how did your family relate to that move? Is everyone—did anyone else from your family leave San Francisco? [00:55:55]

JULIE TOLENTINO: No. Not one person has left a 30-mile radius of San Francisco. Except myself and, unfortunately—I have a brother. I told you that I had a brother who everyone thought was our cousin, but it turned out he was our brother. And he had a very troubled life. He was very displaced, you know, poor kid. His mother ended up divorcing, obviously, my uncle. She was Irish. And she married an Irish cop. And my brother is half Filipino and certainly did not look Irish like his mother.

So he was very much looked down upon. And he felt that schism in that family structure. Because, you know, there wasn't a real Tolentino family structure for those other kids. And he wasn't close to the other siblings, the other boys and girls. So he had a hard time. And he ended up pretty early on kind of packing it in as a gang member. He was young. He was, like, *flaco*, you know. Like, he just had a name. He ran drugs. He was tiny, he could do all the stuff that other kids couldn't do. So he definitely found another family. He found another family.

And ultimately—you know, years ago now—but the Three Strikes Rule came in. When he got out of jail after the second time, he pretty much decided that he wanted to not live in society. So he came out, he hung out with Lola for two or three days. Kind of to say goodbye, we realized after. [00:57:59]

But then he went on a crazy rampage and he kidnapped a girl. They went running drugs up and down the coast and got in a shootout with a cop and basically made sure that he wasn't going to get—you know, he was trying to get in there, get in for good. And, unfortunately, he's still there. And he is the one person who left, and now lives in southern California in one of the max jails.

But, yeah, nobody has moved. And nobody's even tried to move. Not in our family.

ALEX FIALHO: But you moved to New York.

JULIE TOLENTINO: But I moved to New York. And I don't know how they felt about it. I wasn't worried about it for some reason. But I do remember that I moved in winter. And I remember thinking, like, "Whoa. If I can handle this, I'm okay." And I also remember that I loved being in the subway. Like, in the lowest parts of the subway, like, all the deep subways. Because I also remember that it was warm in the deeper subways. And it was, like, what I would do if I wasn't in a rush to go somewhere. I would just go down into, like, the deeper parts of the subway because I knew I wouldn't be cold.

But I remember also calling Lola on a holiday. Because I didn't really celebrate holidays. But I remember calling her, like, maybe Christmas or Thanksgiving or something. And I just remember the distinct feeling of being in New York, like deep New York, late '80s, a lot of shit going on. You know, like, already tuned to what it's like to live in New York, and to be alone, and to be female alone. It was very obvious to me that that was something—I felt like I had to be careful somehow. [01:00:12]

And I just remember transmitting that I was fine, even though I was checking all around me to make sure everything was okay around me. Like, on the payphone in the subway. Do you know what I mean? I always remember it like it was yesterday. And then hanging up and never even remembering again it was a holiday. And I probably never celebrated a holiday. I've considered that the last holiday that I celebrated. And I mean, when I think about it, it seems like in the first three months I had already established a very wide group of friends.

ALEX FIALHO: From these jobs you had noted?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. There was people through the jobs. I can't remember exactly the name of the organization, but I had gone to The Center. You know? At The Center you could go figure out all these different groups and meetings. I had just kind of popped in at different things and then, little by little, just started meeting people.

And one of the first things besides working and also finding a place to take class, I had to audition so that I could get a work-study. It was like a work-study/scholarship. And I just kept doing that everywhere so that I had free classes and whatever job I was doing back then. And then, I found an apartment. And my first apartment was on—I mean, when I first arrived I had a friend who was at Ailey. And she lived in Hoboken. So I got to stay with her for— [01:02:06]

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JULIE TOLENTINO: —the first months. And then I was desperately looking for a place to live, and I found this loft on Grand Street, right in the middle of Chinatown. It's probably, like, the building where Gavin Brown is right now.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: You know what I mean? [Laughs.] But I think I know exactly where it is. I pass it. I'm trying to figure it out, but it is right next to Gavin Brown. But there were, like, six or seven people living there, and the rent was just absolutely mini. But my room—it was just this loft, and they just put up, like, literally just two-by-fours and no insulation, and maybe there was drywall. Maybe it was just a piece of plywood or something.

So I just had this little tiny room, and I don't even know if I had a bed. I think I made some kind of bed out of some secondhand blankets or something. And I had a very tiny diet of apples and peanut butter. That was the only food I would eat, and coffee. Most of the roommates kind of came and went, but there were kind of—there was one woman who was a painter, a French woman who was a painter. And then—I will decide how I feel, if I want to actually mention this in real life—but one of my roommates was Amy Capellazzo, [Laughs.] when she first moved to New York.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] Yes. [00:01:52]

JULIE TOLENTINO: By the time that I had that apartment, then things started moving very quickly. I felt like that apartment was one of the places where I had to sort of—I mean, I was already out. Being out wasn't the issue. But really defining my gay identity was really clear for me. I mean, I felt like that all my life, so I never really had a massive experience with coming out. But something about living in New York at that time—I felt like it was just—because it was such a transient house, it was very easy for me to somehow represent that thing.

And then I had also started trainings for a National Gay and Lesbian Suicide Hotline, and that also had an incredible impact on me. And from there really bloomed and opened the kinds of people that I was going to get to know, and also where activism started to really take shape and understanding what that could be, and also being able to connect some of these feelings that I had that I couldn't understand, like these feelings of despair or disconnection or that probably you wouldn't see in me, because even though I was shy I still had an ability to be

with other people.

But I felt like there were ways that I was learning—through these trainings, and slowly through these various groups that I was finding—ways that I could actually identify these things in me that were making me sort of shy or insecure or whatever, and also helping me mobilize those thoughts into something that could be sort of productive and thoughtful for others and myself, you know? [00:04:00]

So yeah, it was a funny time.

ALEX FIALHO: I want to definitely dive into the hotline, but I think, to take a step back in terms of your growth or development—when did queerness become something you identified with or experienced? How did you get—when you came to New York City, for The Center to be a place that you went? Was that developing in San Francisco before you left—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, yeah, yeah, totally.

ALEX FIALHO: —and decided on LA?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, I had girlfriends and sex and stuff like—that's what I mean. It was sort of a non-event. Do you know what I mean?

I mean, I would also remember that I did have—like, when I was dancing in San Francisco, I was always attracted to these other dancer women. So in a way, those two things just went together, you know? And, you know, my life was just always filled with fags, really, so that was just the way that went. But also, we had friends in San Francisco that were part of—God, I hope I remember it. I think it was called Club Q, but before that it was called something else. But it was a very very, again, beloved San Francisco DJ, Page Hodel, who played at all the clubs in San Francisco, and particularly in women's bars. [00:05:58]

And there was a group of people who were also a combination of—they were dancers, like club dancers, but then also some trained dancers, all queer. So I think all of those people also reinforced this great sense of identity and sense of self, or gave me a mirror or something to move towards. I felt that was really supportive for me.

But I did leave San Francisco. Something happened when I went back. So after the LA injury, I had to go to San Francisco for something. I can't remember what. And in that time, I hooked up with somebody, and she—Kathy Bryan—her family was from New York. Her sister worked at Riker's, and her brother was a writer. [. . . –JT] In the very beginning, I think I should mention, because you were asking about that transition—she came to visit me.

But, you know, the people that—like, if I was accidently—like, I don't even know, was I in love with these people? I can't remember really. You know what I mean? But I remember thinking that up until that point the people that I was really interested in were really obsessed with someone else. They were definitely—like, they liked me, they like hanging out with me, they like having sex with me, but sometimes I was like, "Are they just talking about someone else?" Because sometimes I thought for sure they were just obsessed with these other people. But I also think that we were young and had nothing else to talk about except other people. Do you know what I mean? So [laughs] I'm not sure how that all fell into the thing [00:08:00].

But I think I would say that, you know, there was something also—like, not to seem so superficial, but I felt like there was a combination of—like, there was an admiration I had for gay people just in general. I thought there was a bravery that was built into being out. And I also really felt like, you know, people who knew how to dress themselves in a way that was maybe going against the grain, or that they were comfortable expressing themselves on the outside in the way that they walked or the way that they dressed—I felt like that had a huge impact on me, including the "I want to dress like I'm a nerd." You know? As much as, "I want to dress because I look like a queen."

You know, I felt like all that really was important to me in terms of a sense of believing in the concept of pride. You know, I feel like that early kind of pride was really, really valuable. And it was a really hateful time, you know? And I think that's the other part that's hard to even pick up again, is to remember how reviled this community was.

So that sort of protectiveness started to kind of roll out of me, sort of my sister kind of

protectiveness, and I felt like I could experience that in this kind of affective—whatever. Like, that kind of flamboyancy that would either be external, or that one that was really really very internal. And I found them to be the same for me, like in terms of the intensity. It was the same. [00:10:00]

But all to say that I still feel like I never really see myself in that situation. I just feel myself, and I kind of can't imagine what I was like. Like, I have no idea what I was like for other people, you know? I think of myself a little bit like—I feel like I wasn't there, like there's a part of me that's also not there, because I feel like I really remember, you know, what it was like to meet people. I just remember falling into people in big way.

ALEX FIALHO: That's really interesting. Let's do the hotline. Let's talk about that, because I know it's a formative context for you early on in New York City. How did you become involved, and then what did you learn from the trainings? And then what were some of the experiences in the process?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I think that I must have been doing some volunteer work for the task force or something like that, something very basic, you know, stuffing envelopes or something for the task force. And the building—there was an office on Broadway and Bond, or something. No, a little lower. I can't remember now. Somehow, I was doing something in this building, and I learned about the hotline, that they shared office space or they were on the same floor or something. [00:11:49]

I saw a posting for a training, and I went in just to inquire, and there were two other people there. And one person happened to also be from San Francisco, Dug McDowell, who eventually would introduce me to John and Alessandro, and they all ended up doing PORK together years and years later. I mean, many, many [laughs] years later. Well, a couple years there.

But Dug and I were there sort of inquiring on the first day, and then started these trainings. And I do have to say that—I'm not sure if this is true or not, but I remember being surprised that we went from being, like, "Oh, yeah, I'm sort of interested in this," and then by the end of the conversation we were both signing up together, and we were going to do this thing without having really gotten much more information than just what we were reading, you know? And just the conversation that we had. So it was almost like we had talked each other into the thing that we were curious about, but we didn't really know what it was. [Laughs.]

But the trainings were kind of intense, if I remember correctly. You know, there were many days you would have to come and do all of these kind of mock conversations. And it was also really interesting, because obviously we didn't have any psychological training or any kind of —like, we didn't have any training.

What we were meant to do is sort of be a resource, point people to resources, identify issues that were happening, and then there were different levels of being the respondent. So in the beginning, we were just locating people, trying to figure out very quickly—using masses of, like, phone books. I mean, we were using phone books, you know? We had phone books from every city in the country in this office. [00:14:00]

So if you were on the phone with someone, we would just have to have them hold fast and just go and grab the phone book for their city—like, the yellow pages—so that we could reference whatever was needed, whether it was someone to talk to, something more local, or people needed, like, health resources. And then, of course, if someone was really displaying some kind of deep suicidal—we would escalate [the call –JT] to another level. There were other people.

So we were the first, kind of on-the-ground "receivers." And I think what we learned about the suicide hotline was that people were just hungry to talk to other queer people and to also identify. Like, most people were like, "Am I gay? Like, this is what I thought, or this is what I did, or this terrible thing happened to me, but I want something like this, but not in the terrible way." You know? [So to even be able to hear what people were actually asking was what we were learning to do, and what we were learning was that most people who are isolated are—you know, there's a confusion about something that were their basic rights–JT.]

And so it was about connecting people to others that they wouldn't maybe have known about, or if they did know about them, to give them maybe safer alternatives than what most people wanted to do, which was just get on the Greyhound bus to New York. [It was

kind of deescalating people's ideas of, you know, where refuge utopia would be. –JT] [00:15:47]

I mean, I just remember thinking every time I would go for a shift how scary it was to pick up the phone. And also, the phones were those old-fashioned phones where you press the blinking translucent button, so you would see a lot of calls coming sometimes, and sometimes there weren't enough people to take the calls, so you would have to be on a couple of calls at once.

And then, on top of it, we were not only fielding people—and people with needs or people who just want to hang out and talk on the phone, which was also something—but we are also fielding a lot of hate calls. So people would call and just scream into the phone, and we would just have to, like, let them scream into the phone. And we were encouraged not to just hang up, because they would be more persistent, so the idea was, like, "Let's let them get their whatever out of their system, but try not to absorb what was coming."

So it was a very, very tricky situation, and also very—I mean, it was so random. You had no idea what was coming. And so it was in that short time period—because I moved to New York in the winter of '86. I always get it a little bit wrong. I can't remember now, but I think the winter of '86, and I was already doing that in '87. And then very soon after that, I went to The Center on a Monday night.

I remember after one of our shifts we went somewhere to have coffee or something, and someone said, "Oh, we have to go to this meeting. It's really important." Because we were learning a little bit about HIV, obviously—or, well, sorry, at the time—oh, we really have to go back to something else. But we were starting to—you know, obviously, something was brewing. We knew that that was going on, but there was no specific training around, like, what HIV was and what was going on. [00:18:07]

I'm not even sure how I managed to miss this while we were talking, but this is kind of what I think, is that—so, in 1982, my mother got remarried to Michael Wood. That's why we have that last name. And he had multiple siblings, but he had one brother who died riding his [motorcycle. –JT] I think he was driving on Mount Tamalpais.

So that was one of his younger brothers, and his other younger brother was very, very tall, beautiful, very spirited young man called Curtis Wood. And he was similarly developmentally disabled like my sister, but he had a little more capacity for living on his own. He would live on his own, but then sometimes he would become a little homeless "by accident," or he would find himself, like, in a squatter community or something. But he was gay, and he was just delightful and wonderful, and we just hoped we could catch him wherever he was living.

Anyway, he, in 1982, died of what was called GRID at that time, and he was living at home. What was detrimental to his situation, besides the fact that nobody knew what was wrong with him, and he didn't know—we didn't really know exactly what was going on with him, and he also didn't know what was going on with his body. But he was nearly [six foot seven –JT], and by the time he died, and when I saw him last, he weighed exactly the weight of me. So he was, like, 80 pounds or something. [00:20:27]

And that was absolutely devastating. Because he went from being someone who was tall and skinny to begin with, to being tall, skinny, and not very well, and then to this emaciated, within weeks. So that was this kind of incredible impact, and that happened when I was still in high school. I mean, I can tell that I have just absorbed that so much. I don't even talk about it as, like, this event that I remember until I think about what I was able to do with what I was learning. You know what I mean?

Because we didn't know anything, and because Michael's father was a veteran, they were only seeking veteran hospitals. And the veteran hospitals were either kicking him out, or they were barely treating him and just sort of expecting him to go home to die. And that happened multiple times where they would kick him out of the hospital. So when I came to New York, and I started meeting different people, I started realizing I had this huge experience that I needed to deal with and had no language for. [And I think that's probably what drew me to ACT UP. –JT]. [00:21:49]

So I think then to walk in the room, and then have that feeling of all the people again—like, I mean, I just—you know what I mean? It was so intense. And, you know, I always say that walking into that situation was like—you know, there was like 15 different ACT UPs in one

room, and my memories of them. You know, there was the front of the room, and the somewhat noisy middle, and then there was sort of this women's area, and then there was this kind of quiet middle, and then there was this back of the room that was sort of, you know, the people of color section.

And I remember being really torn about where I thought I was supposed to be in the room. And I sort of knew who I couldn't be in the room, who I could and couldn't identify with, and also who I could trust. You know, there were some very vocal people in ACT UP I felt like I could trust, and some that I could just trust to, you know, be aggravated. I felt like I could trust the way that they were using their emotion to get people to make, you know, bolder moves.

But I remember also really taking in the kind of grumbling of a more complex situation which was, like, women with AIDS and, you know, folks of color who didn't have the same kind of resources or access, and even situations. Like, you know, you don't just leave work and go to an action, you know, [laughs] or whatever. So I felt like I, especially in the beginning, knew that moving around the room was part of learning about ACT UP, and that this idea of a room of affinity groups was going to really teach me a lot. [00:24:10]

[But, I just knew that it was important to be a body a lot, just to be a resisting body, and I really accepted that as being valuable.–JT] And also because I recognized that, you know, after seeing such a horrific death—and not that I hadn't experienced that in San Francisco otherwise, you know, just being in the community in those early days. I really knew that being a person who was sort of assumed negative, the fact that I was, you know—like, I didn't know how I could be, or where I could be, exposed. I had a lot of learning, you know, the deeper learning to do.

I guess what I am trying to say is not that I was so naive in terms of transmission, but I felt that I was naive in knowing how to be in all of these different kinds of conversations, and what I could actually do as a person. And I felt like I already had a built-in survivor guilt that—I didn't even know what it was until I started to learn. You know, all that language was really showing already, and I'm still young, still 20's. [Laughs.] You know?

And also, you know, there was also just [sheer –JT] energy, and it was young and old. The intergenerational thing was really really important to me, and I felt like that was a really important place to be. I also felt like the hotline and the task force and these other groups that I was involved in—like Salsa Soul Sisters—like, [laughs] all these other little groups that I was somehow involved in, like, whether I was just doing—I mean, I had a lot of time when I wasn't dancing, and whatever job I had, I had time, so I just put my time wherever, trying to find something I could do and something I could provide. [00:26:28]

I knew that my life was not in dire danger, but I knew that my people's lives were in these dire straits. It's hard to talk about that, but it just feels like that was really an impulse—was "I'm healthy; I'm strong; I have a lot of energy. I don't need to sleep a lot. I actually don't even care about money." You know, I never really worried about having it or not having it.

I wasn't scared. New York didn't scare me. So I didn't have any, like—as precarious as my life was, I didn't *feel* that precarity at all. And some of that was because I was in a room like that where I saw what precarity could really look like. And so sometimes I think that I carried or I pulled off this kind of stability that I didn't even have. I don't know. Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: I think that's a good place to take a little pause and we'll really parse out some of these different threads.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, yeah. No, that's great. That's great.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: So I think let's parse out some of these particular contexts that we brought in already around HIV and AIDS and this '80s moment. You brought in your uncle Curtis and also the experience in San Francisco. And I'm interested to know more if that was a specific, unique instance, or were you feeling the way that AIDS was impacting the community widely in San Francisco, in particular, at that time. [00:28:13]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. I would say that I was in that same mist of "What is happening?" Like, people were disappearing. That's the language that I remember, is, like, someone was

here and then they were gone. Or, you know, swathes of people would have disappeared. So I feel like there was this anxiety in the air that I remember as being part of a formative understanding of what happens in a gay community or the gay community. I didn't quite know.

You know, I can't say definitively, but I would say that it seemed concurrent to when Curtis was sick, and he literally was—you know, like I said, he was sort of transient, so sometimes he was living somewhere in an apartment and then sometimes he wasn't, which just meant that he wasn't always employed. So it was also really hard to tell. He was just tall and very thin and differently coherent sometimes. Not from drugs or anything, but it was part of his disability.

And that affected how much he ate and how much he was nourishing himself, so I think there was a confusion also about how that intersected with this potential of him actually having some kind of dreadful illness. So I think I didn't quite put it all together until the speed started to—you know, like, he went from being someone who was maybe not doing so well to being extremely sick in a very short period of time. He had some kind of diagnosis that somehow "related to his gayness." I remember that. [00:30:16]

And I remember the fact that he went from being sick to, "He is dying." Like, slowly-dying-on-the-couch situation. It seemed like that, in my mind, when I think about it now, seemed to be the first time I hooked into the same kind of panic, fury, confusion,—yeah, just this kind of panicky grief that was starting or that was already around me. I just didn't realize that they were related.

I think I also have to say that because my grandfather had died, and I had already sort of developed an understanding of what grief was for someone. You know, that was the closest family member that I had, and I was relating that to my stepfather's loss of his other brother. So I think that somehow all of that—it was still very domestic for me in a way, and I was really young still. You know, I was still in high school. So, I think that—sorry, I'm losing my thought, my process. [00:31:48]

But I feel like it was a very fast intersection of this thing called GRID, to his death, to this thing that was starting to kind of unfurl. And clearly, you know, this gay-cancer idea was starting to unfurl into something that was called a virus, and then I feel like by the time I was making these moves and coming to New York, there was still the question, like: Was HIV the actual culprit? There was still the confusion about what was actually happening about the HIV virus. So there's that going on.

I think you were asking me about the way that I was kind of apprehending this human concept of AIDS. I mean, I think that it was impossible to—I mean, these are the two key gay cities, so it was impossible to not know that something was going on, but it was very, very hard to even begin to think that this dreadful thing could happen.

And because of the homophobia, it felt like it was actually—like, all of the conspiracy theories, every single one of them just felt possible, but it felt important not to fall into conspiracy theory. But then it was also really important to figure out how we were going to get information, and it was impossible to know for a while, like, who and what to believe. So I felt like, in the beginning, for me, it was more about just taking things off the table. Like, "That is a theory that makes no sense," "This is absolutely not happening," or, "Oh, this is totally happening."

You know, this kind of pointed arrogance, or people absolutely profiting. All of that was really a parsing moment where I was trying to figure out—and also where to direct that frustration. And of course, you know, and it goes without saying that pretty much as soon as you created bonds in that room, you were already then entangled with the fact that you were going to lose people pretty quickly. [00:34:19]

And you had relationships to voices in the room that you knew weren't well, and there was always an announcement of the passing of, you know, several people from each group, not even just from the front of the room. Sometimes it was a sort of front-of-the-room gathering of the names, but often all around the room people would report in on somebody who's missing or not going to make it, or reporting a memorial or whatever.

So I think that connecting the dots to what AIDS was doing started to happen very quickly. Just being in the room, because you're very, very close to a lot of people's suffering, people's

confusion and frustration and anger, obviously, but also this really intense kind of experience of grief that I hadn't felt, which is, you know, pushing back, like using grief to push back. And I guess I experienced it as a kind of optimism, which—I didn't know how to articulate that.

Like, I just was like, "Right, this is just the right—right, what do we need to do?" You know, that kind of very—I don't know why I have no language today. But, like—what do you call it? Like—

ALEX FIALHO: Galvanizing, almost? [00:35:52]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, it's like a triage, you know, like, "Right away. Let's just move to the direction of"—it wasn't just Band-Aid, you know. It was really, like, "Let's figure out what we're thinking, let's try to parse this news," or, you know, "Let's figure out who we need to target." Just using that kind of logic as a kind of triage for grief or for the losses of people. It just had a huge impact on me, because of that horrible experience of helplessness, feeling that really early.

And I think there's other things, too. Like, there were ways that—you know, also, the kind of jargony—like, the way that ACT UP used jargon, this kind of simplifying, condensing, really tightening language that was very foreign to me. Like, you know, "BLeach , Teach, Outreach," these kinds of ways that these things happened so tight.

And I just really appreciated how there was a way to kind of get to the point and, you know, organize the bullet points of what the actions were about, figuring out what those slogans would be, and also really learning and understanding how other kinds of activisms were working in the room. You know, because you could feel that Maxine Wolfe kind of activism working against Ann Northrop, you know, like these really different ways that people were providing some pathways to understand. [00:37:56]

[And, you know, David Robinson gave these beautiful outfits and funky pearls or whatever, just to kind of help keep us or him going. –JT] I felt like it was also giving these organizational models, but also still queer, still proud. [No one was serving that kind of phobic atmosphere that was really prevalent on the outside. –JT] And also fear was so large, that it was almost like you had to even learn what fear was, because it wasn't clear. What what were we afraid of? You know, what would you be afraid of? And that seemed very nuanced for each person.

ALEX FIALHO: I'm interested in this idea that you have 15 ACT UPs in the room. I think that's a really important kind of read on the situation, and sort of the specificities across what may sometimes be considered as a unified front.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: And so I'm interested to hear you parse that out, and I'm interested a little bit here—I mean, in particular around these ideas around Maxine Wolfe, Ann Northrop, David Robinson as examples. But, you know, maybe parsing them individually, or the models you were pointing to, or generally pointing to the ways that this room—the ecosystems of this room, and maybe how you were relating across them.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. I mean, I think that—so, when I say 15 different ACT UPs, I think—I mean, ultimately, what was incredible was that everyone wanted to be in the room, so there was one ACT UP, being in the room. And the idea that everyone was very willing to be part of this affinity, this sense of affinity—but also that if you really threw out an idea, and you really had an idea, people would be there for that. [00:40:11]

And I think that that then helps you understand what people were offering, like what kind of nuanced information, what kind of skills. Because people had so many different types of skills, you know? So there was, like, the housing-works-type skills, and there was heavy science research, treatment, and data skills. There was the outreach type of skill. There was educational programs.

There was you know, "Go around and wheat-paste and sticker." You know, a different kind of putting your body on the line, literally doing something against the law or whatever. That had, you know, different risks for different people or whatever. And then there was this way that there was—you know, these other kinds of groups like Gran Fury—where those people were involved in other things, but the way that they were bringing this kind of—I mean, it was like they were—I always felt like Gran Fury was always delivering the group's message

back to itself in this graphic way, and that was incredible to experience.

And, you know, this is also the same time as the Guerrilla Girls. You know what I mean? So here we have—you know, you're walking around SoHo. That was the old SoHo. And, you know, there were these feminist wheat-paste posters all over the place, and pink triangles, and ACT UP slogans. There was just a way that—you know, like, all of that that you would see out, you know, that eventually was sort of making its way out into the city was being generated from this room. [00:42:12]

But then there were also other kinds of rumblings. You know, other people do other kinds of activism. So there were write-your-Senator campaigns or, like, city council meeting, you know, or going to different precinct-type meetings. So it required a different kind of information and also a certain kind of locality. And sometimes when those things get in that kind of micro-meta—I felt like that was where you could start to feel this difference. Like, some people were looking in this sort of larger scale, and then some people were like, "No, we just have to do the work inside of St. Vincent's." Or, "We have to be careful to disseminate information about certain doctors or certain methods." Or, you know, the arguments around AZT, the early arguments around AZT.

You know, it was hard in the room. You know, some people wanted it, and some people were so clearly unable to afford it. And then, people were also, you know, challenging its affectability or whatever you say—how you say that. How do you say that?

ALEX FIALHO: Efficacy. [00:43:52]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Efficacy. I feel like that's what I mean, when I say there's a lot of ACT UPs. It was like a prism of all of this nuanced knowledge, with everyone looking for information, and not necessarily the cure, but these very, very immediate needs. So I feel like if you were going to join any of these, or if you were going to put yourself in as a participant, you would maybe be moving from one micro situation to a meta one, and you would have to be able to adjust very quickly.

And also, possibly, figure out the interface or the way that some of those concepts could somehow work together. You know, like, if you had been working in the women and AIDS group how could that—if it was a sort of an education moment, if that was the focus, like, what would happen when there was another group that was working with women and AIDS in housing or medical access or something?

So there were just ways that everything—I think that's one of the frustrations about talking about ACT UP, is it sort of sounds like of course everyone was on the same page. And it's true, but it was hard to think about how that was working all the time for immediate needs, if that makes sense.

ALEX FIALHO: To go from a macro or group direction to more of your individual relationship to the stakes: What skills were you bringing? What methods were you most invested in? What actions or directions did you find yourself following? [00:45:54]

JULIE TOLENTINO: I mean, I didn't know what skills I had. I didn't think I had any skills, actually. I just really cared to be in that room, and I felt that I could learn from everyone in the room, and I also felt empowered that I was valuable in the room. So I feel like that the kind of combination of listlessness and this absolutely important—to be one more body in the room felt important. I mean, that felt vital, even though there is a disparity, you know, within.

You know, I relate to it in the way that I sort of relate to the kind of mixed-race feeling. Like, you can feel all the tensions in the room or—but it's really hard to—you know, there's no simple answer between those families. There's no way that you can just sit yourself down and somehow divide yourself right in the right kind of positions. So I thought that when I—like, when I think about myself in the beginning, I really appreciated, like I said earlier, this ability to just be in different parts in the room and just throw myself into another setting, like, "You need people to do that? I'll do that."

You know, sometimes I think I remember being able to get to know people, but I would also say we didn't get to know each other, actually, very well. We just sort of did task at hand, so there's some of that that went on. But then, at the same time, that being able to be helpful or somehow participate just literally as, you know, like, "Do you need more hands? Is this a

situation where"—like, for example, when the women were arrested. I'm always forgetting what that was called. Why am I forgetting right now? But do you know what I'm talking about? When the women were arrested and strip-searched in the downtown precinct? [00:48:28]

You know, I knew I couldn't be arrested. That was actually one of the things that happened that I knew, is that I had to be very careful about when and if I was going to be able to be arrested, because I had—you know, I was alone here. You know, I lived here with no support, and I didn't really have any familial support that would have been able to bail me out. So I wasn't quite sure that I could actually manage that.

And also, you know, I always had to be somewhere, so I was always worried about that. So I was concerned about also, like, what kind of thing that I could do that could be effective. So often I played that sort of secondary role of carrying the backpack with the meds or the information or people's valuables, or, you know, I made sure that I had the collected monies if something was needed or whatever. So I had these kind of secondary jobs, I guess. I mean, I don't think I would call it that then, but you know, they were the support jobs or the support positions. [00:49:41]

And that seemed to suit me in the way of my observations skills. I felt like I was a good observer. I could definitely take in a lot of things at once, and I thought that was useful. And also, I remember thinking that I had a really good sense of how to position my body, and I thought that was a really important skill, both in being able to deal with the intensity of demos and the kind of intensity that happens holding a line, or also having to confront cops or keep crowds away from horses or whatever.

I know that sounds silly, but I felt like I did have—like I could see ahead on the kind of somatic level, something that was happening in the crowd or something.

ALEX FIALHO: That's really interesting to me too, because I haven't necessarily considered the choreographies of an ACT UP intervention, you know.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: And that might be me putting language on top of it, but I'm—

JULIE TOLENTINO: No, no, no, no, no.

ALEX FIALHO: You know?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I mean, I don't think of it that way. I mean, certainly, you know, Susan Leigh Foster does an incredible close reading of that "choreography in activism." Like, the choreography in activism is really incredible. But I think that that—you know, it's almost like I'm actually pointing towards my naiveté about it, but recognizing it in its action. Do you know what I mean? Like—

ALEX FIALHO: And intuition, maybe, too.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I try to stay away from words like that, to be perfectly honest. But I feel like I like to ground it, actually, in understanding that a certain kind of touch could also let people know, like, "You're seen," you know, "You're not going to get trampled," or, "We're doing okay." I just feel like there were ways that there were—I was trying to pick up others' clues and signals. [00:52:01]

And I would say that out of pure anxiety and nervousness and probably fear or something, I felt like I was always on alert, which is really different than—like, even chanting. I feel like I can remember keeping a peripheral vision. Not that I think other people didn't do that, but I think that it's something that you don't always—I feel like you have to point it out sometimes when you're looking at demonstrations.

It looks like people are just yelling into the sky, and like voices are coming out, bodies are really really—you know, they show their fury. But I think that there's also the sort of second reach of peripheral vision and this, like, proprioception that's probably for me a little bit more grounded way of saying this thing called intuition. Yeah, and being sensitive about pace and things like that. You know, I always thought it would be better if I was, like, one of the kind of outer marshals. I thought that would always be a good role for me, but I don't

really have a confidence to do it.

But I did trust myself that I could assess a situation. If it was going badly, or if something needed attention, I felt like I was tuned to that. But I always regretted that I didn't do that, because I thought it would have been a good position.

ALEX FIALHO: I think this is a segue, perhaps an opportunity to talk a little bit about your— [00:54:00]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, can I say something else?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, of course.

JULIE TOLENTINO: You just reminded me. The other thing I remember—and it's also probably why I was recognizing that kind of outside position—is because a lot of our friends were in DIVA TV, and so they were often on the outside. And there was, like, the outside plus the body that's next to the person who's videotaping, so that there's kind of a guide, so you can be behind the camera. So I feel like that's what taught me a little bit about being able to be an observer, but not the one that's in the video camera.

So not the one that was doing that kind of micro work, but I feel like that way of being able to move on the outside was something that I learned from our friends who were doing video, because I felt like they were really helping us understand what was going on often, in a way that you couldn't do from the inside, like, being a part of this gigantic mass.

And also, I also felt like the demonstration itself—not being on the outside was also a chance to really connect back to that really intense kind of group experience and also just have a chance to process some of the other emotions or some of the other things that were going on in that kind of group setting that was not a Monday meeting and that was not, like, you know, a late-night coffee trying to figure out slogans or make signs, or the other kinds of ways of meeting. [00:56:04]

ALEX FIALHO: One directive or prompt that I'm interested in talking a little bit with you about are specific people. We brought in DIVA TV, so I thought maybe that could be a moment to even just ask you to talk a little bit about Ray Navarro in particular.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Sure. Yeah, you know, I've been trying to remember exactly how I met Ray, and I really don't remember exactly how I met Ray, and it's very frustrating. I'm assuming that I met Ray through Aldo Hernandez, who I met very early on, because I think in those days Aldo was either working at MoMA or he was working at Creative Time then. I'm not sure, but we met early in the time that I moved to New York. Aldo just had a pace and a vibrancy to him that I was very drawn to him right away, and he was most likely the person who introduced me to Ray. And, as you know, Ray—I was so enamored with him.

I mean, he had a very, very wry sense of humor, but he had this intense sobriety to him, this beyond-his-years kind of intelligence. I was just deeply attracted to him as a human. He gave me an example of what it could be like, you know, to be creative. I just felt like his commitment to what he was studying and how he was working through these Queer Nation ideas—you know, like really opening up queerness, and also his energy, and also commitment to himself as a gay man, as a gay Latino—was so important to him while he was also negotiating the fact that he was in a committed relationship with his lover Anthony Ledesma, who lived in California. [00:58:43]

Anthony didn't come for a year or so until after Ray had already moved. And they both went to Cal Arts, and I didn't have—you know, I was also always in awe that they had gone to school, like they had stayed in school, [laughs] and they did all of the right things. You know? And I just loved how they described what their life was like before they had come, when they were still in school.

But, you know, Ray was very, very committed, and he was also just very intense. And he just took you with him, you know? And so I felt very supported by him. He was so much smarter than me, and I felt like he really taught me how to read and what to read, and sort of jumped me into something that I was really interested in that I hadn't had any experience with, and I had never met a person like him before. And he was also fun, and he was just an amazing person to be around.

All around the same time—like, I met Lola around the same time, I met Catherine—[01:00:05]

ALEX FIALHO: Lola Flash and Catherine—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Lola Flash—

ALEX FIALHO: —Gund.

JULIE TOLENTINO: —and Catherine Gund. Zoe Leonard—Catherine and Zoe—I mean, we're probably moving up in the years now, but Catherine and Zoe—well, first of all, Lola and I became lovers at the time when she was also with Catherine, so there was also this way that there was, like, Lola and Catherine's life with Ray and Anthony, and then there was Julie and Lola's life with Ray and Anthony. And then Aldo was always there, and there were always different people around. I mean, Catherine lived in the kind of legendary well-known loft on Warren Street. And Robert Garcia lived there, and so many of our friends lived there. I mean, so many friends lived there that I could never really keep track of who actually lived where.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you tell me more about the loft on Warren Street? I don't know about it.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, there was a loft on Warren Street [laughs] that had several bedrooms. And there was also, like—it's hard for me to remember exactly. There were different rooms, like actual bedrooms, and then there were also these—I don't know if it was Catherine's or whose room, but it also had a little office and then a little loft bed inside of the space. There were just large tables. There were a lot of meetings that happened there and parties that happened there.

And you know, people were—you know, I mean, there was also this kind of libidinal ACT UP that's also very rich for people. I think a lot of those—you know, we were young. But there were also ways that we were relying on each other through this kind of sexual—[01:02:06]

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JULIE TOLENTINO: —energy and very human energy. But yeah, I mean, I wish I could tell you who lived there all—I mean, I can't—I mean, someone else who lived there should tell you who lived there, because it's hard for me to keep track.

But Jocelyn Taylor lived there for a time. And, you know, all of the women were all sleeping together, and all—you know, I couldn't—who knew what was going on with all the guys? But it was a sort of central space. I'm pretty sure that there was a little editing station or something that was also in that house.

I know that people worked with Paper Tiger. There was also access to Paper Tiger and other editing options. I can't remember where those places were. I was never involved in the group. I mean, I wasn't a video-maker, and I had no journalistic possibilities, but we were with them often, and I felt like I learned a lot from, like the choices they were making through editing, and I learned a lot from the videos.

And one of them that I just really loved was the *Keep Your Laws Off My Body*, which was Zoe and Catherine's piece that was really about sort of an open lesbian—sex positivity for lesbians—but also the censorship and restriction that was also around the language of the body. And it was a really really meaningful piece. Because it was—you know, it had for me the kind of—I mean, I'm saying this now, but I wouldn't have said it then, probably wouldn't have [realized how –JT]. [00:02:12]

It had that kind of—you know, like John and Yoko in the bed, like absolute—a very persistent commitment to the sexual body that I thought was so powerful. And I feel like there's something—you know, obviously this is living underneath all of the activism, because homophobia was such a huge part, and of course misinformation. And then I think all through the '90s we see that tumbling into art and activism.

ALEX FIALHO: How about your work in dance at this moment? How is that developing? And then how is that relating to some of these activist directions?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I'm trying to remember. I can't remember exactly, but between '87 and '90 a lot is going on. You know, I went through the rigors of training uptown, so I did classes

at Ailey, I did classes at Broadway Dance Center, I did classes at Cunningham, I did classes at Danspace. You know, I was really moving around, and a lot of that moving around had to do with where I had access to free classes, whether it was from scholarship—like, diversity scholarship—or work-study. You know, like, clean the studio, and then so many hours equal classes. [00:04:07]

Plus, I had commitments to people who would invite me to do their work, so I was going to rehearsals, and training, and working. When I left LA, one friend who nursed me through that terrible injury that I had—her name is Deborah Palmer, and she was very tall, like six-five or something. If you can imagine, like—I don't even know what this woman looks like. Do you remember this person called Brigitte Nielsen? Everyone at the time said that they looked alike.

But this person, Deborah Palmer, was this incredibly androgynous-looking person. Tall, very thin, and this very, very short haircut. I don't remember if this is coinciding, but it was very Annie Lennox kind of androgynous day. She had kind of escaped her British family, who were based in New York, and gone to LA. So when I came to New York she said, "Oh, you should look up my father," because he happened to be the headmaster of the Friends Seminary school, the downtown school, and he happened to be on sabbatical. And she thought maybe he could help me with a more steady-type job. [00:05:50]

So once I kind of made my way through those very menial jobs—I didn't do any kind of a restaurant job, ever. But he hooked me up with a paper conservator who was also a modern art collector. Her name was Martina Yamin, and she was a conservator for the MoMA and the Guggenheim, and she is a pretty major conservator for works on paper. So I worked on the fifth floor, the top floor, of her five-story brownstone, where she had a lab for the works and a small office. And I transcribed all of the work that she received, and all the work they did—she put all her reports by recording, and then I basically—that was my first job, was doing these transcriptions for her.

And then, I slowly developed into this kind of assistant position, and then she would give me small projects in the lab. So I would bathe a few things from time to time, or she would have me, like, reassemble a Romare Bearden, the pieces that would fall off or whatever. So anyway, that was my work during that time there. I was spending a few hours every couple of days there.

So that was [visual –JT] art opening up something else, you know, this kind of other—also a very established kind of New York that I had never experienced. She was Dutch. Her whole family was involved in curating or art conservation. Her sister was also a conservator at the Getty in LA. So she was opening my world up to the inner workings of both the museum scene, but also SoHo. [So I was learning the New York art scene through her while I was training as a dancer. –JT] [00:08:18]

This is the moment where these two shall never meet, it seems. You know, there was no dancing in the museum in those days. [Laughs.] So it was also really interesting to feel these different sort of class levels also. You know, [here] I was working for this Dutch lady who lived in New York who worked with these fancy museums and who was a [modern art–JT] collector herself—and that I was her assistant, her brown assistant. And you know, she had a housekeeper. You know, they were just things I never experienced before.

But she was very interested in the world that I was inhabiting, and she was very interested in ACT UP. So I felt like I was going through this other level of a different kind of activism that was using my relationships as a way to—because, you know, we were parsing what was real, what was true, and what was false. Right? Especially in those early years. And I felt like that was one other way that I was able to take the knowledge that I had, and to be able to actually put it on the table, talk with someone over a very, very decent lunch, and defend it. Like, to really understand how—because she would be just as confused—you know, she was like, "Well, I heard on television," you know, or "I heard on the news," or "I read in the *Times*." [So it was a really different position to be in, to actually deliver some information and to be in dialogue.

–JT] [00:10:02]

But I mention that because she also started collecting, like, Zoe Leonard's work, and Nicole Eisenman. You know, so there was this way that she was also recognizing young feminist

women's work through the work of ACT UP, through the relationship that we had, as a way to familiarize herself with something that she thought was very vital and important to collect and support. So I thought that was a really interesting other part of my world.

The dancing part—in 1990, David Roussève invited me to his—oh, wait. Sorry, I am forgetting something I wanted to tell you. Oh, I know. Wait, can I just pause for one second? Because I just—

[Audio break.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay, so I'm going to—there's a small gap, because I know that David—okay, so I was involved in ACT UP, and we had a very, very full life with ACT UP. Ray, Anthony, Aldo—I think ART+ had already formed. I was completely enthralled with David Wojnarowicz's work. And, you know, he was still alive, and we were watching him perform his works, his writings. And so there were these other kind of public opportunities to be in the world, sort of in art—but still, you know, the idea of writing and artworks were really separate from dance. [00:12:05]

[And then, somehow, I performed in something, and I can't remember what that is right now. –JT] But then, in 1990, David Roussève had a company of—it was five women, four black women and one white woman. And they were working with Zeena Parkins at La MaMa. Or they had just done a performance at La MaMa. It could have been P.S. 122, but I'm pretty sure it was at La MaMa. And he asked me to look at this work and join the company.

So I joined the company. [I can't [imagine what he saw me in. –JT] I wish I could remember, because if I feel like it's kind of key. But anyway, so that was 1990, which also—you know, I'm jumping because the two years before—from 1988 to '90—were very intense, because Anthony had moved to New York, and Ray got sick after the conference—the Montreal conference—well, there, actually, and then came home very sick, and then things spiraled downward from there. [00:13:45]

So this was a life-changing time, because Ray had impacted us so deeply, and our friends—I mean, it was the last moment I felt like we were [young], was with Ray and Anthony. Or that we were young. And up until then, you know, we had—Lola had a regular gig in Provincetown, so we would go for the summer. Lola worked at Spiritus scooping ice cream, and I worked at the movie theater taking tickets.

And all of our friends from ACT UP would come and either do these kind of [summer –JT] hustler trades for rooms, or work in restaurants. There were a lot of people who did the New York, Provincetown, Key West—like, moving through the seasons doing restaurant work and catering and stuff. And all of these people that I'm talking about are all artists. The opportunity was not just to go there for summer vacation, because we were all working, but it was about art-making or writing.

And also, our friends that were part of our New York family—but our New York friends—I can't believe I said "family." You shall strike that from the record, because it's actually not what I meant, because I think I meant there was many—like, Lola and I had two very distinct New York circles. One was our folks in ACT UP, but the people that were our closer friends. But then there was also an older generation, which was sort of centered around Sharon Niesp and Cookie Mueller. [00:16:02]

So we had—which, you know, then opened into these other subterranean worlds that were existing around New York, but also still involved in the art scene. And there was also a way that it was starting to open into these other pockets of these kind of—you know, Gary, Indiana, all of these different kinds of—you know, Linda Yablonsky. [Laughs.] You know, all of these people were kind of coming into view.

And in a way, we were also—you know, the way that I felt that I was learning about AIDS through ACT UP, I started learning about AIDS differently through Cookie and Vito and Gary, you know, and different writers. Eileen Myles. Although, you know, I have to say I probably didn't know Eileen back then through AIDS, but I would say that that crossing was happening [through friends, key people like Lori E. Seid, central in the downtown theater scene. –JT].

But you know, this is sort of this intense spiral. Because I remember spending time in Provincetown with Cookie, and you know, she had neuropathy. She was really really struggling, and Sharon was—you know, there was a different way that others were dealing

with AIDS than was happening in ACT UP. So there was the potential for there to be this mutual support or—I don't know, support is not the right word. But there was a mutuality. But it was still a different kind of perspective. They were different worlds, I guess. Those felt also like different worlds. [00:18:09]

And you know, it was sort of like—in a way, it was how David [Wojnarowicz] was. You know? Like, he was sort of in that world, but then also kind of in the ACT UP world. There was just a different way that I felt like artists were really responding to AIDS at the time. And certainly, you know, the kind of clean graphic work of Gran Fury and fierce pussy and that way that that was happening over the years was really different than, you know, some of the grittier, maybe messier kinds of worlds of the peers.

You know, like, knowing Marsha [P. Johnson], and really understanding these other worlds. Same thing with, you know, pre—I mean, I think Keith Haring had disappeared from the room very early in the days that I had joined ACT UP, but there was this understanding also of—there was a feeling around legacy that was already starting to develop or build. I didn't understand exactly, but I *felt* like that was happening. Then this other way of these different locations, like going to Provincetown and having these different relationships outside of the city, while still planning for things.

And my particular relationship with Ray was—you know, I felt like Ray relied on me to talk to him about things that other people wouldn't talk to him about. And you know, he was also teaching me. You know, there was the time that a lot of people refer to when he became blind, where we had to read to him. But before that he was already having me read to him, as a way to help me read these—you know, I had never read Foucault before. It was his way of sharing that kind of knowledge with me. [00:20:26]

And also, you know, he was writing himself. So he was struggling with his own writing. And even though I didn't think that I was capable of helping him with anything, I felt like by him trying to explain what he was thinking and whether—you know, I think my comprehension was helpful in how well his writing was working for a regular person, let's say.

And also, you know, I was very acquainted with their relationship. Anthony was a dancer, and when Anthony came here he had very, very, *very* specific dreams in his choreographic future. And he was very, very disappointed when he found out that he was positive, and he felt like he hadn't done what he wanted. And I don't think the dance scene delivered a lot for Anthony either, so there was a lot of frustration that I really regretted that he had to have, that he had to bear. [00:21:42]

So I felt like—I mean, I'm sure everyone felt that they had a very, very special—like their relationship was the most special. But I think that that's what made Ray so amazing, is everyone felt like what he knew, what he focused on, what he thought about, was very particular to each of us. So it built this great kind of respect for each person. So even though I wasn't that close to Catherine at first, because we were, you know, whatever at the time—we were both sleeping with the same person [laughs]—but there was sort of this thing, like, even though I didn't know how I would get to know someone like Catherine, I felt like through Ray we both knew that there was an incredible value in meeting this other person, because he loved us so much.

So that's how I met Deb Levine. You know, they had done a lot of work together in ACT UP, in their outreach work and education work. And I'm not sure—I always think that they wrote together, but I'm not sure if that's actually true. But I think so. I don't know why. I feel like I should know that.

And then, of course, through Aldo. So then Aldo, Ray, Anthony, Julie, and Lola together was just this other kind of thing. You know, we would—I mean, yeah, I don't know. That was a really clear kind of sisterhood/brotherhood that was really really important to us, I think. And it was—you know, it was a—well, anyway, that's all I'm going to say about that. [Laughs.] I think I'm just rambling now.

ALEX FIALHO: How about—and I think that was all really hopeful and sort of put some networks in place, and also sentiments that went along with it. So that, I think, was great.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: And I think how we got there was we were at David Roussève, and I think that

was actually a moment that we just talked about, was kind of a pause to talk about the years prior to David Roussève, in a way. [00:24:05]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right, exactly. Thank you.

ALEX FIALHO: I think that maybe we could talk a little about your work with David Roussève at this point, which is '90 or so.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. So it's '90. When I joined the company David was openly gay, and his work was—you know, he had been in New York I think since the mid '80s from Princeton. He came through the downtown dance scene. And he was a very beautiful dancer, and he worked with Yoshiko Chuma and Stephanie Skura and many other people, but I know that those two really influenced him. And he is a prolific writer, and he used stories that he had learned from his grandmother—his grandmother was Creole from the Louisiana swamps.

So he had done extensive interviews with her, and he reworked her stories of being a young slave, and the bonds and dependencies amongst the women as they faced the abuses of that situation. And he used these stories as sort of a metaphor for homophobia and AIDS-phobia and, you know, racializations. [00:26:06]

And I think what was also happening in these days at this time—because David had also sort of joined ACT UP somewhere in that time in the '90s, and he was also considering what he might do and how he might—he was trying to figure out—he already knew he was working. He was using this form—experimental dance, expressionist, sort of Pina Bausch-style movement work, very specific, and dance, and these texts, and these very intense gestural movements—to also talk about AIDS and HIV.

But while he was developing the work, and as he got closer and closer to sort of developing a larger body of work, he was still not out to the company about being HIV-positive. But he had confided in me in that time, so I felt like I was like—you know, in 1990, while I was with the company, Ray had died, other folks had died. So we had already experienced how I was maybe a slightly different company member than the others. So, you know, people would come from class and come to rehearsal, let's say. That's a normal dancer thing. [But I would come from, like, the mortuary, dropping off the clothes, and then stretch somewhere alone to process, and *then* go to rehearsal.–JT [00:28:29]

So there was a little bit of a distance that was already built in, so that distance in a way was a way that I was able to hold this story that David was working with for himself, and trying to figure out how and when it might come through. I'm not sure, but I think he wanted to take the time to also talk to his family. You know, he was from Houston. So it was a process, and I felt like I was really part of that kind of—I'm sorry, I think I'm losing my words.

But, you know, I hate to call it a secret. When I think about this, I always kind of think of it as the secret that I was holding. And of course, it was a secret, but I think that's a crude way to talk about what was needed at that time. It wasn't actually to hold a secret. It was more like—it was needed to let people live out what they needed [cries] and also be able to ask for something without knowing what they're asking for. [Like, I don't think he knew what he was asking me for. And I certainly didn't know what to do except to not tell anyone that he was HIV positive until he was ready to disclose.–JT [00:29:53]

But I was also having to—you know, like, I would have to attend to his wounds. Like if he would bleed on stage or something. And that required a choreography, because then I would have to find the materials that I would need, like in the back of some who-knows-what opera house that we were performing in, and have to clean up without being very obvious that I'm cleaning up, and figure out how to do that within the quote-unquote characteristic way that one would move in a company like this, to be able to take care of a task and then continue, and also check in on David and have a conversation that did not feel secretive to other people. You know?

So it's a lot, again, for still being pretty young, but it created a bond with David and I. And I was the tour manager. So we had an agent who booked his tours, and he had a manager and everything, but on tour I—you know, there was no lead, but I was definitely, as the years went on, part of the more experienced company members. I often held the repertory for the company, and helped maintain the scores.

I did some rehearsal directing for David, and then I often went with him to each city,

because he toured these works that started sort of small but then, little by little, would grow into these evening-length works that were literally opera house-style-length kinds of works. [So, you know, I think David was—I mean, I don't know if this is still true, but before he was 30 he had his first BAM, Brooklyn Academy of Music season. –JT] You know, he had two or three seasons, I think, by the time he was 40. I mean, you know, he had a pretty significant career, but it meant that we were going to be playing in pretty large houses, and across the world. [00:32:24]

So we traveled internationally and traveled across the country. And in the first works we also took on—so not only was there the company that we toured, but there was also—we worked with B.J. Crosby, who was an incredible gospel singer that we met at the AME church in Los Angeles early in the '90s, and she started touring with us. And, you know, David cast a role for her, but also she sang live—often a cappella—gospel. And then we would also be accompanied by a local gospel choir.

So now we're in the '90s, touring a company with this really intense work about being gay or about race—you know, very, very open work around race—and text-based dance, which was not that common. Plus having a big black woman singing and just tearing down the house—also doing movement—and then having a gospel choir who is not from New York and who did not have AME kind of values. They were traditional gospel choirs. [00:33:51]

And so they would be on stage with us. Even though we would—they would have the outline of what the work was about or whatever, but they would be pretty shocked when they would see, you know, naked bodies, or, "Oh, my God, they're talking about AIDS," or you know, like, "Oh, these are gay people." You know what I mean? And so that kind of censor that was very prevalent was also then happening from within, so we would have to do these incredible kinds of interventions. You know?

And in the beginning, like I said, it was just—you know, I was the only out woman in the company, and then there was David, so there was a way that we were really having to manage a lot of this kind of refusal around the work or around the conditions or the subject matter. And then as the years went on and the company became more gender-mixed and more queer—and the work was more specifically and actually naming AIDS—it became more and more intense with these groups.

And also, I mean, even in the middle '90s, we would go to England, and we were working with an interracial black dance company who would have stipulations—like, they would obviously pair us together, but they would have stipulations that they refused to have male-on-male partnering or female-on-female partnering, which was also kind of a signature in David's work at that time. So that's one whole world. [00:35:39]

Also, the same year that I joined David's company, I started the Clit Club. Because prior to 1990, Robert Garcia, who was a very vocal, a very insightful, inspiring, but sometimes contentious kind of person—but, you know, very, very dedicated to the fight against this kind of AIDS-phobia—Robert had approached several of us—Jocelyn Taylor, Pamela Sneed, Jeff Nunokawa—[I want to say Charles, but I think that Charles wasn't really in the group, I can't remember—Robert Mignott, Wellington Love, and Robert Garcia. –JT] Did I say Jocelyn? Yes.

So here we were, you know, folks of color in ACT UP. Like, he literally just pointed out—they were just sort of people in our circle. I didn't know Robert that well. He lived at Catherine's, but we were—there was this other kind of Ray—like, we were all close, but Robert, you know, was not hanging out with this group of people. So Robert had proposed that we would start a video collective called House of Color Video Collective. [Laughs.] But really no one did video in the group except Jocelyn. Oh, also, Wellington Love was also part of House of Color.

And so we spent those early years—also I think Ray had already passed away when we were really developing the work, the first work, but this group was spending most of its time identifying that all people of color don't necessarily have the same goals [laughs] and have the same considerations. [So in a way, it was this sort of slow-moving, very un-actionable group that was actually dealing with some of the complexities of our experiences as folks of color and the impact of Ray's passing. –JT] [00:38:14]

So the meetings were really just about getting to know each other's desires, frustrations—and it was easiest for us to come together around this sort of sense of, you know, being objectified. So the first work was this fairly direct, but not so weighted, work about

objectification, and also a kind of intimacy that we were seeking but we had to actually develop in the group.

So I think the video in the end points at this desire for this kind of community that is very hard to organize. So in a way it was a little bit of a micro look at some of the things we were experiencing also being in ACT UP. So I thought it was—you know, it wasn't as productive in terms of its material or how we produced work or anything, but it did give us a place to be together. Because, you know, obviously many of our compatriots were white, and it was really hard to sort of—that wasn't really the space, to talk about our experiences.

ALEX FIALHO: And that video is *I Object*.

JULIE TOLENTINO: That's *I Object*, exactly. I was just trying to—I wrote a little know myself. Also, in 1990—I think it's 1990, 1989—I feel like we did the first Day With(out) Art, but I guess we didn't. [00:40:09]

We must have done the '90 one with—David's company was invited through Creative Time. And we can check that date. It could have been '92, but it seems really late. And honestly, I remember it as being the first one, although I also remember them saying, "This one is so much bigger than last year." So it has to be '90.

But anyway, we shot in a studio or in Creative Time. I can't remember. It was a Creative Time office or something. I can't remember. Diamanda was also there, and Diamanda Galas was also part of our friend circle, starting probably—I probably met Diamanda maybe 1988. And she was—we have to check the year that she did Plague Mass, but prior to Plague Mass—oh, that's in the '90s. That's '92 or something. So Diamanda's in our circle, but also Diamanda was working very much after her brother died of AIDS. She was also dedicating a lot of her work, a lot of her research into AIDS-phobia, and also genocide—she was just looking at, you know, the larger concept [laughs] of genocide. [00:41:58]

So I feel—I guess what I'm trying to remind myself and to say is that there were just so many experiences of these really intense offerings of everything people had up until that point. Like, everything was being poured into every single aspect. And when we were getting involved we were getting completely involved [laughs], you know? So there was a wholeness about the times that we worked with House of Color. There was a wholeness in working with Diamanda, whether it was in preparation for a show, or, you know, later in the '90s, I produced her work.

We had a very, very close relationship. I think in some ways she relied on me, and I also recognized her as kind of this—you know, I had never really met someone who had had such a career and such an intense focus on what she was thinking and how she was conducting her life. And, you know, she was the most intense feminist I had ever met. We would meet at Pangea and have dinner. And even though she was—you know, she was just—I don't know, she was just this other kind of refuge. She offered a different kind of perspective, very much like the opening of Martina, or going to ACT UP and meeting all of these different people. [00:43:54]

I was also going to say—I know I keep trying to insert that I keep forgetting about—but in '88 or '89—'88—really, '88? Wow. '88 or '89, Lola and I—I remember we had a date, and we went to Girl World, which was like—the World was a club that was on, I think, Avenue B and Third Street, or Avenue C. I can't remember. Avenue B. And they had this kind of girl party night, and Lola and I—I feel like somehow there we were approached. We were there, and we were approached to be in a video and to do this photo shoot. So that's when the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* comes in. And that photo shoot also turned into a piece that Tom Kalin did, of his own work, that was called *Nation*. And that included Trash, a performer that called themselves Trash.

Again, I always have to remind people that in the late '80s and '90s, gender-warrior, gender-neutral, gender-variant folks were called androgynous or called themselves androgyny. Androgyny was the word for that. There was no trans word for that kind of gender trans-y—you know what I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: And so Trash was one of these kind of—it was hard to describe. This is a person, who was kind of a character, who was a person who was a woman, who was not a

man, who was a man, who was not a woman, who was definitely not a man. You know I mean?

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] Exactly. [00:46:01]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, exactly. Like, precisely. And their bestie was—oh, God, I knew I was going to do this—Armen Ra, who played the Therémin, who was also kind of in a club scene, club thing, that was very particular also to the '80s, like these very, very intense characters. So they were these kind of brother/sister-sister/brother twinsies people that were very important for what was shifting in the gay art scene.

Because there was also kind of an old-school New York, very segregated by class, by race, by interest. You know, like, leather guys hung out together. You know, uptown business lesbian real estate mogul ladies hung out uptown. Middle-class black women who identified most clearly as one or the other, butch or femme, hung out in another place. You know? That kind of separation was really happening. And this is where sometimes I feel like I can tap on my youth of having that kind of experience of being able to feel really at home in a lot of places.

So for me, I felt like I was also developing this kind of trans-ness, like a very wide consideration of not only not thinking of myself as purely lesbian, like the very particular kind of female-bodied woman/womyn/womban/wimmin, all the spellings. [Laughs.] You know, that was still, like, really on offer. This is still very *Our Bodies, Ourselves* time, you know? But there was—like, all of those kinds of separations were happening, and then there was also kind of the hierarchies around porn. I'm bringing this up because I'm trying to talk about—I'm trying to just notice that there's these all of these sorts of separations. [00:48:25]

So when the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* comes, at a time when there's also this new graphics that have taken hold of culture, and appropriation starts to really take hold—so we're seeing, like, the Benetton ad re-appropriated, and also this kind of different language—I'm sorry, I sort of lost my train of thought how I was going where I was going.

ALEX FIALHO: I mean, to me, I think maybe you're even situating the Clit Club as a space.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, yeah, totally. I think it's just hard to remember it's important to keep the context in the picture, because otherwise it's sort of—there was an a generational shift. There were older women who were not pleased that the Clit Club was open to these new ideas like sex positivity or non-monogamy or porn. You know, educated white women from all of the major colleges around on the East Coast came to protest the Clit Club, while at the same time, the same women from the same colleges who were pro-sex came to celebrate that very thing. [00:50:03]

So we were really seeing generations shift. Also attitudes about alliances with gay men were shifting. Also the understanding of gender and gender oppression in this whole other way—that also was happening within the gay community. There was a kind of coming out of the S/M community, and the openness of the bisexual community. Things were really shifting very quickly in these early '90s.

And I guess I was also thinking for myself that I was—even though, I mean, it was important for me—I came to New York with long hair, and before I knew it, a few years later I was bald. I felt like that was liberating me from an understanding of myself that I felt laden with. You know, this kind of overt—like I was sort of assumed femme, and I thought that was not really right for me.

I can say that even years later with some of my dearest friends, some of the most radical people I know, they just refused me my position as being a non-binary gender player, and excluded me from things. Like, "Oh, you can't have a dagger tattoo, because only the dykes or the butches get to have this thing," or whatever. So these kinds of things sound menial, but it was also how—you know, this was why the Clit Club ended up becoming really important to people, because we were all shifting our language, and we were really working to help each other not only locate rage and grief, but also our bodies and the potentials of how we could live a life. [00:52:03]

I mean, I think by then we were already recognizing that we had to live lives pretty fully for the people we were losing. And we were losing them quickly, and we were losing them young, and we had no idea—like, there was no future feeling. There truly was a sense that

there's no way to plan. There's no planning. There was, like, triage plan, but there's no plan. And that is a very, very different—that meant that that older gay and lesbian people couldn't necessarily help in a way, because at least they had lived to their 50s. You know what I mean?

So there was moments of despair, but then there was also this time that felt ripe to then become the most one could be. And that's right when we start to also feel the shifts around the use of the word queer, which—you know, I have thoughts about that, about how people feel about it now, the same people who were shifting it back then to re-appropriate the word from its slur. You know, I think people now sometimes in my generation also get frustrated with the use of the word queer in the way that it does not actually define sexuality, and just sort of queerness.

So it's just interesting, because it's sort of—to see there's some parts of our friends that kind of refuse that queerness, you know? And then some people that never really accepted—like, preferred the gay and lesbian identity. But I feel like there's a way that all of that was being fed by the work that people were doing and the way that people were thinking about words and language and ways of identifying each other and oneself. [00:54:11]

I think it is important to remember that there are also multiple '90s. So in the early '90s, these striations were helping people identify so that they could be seen and understood and the nuance could come through. Whereas the middle '90s, which was a more commodified kind of community—we were being sold to, we were being sold out—you know, there was this kind of categorizing that was really really different than what I felt were some very, very key and important identity politics. Then there was sort of a backlash against that. But it's always the thing that we have to go back to.

But I always felt that it was also really difficult, because when you had to check multiple boxes it became harder and harder to become legible, or to be legible, for people. And so when I think about spaces of moving in and around ACT UP, I think about the actions that we went to, and I see what that united front does. You know? When I think of Stop the Church, or I think of the City Hall demo, or the NIH—all of those things were so important in terms of a united front, but you really felt as we went on that it became more and more important to start to work with this kind of stripping down and trying to figure out what people need. [00:56:03]

You know, there was always sort of a feeling that you had to let the folks in the front of the room speak first, or there was a certain kind of particular activism that was being championed. And you know, there was that kind of back-of-the-room feeling like, "How are we going to get in there?"

So I feel like all of that was part and parcel of how Clit Club came to be, which was, "Let's make some space where we can talk about those things. Let's hang out around those things." And Clit Club was started as a mixed party, which most people don't know. The first Clit Club DJ was Aldo Hernandez. And that event, it created a space for us.

I mean, I was able to secure the space through a dance connection, actually a choreographer who was interested in working with me. Her husband and his friends from college had a dream to make a jazz club, and they found this cheap place on 14th and Washington. It was empty. I mean, it was just dead empty. Poor place. And so I suggested that maybe I would try to do something, and I was thinking it would make a good meeting place or, you know—I wasn't quite sure. And then within its opening—I mean, it was packed in the beginning. It stayed packed for almost 10 solid years in that same space.

But it was also a meeting place, and it was also a memorial space. And you know, little by little, we were able to use it for different needs, including performances. We were able to show art. We were able to take someone's, like, small show of photos and Xerox them so that there was a way that we could distribute people's work. [00:58:28]

We did a lot of benefits. We did a lot of top surgery [laughs] benefits. And we also hosted a lot of different groups like APICHA and PONY. There were so many—like, if people needed a benefit we just were able to either donate partial door, or we would create a special event just for different groups.

Yeah. So, I'm sorry, we just kind of fell into the Clit Club. But—

ALEX FIALHO: I think it's great.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. And then, of course, at the same time, there's, you know, meeting Pigpen—

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly.

JULIE TOLENTINO: —in 1991. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: So I think we'll wind down tonight by just asking kind of a straightforward question around the name, the Clit Club, how that came to be. And then tomorrow we'll pick up a lot of these histories and move into and through the '90s and beyond.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay, that sounds great. And also, just before—so I don't forget. It's really important to me for us to talk a little bit about what the overlaps of the the nighttime—you know, the meetings, the actions, home care, and dance, and [laughs] Clit Club. You know, there's a very congealing experience amongst all those things. [01:00:13]

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. You [. . . and an intergenerational group—Leeroy Kun Young Kang, Tara Hart, Vivian A. Crockett, Amira Khusro, Dragon Mansion –AF] wrote this Clit Club reflection recently [. . . "The Sum of All Questions: Returning to the Clit Club" for GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies –AF]—one of the quotes that I wrote down was: "Attendees often began their evenings at meetings, memorials, and direct actions prior to arriving at Clit Club. Many were active in ACT UP, as well its affinity groups such as House of Color, ART+, DIVA TV, or affiliated with other groups such as Lesbian Avengers, Kilawin Kolektibo, Prostitutes of New York, PONY, or GABRIELA Network. Over the years, Clit Club also showed and generated many forms of art and invited a number of artists to present work." So I think that that almost points to the ways that you were before, during, and after in a lot of these kinds of spaces.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah, totally, totally. I mean, just kind of an aside, like an admin aside: You should just be careful, because that isn't going to be published for a little while, so let's just make sure that we figure out the timing on that. I'm sure it's fine to use, but—

ALEX FIALHO: Noted.

JULIE TOLENTINO: —I'm sure it will be fine.

ALEX FIALHO: The name.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, yeah, the name, the Clit Club name. So [laughs] prior to 1990, and somehow—I don't know what year. It was '88, I guess. I started working as a bartender, not knowing what that meant—I think in 1988—at this space that someone will have to jog my memory, because I won't remember it. But it was right on Second Avenue. It was a big space that's now torn down, that used to have this big big basement that had a pool space underneath, and people would use it—[01:02:06]

[END OF TOLENT18_1OF2_SD_TRACK03.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: —for parties, and it was completely illegal. But that was my first bartending gig, and it was mostly all guys, basically. That's how I remember it. And then this totally hot, uptown, vogueing contingent mixed together. So it was just an incredible incredible party and space.

But from doing these totally underground parties, Chip started doing bigger clubs. He had done a party in a space in the old Area, in Tribeca. Yeah, it was called Area. And I think the party was called Quick, actually. I was bartending there, and it was—there was always one well-known drag queen, and then there was one lesbian, and there was one—you know, there was one "representative" at each of the bars. And women would come to my bar in particular. A lot of fags came to my bar, I will have to say, and they brought me lots of beautiful clothes. [Laughs.] That's how I even had clothes, was that people gave me clothes.

And so we were sitting around, and I remember Jocelyn was there, my friend D.M. Machuca was there—who ended up being one of the key Clit Club staff folks—and I was literally—we were just trying to think of a unique name that would make it clear that it was going to be really lesbian-centric or very women-centric and sex positive. And I think we named it.

[00:02:06] And they were like, "That's ridiculous!" And I just remember, I was like, "Why?" I literally was just so sure that it was the name. And everyone liked it, but they were then like, you know, trying out every other body part. So anyway, it stuck.

But then we had a lot of trouble with—you know, we couldn't quite wheat-paste the way that other clubs did, because the name was so evocative. And we had a hard time, like, if the wrong person was working at Kinko's and—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: You know what I mean? Like, they would reject the poster, reject the invitation. [Laughs.] And also people wouldn't say the name out loud. You know? They would be like, [whispers] "Clit Club." [Laughs.] Or "C-Club."

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Or, you know, like—and fags were like, "Clit?!" I mean, they would be freaked out, as if they just, you know, put their tongue on it. You know what I mean? It was just totally freaking out fags, which was also really kind of cool. You know, that seemed like the really right way to go.

But it really created this kind of—I don't know, I think its evocativeness gave everyone a chance to come around and have their own comfort around it. And I think people liked it, actually. And then it obviously sparked a number—like, across the world, it sparked body part women's bars, [laughs] like, all over the world.

ALEX FIALHO: Perfect.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. So, I think that's good for now.

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay.

[END OF TOLENT18_1OF2_SD_TRACK04.]

ALEX FIALHO: This is Alex Fialho interviewing Julie Tolentino in the East Village, New York City, New York, on April 12, 2018 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two.

So Julie, yesterday we concluded the day by talking a bit about the Clit Club's origins and its name, and I thought a good way to continue today would be to talk a little bit about the community. Let's start in that sense, around the staff that you worked with.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Great. So, the very origin of the Clit Club, I should have mentioned yesterday—I think I mentioned yesterday—was started by myself and Jocelyn Taylor, also known now as Jaguar Mary. And we stayed partners, running the space, for about a year. But in the year, besides us, there were kind of key members.

There were many people who worked in the Clit Club, but I'm just going to mention a couple of people who were long-time staff members, friends, and like pure kin to the Clit Club and helped develop it. So that would include: Michelle Hill, Pam Willis, Don Boyle, Shigeru McPherson, D.M. Machuca, Aldo Hernandez—I'm just thinking of people super long-term. There are many incredible people who worked with us in and out. [00:01:53]

I'll mention early Clit Club bartenders, for example: Lola Flash, Robin Zeimer—I'm having a blank. It's Kim [Ray]—I'm forgetting her last name, and I will have to insert that. And other friends like Phoenix, Carly Jane, [Clark, Madge –JT]—and I'm going to sort of keep that—you know, of course, the minute you mention names, it's very important to remember that there's always the names that are somehow fallen out of that collection, so not to diminish those others.

But these folks really held the Clit Club together from the beginning. And, you know, if you think about it, we were just a small space at the edge of the city, almost tumbling into the river in a marginal part of the city. And all of these folks, on a regular basis, were really holding the club's values and taking care of each other. And I would just say, from that—I used to say that the Clit Club was dedicated to somebody called Nimby. And Nimby was

from deep Brooklyn, and she would come to the Clit Club and—well, first of all, I have to say that Michelle and Pam used to work at Pandora's Box. [00:03:51]

Pandora's Box was in the West Village. I think I might have mentioned it. It was a very sort of butch/fem, mostly black lesbian bar with dancing in the back. And for Pam and Dez [Guido-Graham]to be interested in working at the Clit Club, you know, they were concerned at first. You know, we had these ideas of people mixing on different racial and class lines, and there was a reputation that we were kind of wild over here in the Clit Club. [Laughs.] And they were really into the vibe of the party. They were really into it.

So for them to be there also meant that they were almost betraying something that was built into their understanding of their butchness, or who they would follow as that kind of butch lineage goes. And so their presence really opened up the Clit Club to that community, and I feel like everyone that I mentioned were also involved in different—like, Shigi came from Columbia. You know, she was a young black woman working in graphic design, coming from higher education. And that attracted a different kind of—you know, so the Clit Club had that kind of community. And D.M., who—like, I just felt like everyone was coming from a different place. And that sort of supported the ideas of the club. And you know, our kind of intimacy, the way that we got to know each other, ended up being a sort of model for how we could run a club filled with people that were maybe not familiar with each other, let's say. [00:06:19]

But anyway, I always felt the club was dedicated to Nimby because she was androgynous. Her girlfriend had three children, and the children didn't know that their mother was a lesbian, and that Nimby was not a man. And so there was sort of this early kind of—I know it sounds just naïve, the way I'm talking about it, but I'm trying to keep it in the language of that time, which was that in a way, Nimby loved Friday night because she could leave home. It was, like, her night to escape the family and go and be with the "sisters." But then, you know, was also expressing and sharing with her friends.

She considered herself a she, by the way. But with her friends—I mean, she used the pronoun "she." And she—you know, what it was like to be in this sort of crossing land, this crossing world. So there was something about the way that that sort of open trans sensibility was always working underneath the Clit Club, and I think that's super important. [00:07:53]

It's sort of around this time, in the early '90s—like '91, I think—that I met Pigpen. And Pigpen was also one of these people—Pigpen lived in LA, and Pigpen used to talk about going to lesbian bars and then being kicked out, or being refused because—as if Pigpen was a man trying to somehow smuggle oneself into a lesbian bar. So Pigpen was always a little bit gun-shy going to different bars.

[So when Pigpen had come to Clit Club, and we met, at Clit Club. . . Pigpen was really happy about that. –JT] And also Pigpen was sober, and there was something that I really appreciated about such a young person being sober. And Pigpen had got sober, like, at 21. So they were probably just a few years sober at that time, which, you know, is pretty remarkable for a young person. [And it was also part of the culture that they were living in LA, which supported a lot of young people who were sober.–JT

And a lot of those people I met were through Club Fuck!, which was also running around the same time as the Clit Club. So there was kind of an overlap there, and as the year—I mean, things were going so quickly at that time. But I think I was touring, probably, with David, and we probably had to stop performing. We were performing in LA and I met Pigpen again there, and they brought me to Club Fuck!, where I met this incredible group of people who had been friends since the '80s. Most people involved in either a punk kind of movement, or different club scenes, or different art and music scenes. [00:10:16]

So at that point, I met this outrageous and just fantastic group of people. And I'm just going to name some people from that time. So that would have been Pigpen, Steak, Crystal Cross, Chicken, Ron Athey, Joseph Brooks, James Stone—and around the time that I had met all of these people, James' boyfriend Miguel had passed away. So there was this very deep strain that you could feel through everyone, having lost Miguel. And I remember thinking that Miguel was like their Ray. And there was a bond that was going to hold us together, and there was always going to be shared stories of these two people that would hold us together. It sort of created our bond, I think. [00:11:44]

And by this time, in New York, Aldo had been DJing for Clit Club. And so I had suggested that—you know, Clit Club on Friday—why don't we do a men's party on Saturdays in the same space at 432 West 14th Street? Which is what it used to be called, the Bar Room 432. And he started a party called Meat, and he has his own crew, his own staff. But in the early days of that club, I actually worked as the manager for that night. And we just shared, you know, the things that we learned from one night to the other. Between Aldo and I, we purchased all of the equipment and we started to really develop and build this club.

And so there was this sisterhood between the LA parties and the New York parties. And just to jump ahead—just so I don't forget the other connections—but in meeting James and Ron and everyone from Club Fuck!, there were these considerations, like: "Oh, should we try to figure out how to get Ron to go-go dance at Aldo's party?" Or, "Is there somebody who wants to come from our side and go and do something with them?" So there was a way that we were already swapping friends and people were coming to New York for the first time. So because we had a regular party, we were able to hire people, and it was a way for people to travel back and forth, because they knew they were going to make a little money.

So I think that that maybe was one of the first times that I met Ron, was hooking him up with Aldo, who had met Ron years ago, because Aldo had lived in LA and Long Beach at one point, but they hadn't been in touch. But having met Ron already, it was sort of like a reintroduction. So, Ron came to go-go dance for Meat, but at that time—I'm not sure that I have all the timing right. Because I think I mentioned that Ron and I did A Day With(out) Art together in this outdoor performance, and that was probably in 1991, actually. And it was at one of the art schools downtown that I don't really know—and I don't think it's there anymore. But Ron had set up these friends who were musicians. They were drummers, percussionists, I think. [00:14:45]

And Ron was like, "Well, we're just going to do this thing, and you're going to dance or move around with these bells on, and then I'm going to be beside you doing something similar." And that was our plan. I had no idea what we were going to do, and I met the musicians—I'm not remembering their names right now—and we went into this, like, classroom, and then Ron was like, "Oh, I'm just going to put these little needles in your skin and then I'm going to hang"—like, he just sort of said, "Oh, it's just this little thing we're going to do." [And I just remember looking down and suddenly there was a play piercing needle going through my arm. –JT]

And I think at that point I had sort of heard and known about play piercing and seen it, but I hadn't had it done to me before. So I just remember just looking at my body—like, looking at him doing it—and not even really quite knowing what was happening. But I didn't say no, and I was sort of fascinated by the fact that it didn't really hurt that much. [There was just a lot of things going on, but I was into it, and I really trusted that it was going to be a solid experience. –JT] [00:15:58]

So anyway, we end up doing this performance and I think somewhere we have a video. And I have a photograph, at least one photograph of that performance, that I think was shot by our late—well, a good good friend of Ron's who also I became a friend—the late—oh, my God, I just lost her name all of a sudden. Elyse Regher is her name. She's a wonderful photographer and she photographed a lot of early events around Club Fuck! performances and early performances of Ron and Co.

So we had had that experience, and then I think from that, I had brought Ron to New York to do the thing with Aldo. And in this time, also, I had met other musician friends including Cliff Diller, and—[Brandy Dalton –JT]—but Cliff had just died, and Ron took this kind of stuff that he was doing at Club Fuck!, and assembled it in a way that was a performance that was held at LACE, that commemorated Cliff's life. And Brandy Dalton and Cliff Diller made up this band that—the name is also—I'm lost now but I'll get it in a second[DRANCE]. [00:17:43]

Anyway, in that performance, Pigpen was a central figure. It was in a 3-D triangle structure, and Pigpen's lips were sewn shut, and there was a nurse figure that was drawing blood from Pigpen and then putting the blood on Pigpen's lips. So there was just this kind of activity, this sort of circular physical activity that started, like, the pre-show of this work. And that was, in a way, the first time, as I understand it, this work that was in a club kind of moved itself out of the club.

And I was really interested in the work, and I feel like I must have seen a video or something

about it in images. I started talking to Ron about it. And I think he had maybe some other kind of presentation, and I may have been involved or maybe I wasn't involved at that point. But it was pretty nascent work at that time, and I felt really compelled by the work. But also, having been a dancer, there was something about the actual true, harsh reality of it—like, the actual physicality, the fact that they were working with real blood, that there was a candid understanding of peoples' experience around drugs and alcohol, around whatever risky behavior, whether that was sex or, you know, whatever sex practices. And that very, very deep kink was really—you know, I felt like that was fleshed out in the work, or it was available in the work, which I felt was more real than the way that dance and theater had demonstrated ideas of risk or experimental work or whatever. [00:20:05]

And so I felt like it was a gift to me to be able to be this close to the work. I ended up doing a project with Ron. I think we did some club shows in New York. Probably, as I remember, we did a bunch of performances at the Clit Club. We did performances for Meat. We also did performances at John Lovett and Alessandro Codagnone's. They were a performance duo, Lovett-Codagnone. And John was working with Dug McDowell, who I had met from the suicide hotline. And—oh, my God, why am I always forgetting everyone's names?

Anyway, there was three or four collaborators who put together PORK, which was a party that was originally held in—I think it was held in a space called The Altar. But eventually, it was at a bar, a leather bar that was right around the corner from Florent. So it wasn't far away from the Clit Club. And ultimately, Meat was like the sister to the Clit Club. But in terms of performances and the way that we worked together, in this interesting parallel, PORK was also our other sister space. And there was a time when Alessandro was a go-go dancer for the Clit Club. And when I was making new works, I would make and perform durational performances at PORK. So there was a way that we were all distributing all of these creative labors. [00:22:10]

So with Ron, we had done some performances there, at PORK. So there was this way that there was—like, Ron and I started working on his work, as there was interest from the Live Art Development Agency in London, run then by Lois Keiden and Catherine Ugwo at the ICA in London. Ron's work was being fleshed-out and commissioned by this organization, and Ron and I were sort of developing a different kind of language, and also this kind of economy, by working in these other spaces in New York, and me working in LA as well.

So there was a way that David's dance company work was getting me back and forth to LA, which was putting me in touch with Ron. And also at that time, other friends of ours from New York had moved to Los Angeles. Like, performance artist Diviana Ingravallo was working in LA, making work at highways. Robin Zeimer, who was the bartender of the Clit Club, had also moved to LA. There were several ways that we were having all of these overlaps. And it was all happening within short periods of time, so it's a little bit hard to apprehend it all. [00:23:56]

But in the meantime, this group of people were summoned for this "Ron Athey and Company"—you know, this group that I started sort of managing. I was doing a lot of the logistics and management with our presenters. I was working with Ron to help develop the work, light it, and what we would probably call now a dramaturge or something—while co-directing the work, so that he could also be in the work as well. And performing in it, and then also tour managing the whole thing. So it was, you know, a tall order. And that was also being supported by my experience tour managing with, and doing all that sort of similar work with, David. So it was just really very rich.

ALEX FIALHO: At the same time?

JULIE TOLENTINO: All at the same time. And sort of touring, and just tucking each of the projects around each other, and really utilizing all of the—you know, if I was touring with David in Europe, I could talk about Ron's work or the kind of work I was doing with Ron and the group. And talking about its value and how important it was in terms of—you know, both works were talking about AIDS, but how they were doing it was so different, and the kinds of impacts they were making—I mean, I know that the reason why I was having the conversation is because it was having such an impact on me personally, that I thought that it was important to tell people and also to be able to make sure that these ideas, creative ideas, were on offer for people. [00:26:06]

And similarly, you know, I would attempt to do that in the live art scene in London about the

dance work. But, you know, the live art scene wasn't that interested in dance or, you know, whatever prescribed—a certain kind of dance work was not in the performance view. But I think that the fact that there was a dancer who was inserting and importing some of these kind of values into Ron's work, I think, was unmistakable in how important that was.

But our traveling group had consisted of Ron, Darryl Carlton, Brian Murphy, Pigpen, Cross—and we were traveling with a musician, violinist Julie Fowells. That was sort of the main group, and that group would extend, and we would pick up people in different cities. I think that was the nature of the work, but I think the cultivating of that came a little bit from that understanding of how we did that with David's company. Like, picking up people and inserting them into the work. I mean, I think that's common, but I feel like understanding how to cultivate those relationships kind of came from that experience. [00:27:56]

But, you know, this was a group of people who were not ever on a stage, so I had to give really basic things, like, "If you're on stage in the wings and you can see the audience, it means the audience can see you." [Laughs.] You know, these really basic things that are very dear. And I think we all, as time went on, really recognized how impactful it was for them to move from a club scene to these theatrical settings abroad.

And you know, of course, the beginning of—you know, [laughs] whatever—the almost fatal beginning of Ron's group work started when David had just done a big show at the Walker Art Center. And we had had a long relationship with John Killacky, and John became a very dear friend of mine. In fact, he used to make work—he was a dancer, and he was making some video work, and he had invited me actually to—you know, I have to think about this, but either he wrote a poem and asked me for a video of a movement piece that I made, or he made a movement piece and asked me for a poem. I think it's the latter. But you know, we became friends and actually even collaborators for this piece. And it opened up a lot of conversations. I had talked to him a lot about Ron's work, and I had tried to get him to see the work. [00:29:39]

Anyway, it prompted him to invite the work, which was at the time the *4 Scenes in A Harsh Life* series. We talked about bringing that work to Minneapolis, to the Walker. And in the process—I mean, I thought that John was doing his best to really figure out how to create a context for it. And as we know, in the early '90s it was still confusing, how people were thinking about and talking about AIDS and especially how people would receive this work that was also demonstrating these risky—you know, whatever people considered risk/kink. You know, these were not, like, demo-worthy S/M techniques. These were really creative and also autobiographical stories. That was a really important part of what Ron's work was, for all of us, that frankness of autobiography. And also, I was also very enamored with Ron's writing. It was actually that writing that I was really interested in being able to support through performance.

But anyway, John decided to work with Patrick from Patrick's Cabaret, and thought that the community around Patrick's Cabaret would be more supportive and a good entryway for a more conservative Midwest receipt of this work. And then, you know, the famous performance happened, where Pigpen and myself, Darryl Carlton, and Ron performed a few of the scenes from *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life,* including the cutting scene.

So I probably don't have to talk about the entire censorship issue and, you know, basically the misinformation around it and the media uproar and Jesse Helms and everything else. But what I would like to talk about is that what happened, as a result of that performance, is that there were lies. Jesse Helms was obsessed with Ron in his own kind of strange, homoerotic way. [00:32:25]

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: But I think what was really—something that we had to deal with very quickly was that Ron had been vilified in this situation, but also there were other witnesses. Right? So besides the stewardess who ran to the press with misinformation, there was a whole room of people who were there that were never really quite consulted, as if anyone would care if there was—I just feel like there was something that is also prevalent now, which is: There are other ways to access truth. And it included a completely packed audience and theater space, and three other company members who were in the room. You know, three other people who knew the actual details of the performance.

And also, you know, people like Darryl could have confirmed his HIV status, if that was important for people. The fact that Ron was openly HIV-positive but that he was wearing gloves and doing a cutting was never considered. The fact that there wasn't a way to critically look at the work, in terms of the makeup of the group and the way that there was, you know, certainly trans people in the group, queer people in the group. There were a lot of perspectives that were brought to the work and a lot of perspectives and considerations around the exact pieces that were going to be shown and, you know, the curatorial aspect. So I feel like all of that was missed, in terms of everything that was going on. [00:34:30]

But what did happen afterwards is that John and I sort of beat back a lot of the misinformation by sitting on panels—and we actually did a talk at the Smithsonian, and I think that's still somewhere, available. But, you know, we were on the front line at a time when Ron was obviously very—besides being upset, but disgruntled, and there was like this feeling of being duped. You know? Kind of being pulled out into this situation and then it all completely backfiring. And I think that was something that we had a very hard time recovering from. But, you know, I felt that there was something in the activist experience that I felt we could do with that information.

And you know, ultimately, it was up to Ron what he personally wanted to do, but I felt like there were a lot of opportunities for me in New York and with other art people—including talking to Mark Russell at PS122 and other presenters—to make sure that people really knew what the conditions were, so that those dialogues that we had already started would not be shut down because of this situation, which of course was threatening everyone's budget. [00:36:02]

And so, in any case, I just think it's really important to state on record how much Kathy Halbreich and John Killacky—you know, they really went to bat for the work, for their position as presenters, and expressing their support for Ron regardless of how he could accept that at that time. Because, you know, it was just backbreaking to be pointed at like that. And as far as I could understand it, he was receiving it as one person. He was like the NEA One [laughs] as opposed to the other folks, who were slightly older but were definitely centered around, like, PS122.

So I just feel like it's important to say that it was a moment that really also politicized me in a different way. And it really helped me understand another level of advocacy that I had already experienced as a young caregiver, having worked so closely with so many of our friends to take care of Robert Garcia, Robert Gleason, Anthony Ledesma, Ray Navarro, Don Boyle—you know, and that list goes on. But, you know, these were really impacting situations where you learned—or I felt like I really learned—how to isolate what people needed in their situations, in these very dire situations, and follow their lead but then also recognize if there were other things to do, to maybe take up some of those other spaces of advocacy, or just to be able to take up other spaces that maybe were meaningful to me. Like, ways of using these really difficult experiences to still continue to connect with people who could help us through it, or how we could learn from it, like figure out ways to learn from it. [00:38:34]

So I think that really was foundational, in a lot of ways. And in a way, it was just like second-wave foundational. Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: I think I'm interested to stay with that idea a little bit more too, in relationship to the different histories that you've pulled out. Whether it's working, collaborating, dancing with David and those stories, or advocacy around Ron, or reading to Ray. How does care advocacy, support, and those layers, come through?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, I would say that probably—I mean, there was something to be said about the fact that we were young, and that so much was coming at us on these very, very intense levels. You know, governmental level, and personal loss, and absolute fury over either the way that people were treated in the hospital, and/or the way people were treated by their families, and also the way that people were receiving and understanding certain kind of cultural—like, there were such big cultural shifts in the '90s, in terms of what kinds of work was being made and created, and who was able to cross over, and what experimental work was doing. Like, "What was the role of experimental work?" [00:40:21]

So all of this required incredible amounts of care and listening, or attention, observation. And also, width. You know? Like, how to create more and more space for these ideas, which were

developmental ideas. They weren't these wild ideas. You know what I mean? And I think that care—when I say that now, 25 years later, I certainly understand this kind of through line that seems like it's already starting to build. But I think at the time, it just—again, I think it taps back into the side where it felt like we were never meant to survive. And something about that was like, "Well, this is what we have, so we will take care of these freaks." You know? We were all very openly, you know, freak-flagging, freak-flag-flying [laughs] or however you say that.

And I feel like that sounds cheeky, but I think it really had this incredible weight. Like, there was a way that—being tattooed, you know, at that time, was really—the willingness to put oneself out there. And I felt like it was really important to protect that risk, or that candid way of living. And I felt like it was empowering people around them, but it was very hard to know what you were grabbing on to. [00:42:15]

I don't know, I'm probably rambling a bit. But I mean, I feel like that care thread traveled through in a lot of ways that had to do with, you know, how we would develop relationships, how we would create work, how we would make sure that there were certain conditions for work to be made, which meant working with and against institutions, opening up conversations in institutions that aren't usual ones. It meant not business as usual. You know, like, not falling into the same kind of schedule, as if every live performance work would have the same kind of conditions. I think some of those special conditions also created areas of respect and these more boundary-less potentials, in terms of, you know, how we would set up teaching settings. You know, like classes.

I mean, I think if I'm thinking of it—I guess I'm trying to think of it through the art context. Like, how that really—to me, that attention I think is why I find myself in Lia Gangitano's curatorial studies courses. Because that sort of traditional, or—sorry, the, you know, etymology of this kind of care work has always been present. You know? [00:44:16]

Like, I think there's something that ability to turn the prism just slightly in order to see the work deeper, or that kind of research, or the kind of slowing things down—like, all of that ends up having some kind of resonance in my own practice. It's something that I've come to appreciate as a value, which was before, I think, you could be easily—you know, and this was also a part of a kind of class-race thing, too. It's easy to be considered sort of slow and particular. Or it could be this sort of anti-feminist thing like, you know, that specificity could be kind of fussy. And you know, I feel like there's a lot of negativity that comes that strikes me, personally, in a lot of hard spaces. Because those are the same almost derogatory things that could come as a racial slur or a gender slur. You know? Or a queer—you know?

And so I think there's something about how protection, care, advocacy, boldness, and risk end up sort of taking up the same area. It's not like there's one over the other. I think they're deeply overlapping. And I think it comes from this kind of situation. You know? I think a lot of these things—even though I'm not sure how clear they are—but, you know, that we're learning a lot of lessons really fast, and catching and pitching a lot of balls, like, very quickly. You know, just—[00:46:01]

ALEX FIALHO: Intensity.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah.

ALEX FIALHO: It feels like—to throw into the pot there, with boldness and risk and—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. And it's hard to say that it was intense, because it just seemed like that's just all we had. So I don't even know if we knew how intense it was—or I knew how intense it was—until, like, you know, years later when things started to change. You know, I had to really close things down, like the Clit Club and working with David's company, officially, in that capacity. You know, there were like 12 solid years of these two things running parallel, including international traveling, opera house level touring, Clit Club hitting its peak in the middle of the '90s, just absolute nonstop Clit-Club-mania hitting after the mid-'90s.

Which I think is also very interesting, because some of the real juice and the real heart and the politics and the risk of the Clit Club really happened in those early years. Especially '92, '93, '94, so much went on, and a lot of this layering that we're talking about. And you know, expanding and learning through the work of Lovett-Codagnone and all of the artists that were coming through the Clit Club, and the ways that we were supporting people in their

work, and the way I personally was also making work through the Clit Club. All of that, with Ron and Company, and David, and the Clit Club, you know—and then somewhere in there, there was the movie with Catherine Gund. [00:47:54]

You know, she came along when we had been touring quite a lot, actually, and Ron received an incredible invitation from the Ex Teresa space in Mexico. And that, for us, was this pinnacle experience. I mean, everyone—you know, everyone—who had ever wanted to work with Ron, or had worked in the club scene with Ron, wanted to come to the show, or ended up taking part in the show, including Cathy Opie—Alex Binnie came from London.

At the time, Ron had finished making *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* and was moving on to the next work. And we had had these ideas that we had been working on, and we had started—I think we had already started performing in London. So at one point, one of the works—so we did *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* in this small chapel. That was an hour piece. And then, sort of [laughs] in the intermission, I jumped from *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* and then we worked in the garden. Alex and I did a duet, like, this kind of movement duet in the garden, and then we went on to do the next work in a whole other huge church space.

So that happened, but prior to that, I had talked to Catherine Gund, who was obviously part of ACT UP and our close set of friends. We talked about producing a film around this work. And particularly, not even focusing on the work. It was actually to really look at the group, because I thought that the group was so unique, and I had just grown to, you know—I was just completely—I don't know, I was made by this group. [00:50:16]

And so she came to do a set of interviews with everyone. And there was kind of a tension in the beginning, because Catherine really thought of this as a documentary that related to AIDS activism, and I think Ron wasn't really thinking through those terms in those days. And I felt like I was a little bit in the middle of that. You know? I felt like I was in my classic position of, like, being in-between. And Catherine did an amazing job with us in Mexico. She was so diligent and has incredible footage of that performance, but also the backstage of that performance, [laughs] the behind-the-scenes that I think is so important. And ultimately, there was just a way that there was—it was very hard to come to a centered place about how *Hallelujah* was going to come together.

And I had started to step away from those projects, and Catherine continued to keep documenting the group. I remember that Catherine had asked me several times to be involved in the movie, and I thought that I really didn't need to be involved in the movie because I had played so many roles in that work, and I thought it was clear what my role was. But because no one was every really talking about the work—and Ron was talking about it sort of through the point of autobiography but not necessarily the construction of the group and the work—she managed to convince me to get involved in that. And so that was the way that I closed a sort of chapter of work with Ron that would come back again some years later. [00:52:27]

But that kind of trilogy piece that was really—it played out. I think it played in maybe two more cities, after someone—somehow, they hired somebody who looked almost exactly like me, who was younger than me. She happened to be a dancer. I found that to be very disturbing, to be perfectly honest, but—and humorous, at the same time. [Laughs.][But it was a very interesting situation, because she was only hired to perform, and then someone else was hired and brought on to do the tour managing, and then someone else was hired to kind of help them do everything, tech, etc.–JT].

So I just was sort of interested in what it meant to step away and see what my role was in that group, because I was so committed to it, and committed to Ron, and to the group itself. I mean, I had the deepest love affair with Pigpen and Brian. And, you know, we had very particular roles, taking care of the backstage, and there was something about those two that—I felt like I found myself in these two people, and we were all quite close. I mean, everyone was very close, but there was a special bond within the three of us. [00:53:57]

But anyway, so here we are, in this multi-layered period. And, you know, towards the end of that—even though I was still with David—I was commissioned by queerupnorth, which was this art organization based in Manchester, England. And the director, Tanja Farman, had come to inquire about my work and commission my first piece, called *Mestiza–Que Bonitos Ojos Tienes*, in 1998. And this is one of these moments where only now, in retrospect—and probably in this [laughs] conversation—can I see how, you know, the idea was—I mean,

Tanja's perception was: "I've seen you with David, I've seen you with Ron, I've seen you with all of these other downtown New York choreographers working through the years, and I really want to support you in this possibility that you might be making a solo work." So that was the initial impetus.

But then, it turned out that she brought me to England and I wanted to workshop the piece. So I wanted to use sort of old-fashioned developments to create a new work. And I was also during this time—I should have mentioned—I was also doing body work. I started studying traditional Thai massage and I was doing some more classes in Oriental medicine and herbs. [00:56:02]

And I feel like this is starting to then tie in with this other level of deepening my understanding of care and a different kind of advocacy, and sort of somatic advocacy that was already being built in by my training with Barbara Mahler and Susan Klein, which was a kind of training that was unlearning all of these other traditional forms. And I was building in this other kind of physical, S/M style, heavier kind of body work, and then working with traditional Eastern, Thai massage techniques, starting to learn forms like Shiatsu and *Tui na*.

So it was just adding this kind of—it was adding. Because I could see it also in the kind of classes I would teach with David on the road, or the kinds of exercises that I was doing to prepare us for performing. And I also had a really intense yoga practice at this time. I was studying with Eddie Stern and was sort of part of his first cohort of Ashtangis.

So there's a lot of intensity, you're right. [Laughs.] There's a lot of practice and discipline. There's a lot of traveling. There are a lot of different types of people influencing my life. I'm also being inspired by a lot of different kinds of people and practices. So when it came down to coming to make my own work, I started making these kind of reverent installation works that had these durations to them. I don't know, I guess I was starting to experiment with all of these forms. [00:58:19]

And, you know, I did an installation that was based around sleep. And in the process of making a solo, I ended up using the theories around the five elements of Chinese medicine as these visual backdrops, and I was using some of the tenets around emotion and timbre and tone, to help me parse out some of the things I was feeling as a mixed-race person of color with the kind of class background that I had and experienced. And because of living in New York, I was actually even understanding what that class experience looked like to other people, because I think I didn't quite recognize what it was like for other people to think through more challenging living situations.

So anyway, in the process of making a solo, I ended up making a group work that was composed of durational practices. And they were very physical. There was a lot of repetition, and there was a lot of reverence and citation to a lot of the '70s feminist performance artists, as well as looking at other affinities with other forms of work that did not have to be autobiography, that did not have to fall under, like, narrative structure. And I just felt like I was really learning, kind of moving into a new form for myself. [01:00:27]

ALEX FIALHO: And that was *Mestiza–Que Bonitos Ojos Tienes*?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, yes. Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: Can you tell me just about what the form of that work took?

JULIE TOLENTINO: The form?

ALEX FIALHO: The duration, the—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And what engaged it?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. So it started out with this kind of humorous—so, obviously, I was very influenced by my Filipino grandmother. So the beginning of the piece actually started off—I made kind of faux Filipino food and desserts. [Laughs.] And we—the group, because I had a group. I was working with a group including incredible artists that now have their own practices, like Mem Morrison, Julie Stewart—I'm just trying to think who were the people in the very first—well, anyway. Oh, John Malpass. And there were two others that were—I don't

think that—well, anyway.

So it started off with a sort of gaggle of lolas wearing traditional Filipino dresses. So it started out kind of like a drag show, [laughs] basically. And it was very audience-interactive and it had this kind of tone that, you know, in 1998 there wasn't, like—you know, this was kind of a funny idea. [01:02:06]

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JULIE TOLENTINO: But very quickly, it went from that into these recorded telephone conversations that were actual conversations between me and my grandmother, where she was just concerned about me, but I was trying to tell her about my life as a young queer person in New York. You know, I guess that started out with this kind of autobiographical—just as an insert place. And then, while the conversation is going on, these lolas start changing from these bright traditional Filipino dresses into dark suits and umbrellas. So there were this—then a movement piece that would happen over a long period of time that was quite melancholic.

So the work was quickly turning—I felt like each scene was trying to turn or go a little bit deeper into some of the insides, I guess, of what I was experiencing. So, you know, each—like, there was a scene that introduced——there was some text, there was some movement. But all the while, every 15 minutes would start these new visual scenes that were organized by the color of these five elements.

And then slowly but surely, each of these elements would stay on the stage regardless of what was happening in the foreground. And it was sort of setting up another way to look at a life. Instead of a psychological point of view, it was more this kind of yin-yang kind of potential of balance. That's what I understood it to be, or that's what I thought it was. But really, yin-yang isn't really actually about balance. It's actually just about recognizing that with darkness comes another kind of light support, and with light comes the weight of the dark support. [00:02:15]

And so I think it was through the work and through this concept of the five elements that I felt like I grew myself sort of through the experiences of the last—like, whatever, those 12 years, you know—of being in New York. Or, like, being able to synthesize some of the things that had happened pre-New York, the things that had happened as a result of working with these artists, all those artists. And then, the way that I was kind of experiencing it was like—there was never going to be a balance. And there was never going to be an erasure of the darkness. Or I didn't have to completely fall into the darkness or something. So, I know that's not quite a description, but that's a little bit of, like—yeah, how I [laughs] remember it anyway.

ALEX FIALHO: How about this concept of mestiza, which I know is important, especially in childhood or identity formation. Where is it coming from for you and in what ways are you identifying with it?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Like now?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: I mean, I think that I—you know, this is coming directly from *The Bridge Called My Back*. You know, this is the way that, you know—

ALEX FIALHO: Cherríe Moraga?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Like, this work is—that's what I mean about that sort of—women of color, but in particular black and brown feminisms, were really always working on me. And I just didn't have the exact kind of empowerment in language for it. But I felt like I was playing out, and really really living out, some of these experiences. [00:04:11]

And, you know, recently—as I'm thinking about focuses for my projects—I think mestiza consciousness is kind of the central part of what my projects are. Not just in terms of racial constructs, but this way of being able to bring these kind of different disparities into view and to be able to create structures around disparities and use this kind of mestiza-ness, this cross-culturing, or this sometimes-congruent-but-not-necessarily—so, like, it's ways that lives overlap, that I think if you take that out of the racial construct, I think it's a really

interesting way to think about constructing communities and relationships. In particular, relationships.

So yeah, I think it's central, and I feel like I was working with it in a more crude way in 1998. But I feel like it's continued to always lay underneath all of the things that I'm talking about. And I think, again, that it ends up being part of that advocacy conversation, and that the way that those words—and we find each other in this kind of interdependence, as opposed to just sort of positioning things side-by-side and trying to find these kinds of—whatever. [00:06:05]

I mean, that's why I think sometimes "collaborations" is the wrong word. It's the word that sort of jumps over all of the nuance of what collaborating is like. You know?

ALEX FIALHO: Because?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Because there's an assumption, like, "Oh, we collaborated." And then, we know what that collaboration is. You know, as if—and I think that most collaborations are kind of perfectly and beautifully uneven. And it's unevenness that makes the collaboration so great. Because you learn this excitement for someone's ideas, or you feel the pressure of someone's ideas, or you feel the restraint of giving away a little power, or you feel the empowerment of being given some power.

And I think that that kind of inner workings, that kind of mestiza [laughs] experience, has nuance and it has—I think that's when I say "space-making." I think it gives space to each other, whereas a collaboration is like this small pact. You know, it feels like a suitcase and half of it is yours where it zips, and then the other half that's left over is yours, you know?

And I just don't think that that does justice to relationships, nor does it do justice to relationships that have to mold and change. You know, collaborations and collaborators have to allow each other to grow. And I think that when you just say a "collaborator," there's somehow this—I don't know, it's built in with something that doesn't feel fully true or something. I don't know. I don't know what the word is. [00:08:04]

ALEX FIALHO: Let's move back a little bit, actually, from mestizas to *Marks of My Civilization*. Because I think we're going to talk more specifically about some of the range of your practice and I think going back there might continue us to move forward.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay, that's great. That's great.

So in 1992, I was I was dancing at David Roussève's company. And Sondra Loring and I decided to do a duet together, just work together. And I was in a relationship with an artist who had gone to San Francisco Art Institute. Their name is Alistair Fate. And Alistair was a sculptor who made installations, these kind of [whole] room installations.

They were little—like, one or two rooms that could almost be some kind of domestic situation. It was almost like a domestic setting. And Alistair's work was really—it was so stunning for me to be this close to someone who was making work like this. In fact, Alistair was one of the artists who lived in the studio above Matthew Barney's, on the same block as the Clit Club. I think I had mentioned that before. [00:09:50]

Anyway, I felt very inspired by what role an installation—and I started to really research environmental and installation work. We were also living in a loft on Broadway. And I remember that I was really drawn to living in the space because it happened to be right across the street from where Ana Mendieta was very clearly thrown out the window.

And it was also impacting for me because prior to this I had lived on Cornelia Street in the West Village. And somehow we lucked into this apartment. I mean, I don't know how. I was living with Lola there at the time. And we had this really wonderful community of people around the Cornelia Street Café, including International Crisis. And we also lived a few doors down from where Freddy Herko flew out the window.

So I just have to say that, you know—without being overdramatic, I had already felt that I had been sort of tracing the addresses of these very faded losses. And it reminded me too—I mean, this reminds me too—that I had kind of correlated it to this accident that had happened in front of my house when I was a young person, probably nine years old, in front of the house that I lived in with my mother and sister. [00:11:53]

A car had hit a pole and the driver, this young man, went through the windshield. And he landed in front of our house. We had gone downstairs, and I remember seeing him, and my mom had told me to run in and grab a blanket from my bed. Like, she said, "Go get the blanket from your bed." So I remember—I have this very visceral experience of taking this blanket and wrapping it around this guy who was obviously not doing very well. You know, he had glass and there was blood everywhere. And there was a way—like, when I think about it—you know, when I recognized that there was this way that my domestic situation always included some kind of—I mean, the man died before the ambulance came.

And I remember my mom was trying to say that he hadn't died. And I just thought that was the wrong thing to do, because I thought he wasn't there anymore and that he would have preferred us to know that he had been able to escape that terrible situation he was in. But there was something about that happening at my house, and then these addresses that I had, that really had an impact on me.

But—okay, sorry, I know I was talking about the installation. But I feel like all of this information was really cumulative. And at that point, especially with the way that I had felt about Alistair's work and how impacting that was, and how it kind of unfolded all of that for me, it felt really important to make what was going to be my first work in New York with my collaborator—who is a very, very strong dancer, who also had already made her own first works—to add this installation quality. [00:14:05]

And so, in this piece, we used photo paper. This big photo paper installation with—and the entire dance was being bombarded by different women's health statistics. And we created a pace in them that sort of accumulated, and this dance was happening below. I can't tell if it was a good dance or a bad dance. [Laughs.] But it really was just this way that—I think we were trying to demonstrate the labor of trying to unfold information. Yeah. I mean, I don't know what else to say, but it was a really incredible experience, seeing dance work, knowing that I was interested in movement work that was going to try to step out and have a different form.

But that was a long time. I mean, it was sort of soon after that that I knew I was actually never really interested in making dance at all, actually. And that's why I think moving into building my works or my ideas, like in the Clit Club, thinking about durational performance, working out ideas that—you know, working with harnesses—these more durational-style activities—my own personal practice and interest in play piercing increased. So I was also experimenting with these different kinds of needle/blood/durational situations. So I feel like that all was, you know, being thrust out of the idea of making installation and environmental work. That is where it was working in parallel with physical practice. [00:16:25]

ALEX FIALHO: While we're in this early/mid-90s moment, there's two different contexts I want to ask to make sure we cover them. One is ART+. Can you just tell me about the work of ART+ and your role?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, ART+ was an interesting group because there were people coming and going. It was really important for it not to be a—there was something that was really built in right away from the beginning, which was, "If you're interested in being part of whatever the projects were, just figure out your role, come do the thing that you need to do. We don't have to have meetings." We didn't want to be bogged down. People were really interested in sticking with their creative practices.

And Aldo often mediated all of the projects that were going to happen. Hunter was also quite an instigator in all of it. So I felt like the real center happened around Aldo and Hunter. And depending on what kind of presentation it was going to be, whether it was going to be in a gallery, or if there was going to be a calendar being produced, or if it was—you know, there were also some environmental kind of practices there too, where, you know, Aldo had a separate project that's so amazing, that hopefully we will see, which is that he would take photographs of very particular walls around the East Village, like on a regular basis. [00:18:18]

So there was a way that we were also nurturing practices. Or, in those days, you know, when Ray was around, there was a way that he wanted to participate, whether it was with a text or—like, there was always sort of—incubator, I guess, is the way that I like to think of ART+. And, you know, I would say in those days I was—I mean, there were other people involved, like Leon Mostovoy, the artist formerly known as Tracy Mostovoy, photographer.

And I feel like all of us were just supporting whatever needed to be done. So whether that was a pay stub, or if it was making wall labels, or collecting works, or helping install, or whatever. That was kind of our role. I lived right across the park from Aldo, so it was—I feel like at any time, I would go over there and there was some sort of ART+ event or—not event, like a—you know, there was something that had to be done for someone's project.

So, you know, obviously—

ALEX FIALHO: What were some of the stakes of the work of ART+? [00:19:52]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Some of the stakes? That's a good question. I mean, I feel like there was a very particular kind of—I feel like Aldo, David, Hunter—there is a very particular kind of voice coming—yeah, that's a good question. I mean, different aesthetics, I guess I want to say. So it wasn't a certain kind of '80s art, East Village aesthetic. And it didn't have the same kind of market interest that—like, the artists weren't thinking about it in terms of market interest.

But I feel like it was just—like, it was nascent work in a lot of ways, around certain kinds of practices or trying new things. You know, I was making, like, text-based works that probably I wouldn't find so inspiring now. [Laughs.] You know, when I think about it, I think I probably—I think at one point Aldo gave me back some of my works, because they were just all cluttering Aldo's apartment. And I was really happy to find that I have the work, so that—because I didn't necessarily think that I wanted it to come out of the archive [laughs], you know, because it wasn't that strong of work. But I think I appreciated what I was trying to do. You know?

And I sort of felt like that with a couple of other works that I remember from the shows. And I remember that after David died, we had one of the pieces, and I'm just forgetting the name. But there was all these complications because we knew a lot about what the original work was. We had part of the original work. But then the work had sort of shifted, and the gallery had presented it in different ways. So there was issues about whether or not we could show the work the way that we knew it. [00:22:15]

But anyway—so there was also this—I feel like when I think about dealing with this kind of—you know, we were dealing with people's artworks who had just passed away. So there was this sensitivity about the work and—I don't know, I think it was very hard to be critical of what we were doing because the center of that time was during so much, a very, very dense period of loss that I feel like—I mean, yeah.

I guess I can't think of it in a critical—I don't mean critical like criticize, but it's hard to think of it as critical in terms of its standing, like what you're trying to ask about its stake. I just feel like that wasn't part of the language. Like, there was no stake as much as it was this kind of—perhaps its stake was a desperate need to be made, without the time to actually create the work and really really develop it. Maybe that's something about it.

ALEX FIALHO: Another context I wanted to ask about—which I've never heard you speak explicitly about in all the back and forth we've had over the years—but I'm curious just thinking about it, is Madonna and this book, *Sex*.

JULIE TOLENTINO: [Laughs.] I know.

ALEX FIALHO: That's part of the story—

JULIE TOLENTINO: I know it is.

ALEX FIALHO: —that we don't actually ever go to. So, let's go there.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Alright. Let's try.

ALEX FIALHO: I'm curious.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay.

ALEX FIALHO: At least some anecdotes.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So, I have good ones. Okay. So, because we did the *Safe Sex Is Hot Sex* poster—[00:24:06]

ALEX FIALHO: Cynthia Madansky?

JULIE TOLENTINO: No.

ALEX FIALHO: Oh, excuse me.

JULIE TOLENTINO: *Safe Sex Is Hot Sex* is Red Hot + Blue.

ALEX FIALHO: Right, obviously. [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: And it was [laughs]—thanks. It was shot by Steven Meisel. So he had invited us to this secret meeting. We weren't supposed to even tell anyone that we were having the secret meeting. So we went there. We met her. She told us about the project. And—

ALEX FIALHO: She?

JULIE TOLENTINO: She, Madonna. And I just have to say—and this kind of continues to this day, which sort of sometimes explains why I have no sense of humor. But I really just don't connect to pop culture. So probably the only time I even had any connection to Madonna was when, like, in 1982, I taught aerobics in a gym. And I used "Burning Up," whatever that song is called. You know what I mean? [Laughs.] Like, that's probably the only reference I had to her. And I had no idea that over the '80s she had turned into this kind of—whatever she became. And I think it was a little bit off-putting for her that I had no reference to any—

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: And I thought for sure I was ruining the gig. You know what I mean?

So anyway, we were offered some money to take part in some of these—you know, what was supposed to be her exploration of S/M. It wasn't necessary that we would set up a scene or something, but it was that there would be some things around and we would just sort of hang out together and see what happens. And that seemed like a very reasonable possibility. [00:26:18]

So anyway, we ended up going and they had—I had never in my life seen this many clothes.

ALEX FIALHO: What year is this?

JULIE TOLENTINO: I think it was 19—let's see, the book came out in '92 or '91, I think. God, this is amazing. I can't remember. Anyway, I think '92. And we shot it the year before. But anyway, we were in—

ALEX FIALHO: You had never in your life seen so many—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, I had never seen so many clothes before. Like, her wardrobe was the size of—the entire photo studio was just the wardrobe. Like, thousands of shoes. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of every kind of—you know, from accessory to underwear to coat to whatever. So on top of the fact that there was probably four leather shops worth of gear—you know, and then we would move into the studio. And it was just a studio with photo paper and us.

So what is interesting to me about the shoot [laughs] was crazy things would happen. Like, she would be away, we would just be waiting, and she would come in, and then I remember we were like, "What do you want us to do?" And I was like, "Do you like your hair pulled?" Right? Just anything to get her going.

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] [00:27:52]

JULIE TOLENTINO: And she was like, "Sure!" I remember this like it was yesterday. I went to go touch her hair, and I actually realized I had never touched blonde hair before. Also never that blonde hair. So then I started to touch it and I was like, "Is this a wig?" And she was so mad because I thought that her hair wasn't real, because it was so done or whatever.

So there was sort of a moment where I think—like, maybe it was supposed to be a little bit more—like, it was very obvious that there was something that she was interested in us. It would be hard I think—I mean, [laughs] I don't mean to sound that, like it would be hard not

to be interested in us. But, you know, I knew she was interested in us. There's no doubt.

But, you know, at first, it was very hard to connect to her. And like I said, it was hard because I also had never really understood her success or whatever. So in the end, what I like about the photographs is they ended up printing the set of contact sheets. So there is a way that if you just look at the contact sheet section of the book, you can see that it's real. I appreciated that they didn't sort of take out the realness and the awkwardness and the kind of goofiness. You know? And because of all that awkwardness and goofiness, there were moments where it sort of shifted and then the heat was kind of coming. But it took a long time to make that happen. [00:29:47]

We were supposed to just do that shoot, and then after that, we were invited to four or five other shoots. And a lot of them were with Tony Ward, who we knew from LA. And then, kind of interestingly—like, I don't know really how well they were getting along, but we were getting along with Tony a little bit more than—you know what I mean? So it was just these weird dynamics amongst us.

ALEX FIALHO: Who's we?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Oh, sorry. Alistair and I. It was Alistair Fate. Was it Alistair? Yeah, it was Alistair.

We're in many of the photographs in the book that you can't tell. Like, we're in the urinals, sort of as if we are—well, we're in the urinals. There's times where there's shots in [laughs] the gym locker room and we're actually inside of the lockers. So there's all these sort of hidden places where we're in, like—some of the shoots that were in the—what's the name of the club, that Follie's Club? Anyway, I can't remember.

I mean, what was funny was just how funny it was. What ended up being amazing for me, personally, was that after the shoot—she had come to the Clit Club a few times, but after the shoot, she had invited me to come to organize all of the performances for the debut of the *Sex* book and the *Erotica* album. Oh and also, I forgot to say that we also shot a video that was an X-rated video for the *Erotica* album. It's very hard to come by. But apparently, it's still out in the world. [00:32:00]

So that's another aspect to it that got submerged because of censorship and whatever. I mean, there was so much that was terrible about the book and her writing and—but just in terms of, like—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.] Like what?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Did you ever read the writing in the book?

ALEX FIALHO: Not recently.

JULIE TOLENTINO: It's remarkable.

[They laugh.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: I mean, I haven't read it since probably 1993 or whatever. Maybe it was 1993.

But anyway, I was basically the kind of the curator of this huge record release party at Industria Super Studios. And that was [laughs] an outrageous experience. I ordered, like, thousands of sterling roses, and bathtubs and all of these—we basically had this outrageous budget, just to set up all of these vignettes. So in a way, what had been developed from this early idea of installation or whatever, was also set up in this party. So everywhere you turned around, there was some kind of, like, whipping station, or—there was just all these these—and with very beautiful dancers. And all of the dancers, of course, came from the Clit Club.

So that was also—and, you know, in our circles around the night scene or whatever—that we had kind of a great command of great players in those scenes. So that was exciting. I mean, I felt like that was a personal achievement, to go from just being some body to someone who was—I mean, I was organizing performances. People were moving from—you know, like, there was this circulating. People were playing different roles. [00:34:09]

So it was an amazing way to see all of my organization work show up in on this other kind of

scale. And then, to be able to organize that many people and those many kinds of performances, and be coordinated with the overall design team and a record company's demands and everything. So one of the things that we had offered to [laughs] see was—because Alistair was a tattoo artist. So I found some guy through John and Alessandro and PORK. And I was like, "I'm looking for somebody who's willing to have their ass tattooed with Madonna's face as, like, a thing for the party."

And so, anyway, he did it. Apparently, he covered it up afterwards. [Laughs.] But he did do it and he was a huge fan of hers. And at one point, she was sitting down and she was letting people come talk to her. And I was sitting with her. And one of the things he said was like, "What would it take to work with you?" And then, she said, "Oh, well, you should ask her." Like, me. And I was like, "I think it helps if you actually aren't a fan." And it was just one of these things that you would think she would be really mad at me. But she thought it was really quite funny, and I thought it was really nice to be acknowledged for telling the truth, you know? So there was a nice moment. And I would say that was kind of a small bonding moment. But then soon after that, she ended up joining our teacher—she came to Eddie Stern's studio and then started practicing yoga with us. And so then I saw her every single day for years, actually, after that. [00:35:12]

But, you know, I think in the end, the book in that period wasn't her favorite period of her life. And, you know, she often doesn't talk about it—doesn't like to talk about it, apparently. Like, I've seen in some interviews or whatever. You know, I never really quite followed her work before or after. But it did happen.

ALEX FIALHO: How about in relationship to your own visibilities? You know, you're on the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* poster, *Safe Sex Is Hot Sex*, Madonna's *Sex* book. You were very visible at that moment. What—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Covers of magazines.

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: All the magazines. [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: Exactly. Like what? Like, which ones?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Let's see. I was on the cover of *Out* magazine a few times. Also, there was another publication that I probably should remember at the time that I can't remember. I was on the cover of this lesbian magazine called *Diva*. I think I was on *On Our Backs* at some point. I mean, I think I had a lot of body out there.

ALEX FIALHO: Can I ask you to reflect on that?

JULIE TOLENTINO: You know, I think—I wish I could tell you that it, like—there's something about me today that has this—let's see. I have to think about it for just one second.

ALEX FIALHO: No rush. [00:38:00]

JULIE TOLENTINO: I would say that I don't know what the—I'm just going to say it, like, in scare quotes. "I don't know what the return of that was." Because I wasn't, like, an exhibitionist. Do you know what I mean? Like, I just happened to not have clothes on. Or I just happened to feel comfortable with who I was with doing whatever I was doing, whatever it required. So, there's—

ALEX FIALHO: I even made notes that you earlier yesterday were saying, you know, you thought of yourself as shy and insecure.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right.

ALEX FIALHO: You know? So—

JULIE TOLENTINO: It continues. And it continues to say, like, "How do you feel that comfortable with your body and still be insecure?" You know, it's kind of an oxymoron. But it's also, like, "How could you be out there so much and still feel somewhat illegible or invisible?" I think to this day, I still have a sense of this kind of invisibility. And I feel empowered by it in a different way now. And it shows in the work that I make now.

But I think it has a lot to do with my interest in how spectacle plays a role. You know? Like, there's a way to really stand out and make an impact that doesn't necessarily always have to take on a solid shape. And I think I'm interested in, like—I don't know, these things that kind of bubble up and then make some kind of impact and then diffuse, but still keep moving, like molecules doing this thing of gathering, making an impulse and then kind of scattering and then somehow regenerating. [00:39:55]

There's something about that that is still spectacular, you know? It still has impact, but it doesn't necessarily keep coming back to be the same thing over and over again. I mean, I think the hardest thing about my experience of that thing that we're talking about is that a lot of times, people don't know those same people are me. So there is something that's weird about also having your image kind of scattered in a way that doesn't retrieve back into being, you know, this one person.

And then of course it happens more and more and more as I get older. I look less and less and less like I used to, on top of the fact that not only do I not look like that image, but I really don't look like the others. You know what I'm saying? I don't know how to describe—I can tell I sound confusing. [Laughs.]

But I guess I just don't—those didn't leave imprints on me. You know what I mean? Those were just things I could do that seemed like they had a bigger cause. And I think that it relates to having a lot of experience behind the scenes. You know? And being able to see things in others and want those things to really come to the surface and support that. I feel like it requires a little bit of that—not always being the same person, you know—in order to connect with other people. Although being the—you know, obviously, sincerely. [Laughs.] Sorry.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's take a little pause.

JULIE TOLENTINO: [Laughs.] Yes.

[Audio break.]

ALEX FIALHO: So while we're in this early '90s moment, again, I wanted to make sure we discuss the Lesbian AIDS Project's *Safer Sex Handbook*.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Didn't we talk about it?

ALEX FIALHO: Not in any particular detail, so—[00:42:00]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay, sorry. I couldn't remember.

ALEX FIALHO: —I'm curious how it developed, or in what context it was distributed, your cooperation with Cynthia—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay. That's great.

ALEX FIALHO: —Madansky.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. So I knew Cynthia from ACT UP. She also came to the Clit Club. And I believe we started talking about the—for some reason, I feel like it might have started with her approaching me to maybe write—or maybe some research that she might have been writing about. There was something she was writing about. And through the conversation, I think that—sorry, I am not exactly sure how it started.

I seem to have the recollection that she had been in conversation with Amber Hollibaugh, who was running Lesbian AIDS Project. And I think that there was a conversation that maybe led to the possibility of Cynthia writing something. And in conversation with Cynthia, probably at the Clit Club, we started talking about sex-positive sex practice and safer sex practices for women, and that sort of opening up into, like, what that could look like, and this idea that since women were also in denial of even being able to contract AIDS, there was also that following on one side. [00:43:57]

The other side was, you know, lesbians who didn't think it was applicable if they were monogamous. Like, there were all of these issues that were also coming up that were more universal, like just for the general public. So we realized that if we wanted to make something that was specific to lesbians, that it was more important to focus on a sex-

positive, body-forward, and also bodies-of-color-forward kind of—and also, you know, common, everyday language as being a way to entice people to get interested as a way to get educated.

So it started with us finding the language, like finding a tone in the language that would feel familiar, evocative, and also sort of legible to lesbians. And there was—I'm sorry, the reason why I'm struggling right now is because recently, I did a class on "The Queer '90s," and I focus quite a lot on this section, about this exact topic. So I feel like I've said it already. So, I'm just sort of struggling with a regular kind of train of thought. So I apologize. [00:45:53]

But anyway, so what we did was we went back and forth and made just millions of edits trying to find the right language. And then we created a handbook that was a fold-out handbook. And so one side was—and we also created these chapters or these sort of pages that were ways to use the body, as opposed to centering the apparatus. Like, instead of centering the condom, it was more about, you know, fingers, fists, or penetration. Or ways that you might find yourself with a condom is if you're thinking about penetration rather than, "What does a condom do, and where does a condom go?" You know, it was a little bit of a device to help people find the information in a different way.

So the handbook itself was organized by body parts. Inside, there was also photographs and also hand-drawn pictures. And I think at the time, there was still a lot of question marks around the use of a dental dam, and the necessity and the potentials for a dental dam beyond HIV transmission. And it was also sort of uncomfortable to figure out how to use it. So we found other ways to reconfigure the dental dam as sort of a toy, so that it could be used and it could be considered and there could be some familiarizing. So there was these other kinds of, you know, mechanisms. [00:47:47]

It was packaged inside of a plastic zip bag. And inside, there was a glove, a condom, and a dental dam, and lube. And I have managed to hold on to, I think, one or two of them. And for the record, everything has a shelf life. Just remember that everything has a shelf life [laughs] because I think one of the lubes exploded and became its own other material. Like, [laughs] the lube itself became another kind of plasticine or something. And I think the latex is pretty much dusty by the time we opened it again after, you know, 15 years.

Once it passed through GMHC and the Lesbian AIDS Project, they approved an incredible run of the packets. And we had free reign to do the distribution. There was possibly a grant for the production. But, you know, there really was no money involved. So in terms of the labor and the distribution, that was done by Clit Club folks. We made sure that it was not only in our club, but in other lesbian bars, which obviously opened up dialogues for other lesbian bars who didn't have the same kind of open nature, or maybe people who wanted to be more discreet. You know?

So that was sort of a provocative campaign in that it wasn't something you could just tuck in your pocket. It was definitely something that you were taking home. So that also politicized whoever it was who was taking part in it, and also the people who were distributing it. So I think that had a really important impact. And then we really had a few years where we had access to them. [00:50:15]

I even remember when the last two or three boxes were delivered to the Clit Club, and it was like the end of an era. I could sort of feel that there probably wasn't going to be a re-run of the materials. And I just remember marking that in my mind, that we had definitely done something with this campaign, but on a level that was not going to be easy to track. So there was no way to bring that kind of material survey result back to the organization and the institution. So in some ways, even though it was kind of a quote-unquote lost project, because it wasn't surveyable, I think it was very powerful in terms of what it was doing, how it was saying it.

We had so much criticism. In fact, I think Cynthia ended up writing an essay about the pushback and the feedback around the project. I have to find that, because it's a really good piece. It is probably the only material result of the project. But people were definitely piqued and also offended by, like, the idea of fisting, you know, that there would be this kind of harmful activity. This somehow masculinist, dangerous material. I mean, dangerous activity was being promoted in the form of a *Safer Sex Handbook*. So that was kind of, you know, trippy. [00:52:14]

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you for detailing.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah [laughs], no problem..

ALEX FIALHO: Let's, I think, jump forward a bit—just for the sake of covering ground—to some more of your practice. I think it's a good opportunity to talk about *For You* and Participant and Lia. I think that's the next stop on our progression in talking about your work specifically.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Okay. That sounds good. I would like to—I mean, if it's okay—

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah, of course.

JULIE TOLENTINO: —there's just a few people—you know, I think this is just bound to happen. There's a way that people are kind of pulled back through once I start thinking back to things. But I was thinking about, like: Who were people that were influential that weren't directly related to Clit Club, for example, but have these arcs around our relationships, you know, back to Ray, and how those were impacting.

And I was thinking about friends like Kim Christensen, who really opened up disability politics to me and also was able to help me understand the politics of pain on the level of this different kind of temporality. A different way of recognizing that there isn't simple and easy answers towards the physical experience, which I thought was very impacting as I related that to my experience with my sister, but also my experience as a dancer, which, you know, has this kind of masochistic, sadistic [laughs] discipline to it. [00:54:32]

And I just remember that having kind of an impact. But also, like, very inspiring other folks that were also in the public realm, that sometimes could be connected to the Clit Club. Like, Jewelle Gomez I felt was really a voice for our generation and a lot of poets in her vicinity. And I don't know, I just know that there's—I don't know, I was thinking of Jewelle and Urvashi Vaid and Kate Clinton. You know, these people that had this incredible leadership and also a great tolerance for ideas around intersectionality in those days. And that I felt really played into what we were trying to do with the Clit Club, and what we were trying to do in terms of trying to integrate our experiences as young people. And, you know, still—especially in those early '90s, you know—really coming to grips with the experiences that we were having. [00:56:21]

So it's hard to explain why I feel like all of those names go together. But I feel like there were so many raw edges that it really took a lot of different kinds of politics or insistences or these very, very nuanced ways of understanding peoples' lives. You know, from Kim's careful reading and kind of education to Kate Clinton's sharp humor and ability to really put things on a head. So, anyway, I just appreciate that we can talk about them.

Yeah, and then of course it's important for me to mention Lori E. Seid, who was a downtown icon, is a downtown icon. Lori worked with, you know, every—well, Lori was a central figure in PS122 in the late '80s and '90s, and worked with dancers and performance artists. I mean, anyone that you can think of who performed in those days, Lori was always there, extremely supportive in all areas of technical, stage management, producing. I mean, Lori is the second—like, Lori Seid equals advocacy. You know, deep deep deep understanding, a lot of patience for people with different kinds of practices. [00:58:09]

And Lori, you know, just kind of made everything happen and wasn't really afraid of the demands that people had, whether that related to their health or their creative practice. And I think there was something that I learned from Lori all of these years, about one, stamina, to maintain this dedication and fortitude [laughs] around being involved in performance and these kinds of advocacies and activisms. You know, between AIDS and cancer and tragic drug deaths or suicides that—you know, I feel like Lori's one of these people who can really maintain and—I don't know, I think I want to strike this idea of maintain. I mean that Lori, in her capacity to take in these challenging situations and tragic ones, has always been a huge inspiration. [00:59:48]

And she's one of those people who also crosses over between friend, advocate, professional, friend, advocate, professional. That has always inspired me. And also, I have seen the tolls it can take, which of course is probably not something that she would want to be visible. But I think she has come to learn that that vulnerability is also a strength. And I appreciate that she's been really open with me through the years, kind of leading me and teaching me

about that.

ALEX FIALHO: The way that you're holding space for those folks actually, to me, speaks to the work *For You* at Participant in some ways. And the way you just previously formulated how you figure in Lia Gangitano's curatorial studies courses in the way that that level of care comes into your practice. Maybe that's a segue.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I think that what had developed—and I probably started to insinuate with my early attempts at making work—was that dance often didn't have a satisfaction to me. There was something about the choreographic—I don't know, there's an opaqueness to dance that I felt like I couldn't join, I couldn't participate in. And I didn't understand the language of that. And I think in particular, I felt the dance community's grief. [01:02:06]

[END OF TOLENT18_2OF2_SD_TRACK02.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: In fact, today I was in class with Barbara Mahler, and I was talking to her about this time. And I asked her what she remembers the most from class. And she started to talk. And I realized I was interrupting her, saying, "Oh, you must have felt the disappearance of people." And she just jumped ahead and she said, "What I"—she sort of stopped my interruption and she said, "No, it was how many people would leave class and cry in the hallway." And that there was really nothing she could do, so she just continued to teach.

And then I was reminded of—every time I come back to New York, I take her class. And I always have this intense—like, tears, tons—like always crying [laughs] in that class. And I remember that from back then, because I couldn't imagine how I was having all of the experiences that I was having. I was actually never leaving the room. I was just—you know, tears were flowing. But what she said today was, like, "Oh, it's because we were processing all this stuff in our bodies." And when I come back, that's one of the things that happens. I can't figure out why I cry. I always think it's because I just am missing New York or something.

Really it comes down to the fact that, in a way, it just revs up the fullness of life at that time. But I guess I'm saying that because there was something that had to do with that dealing with grief or being very frustrated about all the demands that were on us. And then going into a class where we were just, like, hanging over, trying to stretch our backs. It just didn't seem like—I knew that I needed that kind of work. Like, I knew my body needed that kind of work, but it was very, very hard to reckon that dance discipline with the life that was actually being lived, the lives that were being lost, and also the way language was so difficult then. And now, certainly, for me. [00:02:37]

So through those years, I felt like I was slowly asking myself to let go of some of these dance considerations. These goals that I had or these things that I thought were necessary or that I thought were evocative just weren't quite enough. And I started to really render myself as a person who was not meant to be a choreographer, who has an interest in this form, but I didn't think that I wanted to participate in that form.

And so after making *Mestiza*, I also was commissioned by The Kitchen to make a piece called *The Bottom Project*, which also developed into this other smaller project called *The Point of Diminishing Return*. And they were, again, these more performative projects that didn't have a lot of play. I think people were really wondering what I was doing. It's very possible the work was not strong. But I appreciated in myself [laughs] that the work was not dance. [00:04:01]

And I realized too that the setting wasn't always conducive for me, the theater itself. So I felt very fortunate that I, through John Lovett and AlessandroCodagnone, met Lia Gangitano and started talking to her about my beef with dance and also my interest in seeing the work in another kind of setting. And so, Lia had opened the space on Rivington and she invited me to sort of have a residency. I don't think we called it that, but she was like, "Just use the space up there."

And so I developed a relationship to the space. I started to learn the timing and the way that an art space worked, as opposed to a theater. And I was really interested in creating a more intimate setting for movement-based work that allowed the rigor to be viewable, and to allow the smell and tactile-ness of what it is to work with your body to be part of an artwork

or part of a presentation or an exhibition.

And then that led to, a year later, the work *For You*, which was a one-to-one performance, also not a form that was that well-used at that time, or utilized. And that one-to-one work really directed its energy—the work directed itself towards the agency of the participant, so inverting a lot of the dance tropes or the dance methods. [00:06:08]

So the audience member would call the gallery to decide when they wanted to come see the show. When they came to see the show, they could choose from a list, so they could choose their own music. When they came into the space, they had one spot where they would start, but there were video instructions on the wall that gave people the chance and different opportunities to move around the room and to apprehend the work in all of these different ways.

Interestingly, it was a split-level space in the gallery, so when you came up the stairs, the gallery itself was actually completely open. But I used those plastic slats that were used in the Meatpacking District, you know, to keep the cold in. So I created this space that you could see through, but not really, because of the overlap of those plastic pieces. So you could kind of watch the piece from the mezzanine or the second landing between the upper gallery space and the lower gallery space. But it was a private space.

And when people would enter, they entered sitting next to a bed. And there was the person, me, in the bed just with my eyes closed. So I set up that sitting-by-the-bed setting that could be many things. But it was the place I knew the most. You didn't have to talk, necessarily, but it was important that that time was acknowledged. And then the work would continue and one of the ideas behind the piece was—oh, I worked with a choreographer so that I wasn't responsible for the choreography. [00:08:20]

I worked with Ori Flomin, who also lives in the East Village, and danced for Steven Petronio and now does his own work. He made the piece of choreography, but the idea of this work was that it was not only one-to-one—and it was a one-to-one piece that would last about 15 or 20 minutes—but that I would work over an eight-hour traditional labor time, with a half-hour lunch break. And I set up the space, performed in the space, and then reorganized the space. Oh, and ran my own lights in the space, and then reset the place, and then started again with a new person. That was the whole cycle.

So it had duration and one-to-one in the same—plus, at one point in the performance, I picking up the affect that was sort of coming from the participant, or whatever exchange was happening between us. And then the song that the person chose would then miraculously [laughs] start playing in the middle of the piece. And what I did was I took the choreographic idea, and the last—you know, whatever the duration of the song—was material that I would pick up from the exchange over the last 15 minutes, and I would improvise to that. So it was my first public performance of improvisation, which I found really vulnerable. It was a very vulnerable experience, and very, very [laughs] scary experience. [00:10:08]

But it was so exciting, because it had this liveness to it that I hadn't experienced before. But on top of all of that, you know, this was accumulating. The accumulation of all these experiences, having to perform the choreography and then the improvisations, was a really challenging experience. But I felt like it was really starting to point towards these rigorous exchanges I was already sort of archiving or I had held.

Soon after that, I had also worked with Lia on another work for Performa, that was called *A True Story About Two People*. And that was a performance for one person at a time in a mirrored room with a fresh grass floor. And people came in to slow dance with me over a 24-hour period. And people could stay as long as they wanted. That was also just very interesting because people came into—oh, and I was blindfolded. So people would come into the space and they would just talk to me. And I didn't quite expect that to happen, so it was something that I had to reckon with right away.

And there were, you know, just a myriad of responses. A lot of people were interested in talking about the construction of the piece. A lot of people were talking about the fact that they would come at two or three o'clock in the morning, people I didn't know. And they would leave Brooklyn and come to the Lower East Side because they had heard about this performance, and they didn't want me to be alone. Which is just kind of an amazing thing to hear from someone who was a complete stranger. [00:12:18]

And I think that what's different for me is that these things that they were telling me—although I was surprised by what they were saying, I don't think that I performed these durational works to receive their—I mean, I'm not looking to test the public's empathy or something. But I'm always very surprised by people's engagement. You know? And how people engage.

I mention that because I think that there's a way that this kind of work is perceived as this personal, experiential—like, for the artist. And I think that I'm less interested in the fact that someone was trying to come take care of me, as much as I am amazed by a person's construction of a thought like that, and that they would actually do it and show up and be willing to talk about it. You know what I mean? Which is really different than someone like me feeling special because someone came to see me who was a stranger, you know? That's a form of celebrity-building rather than being focused on the practice and the nature of a construction like that. [00:14:04]

ALEX FIALHO: For me, there's something very AIDS-related about the form or the—I don't know, I'm trying to wrap my head around it, and I can't get there.

JULIE TOLENTINO: In this piece?

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, I feel like it is—because there's a cognitive side to my—I think when you're actively taking part in a demo, you know what to do. You know where to face, you know the words, you know the actions and the impact that your action is there for. Like, you know what you're there for.

But at the same time, you're open to the outrageous potential, you know, negative potential and positive. And it's, again, where the risk of putting yourself out there, you know, putting yourself on the line, how it intermingles with the very personal reason that you're there. And I also imagine that when you're HIV-positive and you are literally fighting for your life in this way where every cell is pushing towards this expression, I think there's something—there's a way that by me removing my identity, by us not contacting through eyes—you know, this, like, knowing—in a way, it puts the realness of two bodies together. [00:16:28]

And I think that that's something that happens when you're in an advocate situation, where you are speaking on behalf of someone else, or when you're trying to be able to articulate these things for oneself so that someone else can hear you and really know what your needs are or what your wishes are. There is something about that, I think, in that piece.

I mean, the title of the piece comes from a Cookie Mueller short story that is actually a teenager-y kind of love story. And the way that I made a tribute to the title and to Cookie was by embedding car speaker stereo—like, a speaker that has a really different sound than a regular speaker. So there's these car stereo speakers that are embedded inside of the grass and inside of this small space. So there's this sound of crickets, like sort of outdoors, you know, like late night outdoors with the sounds of cars going by, with love songs in them. So there's some way that there's kind of a naïve-ness to the sound, in a way. [00:18:00]

And then also maybe something else that has this kind of aspect—this kind of inner, outer, internal, external aspect that maybe is what you're referring to—I used two-way glass for the walls. So from the outside, you can look in and you can see everything. Or you can, you know, you can see the action that's going on inside. But on the inside, you can only see yourself. Because the inside space becomes a completely mirrored room.

And not only do you see yourself, but because even though I'm there in the room with you slow dancing, your eyes are—you know, I'm blindfolded and all you can see is you looking at your reflection. In multiple, you know? So I feel like there is a metaphor there that possibly sort of circulates around some of the experiences around AIDS.

ALEX FIALHO: Let's talk about *Sky Remains the Same* and the question of archive and also this soft record. You said you hope it's the piece that you're known for.

JULIE TOLENTINO: [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: In the future.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Right. Well, I think the piece's conceit is challenging, but it sort of proposes the body—like, my body—as an archive, or a body as a container of record. So I think that in a simplistic term, you can see this idea in all works of citation, you know? [And certainly the consideration of dance archives and also to counter this idea of re-performance. –JT] [00:20:17]

And all of those things, I think, have their own space and time. And people are dedicated to those kind of ideas. But I feel like my interest is not in these repurposing of works or re-performances or the most likely representations. I am more interested in the artist-to-artist relationship, and also allowing for time with an artist. And certainly in the case of these first five artists in this first series, these are artists that have had some kind of impact on me—definite impacts on me—and who I consider beloved and influential artists.

And I think that to ask someone to return to a past work is a rare experience. You know, most people don't have time to reconsider a work, certainly works of performance. You know, when they're done, they're sort of done. You know, some artists actually will only perform a piece once and then they move on. So to ask someone to—that I'm interested in this project as their archivist, and that the work would be archived in my body, it's been interesting because the artists seem to know immediately—without me saying much more—what piece. There's something always comes right away, which I find really fascinating. [00:22:20]

And then as we talk—like, sometimes I don't know what piece they're thinking, or if they're like, "I know what it is." And sometimes they'll tell me, sometimes they won't tell me right away. But the idea is that the archiving occurs at the point that we start to really dive into how they want me to archive it and how they want to talk about it. And that conversation is the archiving moment. So the first part of it is just retrieving the work from their minds, or from their archive, or looking at video or photographs. You know, all the ways that one might bring a work forward.

So that exchange happens with me. And though I'm not interested in being, you know, the card catalogue—

ALEX FIALHO: [Laughs.]

JULIE TOLENTINO: —I think that I'm interested in hearing all the details and giving an artist a chance to sort of funnel the information in. And like an archivist, allow—you know, there is a subjectivity to the archive and to the archivist that is, I think, up until recently, something that people never talked about. Like, as if the archive just had the facts. And of course, you know, you pull that information and you do sift through it with objectivity, but with some deep subjectivity too. And so I'm trying to play with those kinds of ideas. I don't really know how they work or if they work effectively. But the idea is that this archiving process happens and there's an acknowledgement of those aspects. [00:24:24]

And when we talk about the work, we talk about why that particular work should be the piece. And then we discuss the potential for it to have a life through my body, for some kind of external expression, let's call it. So that means it could mean that we make a new performance, or maybe if the person wants it to be quote-unquote re-performed, that's up to them. All of that is up to the artist. But it could come out in multiple ways.

And then ultimately, one of the things I'm really interested in is that I start to build a collection in my body. So I'm kind of interested in the archiving, but also this potential of a collection. And considering that I imagine this is a lifelong project, I wonder what happens to a collection and an archive that works in a body that is, you know, ultimately a disintegrating body. And I think that it opens up a lot of doors and a lot of considerations for art and art-making and the richness of these relationships and historical accounts. [00:26:06]

The artists that I'm working with now are—I work with Ron Athey on his *Self-Obliteration #1*. I worked with Lovett-Codagnone, and they asked that we would work on three different works that occurred in 2017 [sic] when the New Museum offered me a residency to work on this project. And that resulted in both—

ALEX FIALHO: 2013?

JULIE TOLENTINO: '13. And that was a combination of an exhibition, talks, open rehearsals,

and panels. And then the works themselves, the three works, were expressed in videos. One work was actually transformed into a tattoo. We asked a tattoo artist to come and perform these bloodline tattoos on museum staff, just to talk about the imprint, the archive, the fact that things also don't stay present in the archive and disappear. And what a bloodline tattoo is—it's a tattoo using a gun and the tattoo needle with no ink in it. And it just creates the mark. [00:27:46]

And then the participant is welcome to push ink into the wound, depending on whether or not they wanted a mark or not, you know? And of course the mark would also change, depending on the type of skin that they have, if they keloid or not, how they scar, how much they could accept or not accept the ink. So it just deepened the conversation about the archive and also the institution's role in maintaining and sustaining the archive through labor, which is also very complex.

Stanley Love is also meant to do this project. And you know, we threaten to try to find time to do that. Franko B. has offered a work to me, and he's—you know, it's pretty much a work that I could probably do any time. I know what he wants from that, but we're not quite through the whole process because the process includes these conversations and a contract and some conditions. And then also David Roussève is a person on the program.

But, you know, I'm challenged by working with a dancer, because there's already this transmission idea. So I'm thinking through that and I'm also asking David to also think through what the output might be. So that's also in the works and always in conversation and, you know, currently in conversation. And then I think that there will be a next set of artists that I'll put together for a different set of criteria. I mean, still influential people, but probably I will work differently around the gender configuration. [00:30:05]

And I think that it's also fair to say another aspect of *The Sky Remains the Same* is to identify also for myself this kind of labor and complex thinking and consideration around each of the artists' work. And I keep thinking about, like: How do I make myself legible—having this honor and beloved and reverent feeling about them and their work—but then also trying to recognize myself and my own practice alongside of these artists that I have worked with in the past?

And, you know, I think that there's something to be said about what I'm doing to point to these white, gay, male artists, in order to see me. Because I feel like it's the only way to do that. And it's challenging, but I think that that's part of the front line that you experience when you're trying to move the edges of these conversations that are difficult. I wouldn't say that those artists are not in their deserving spaces, but I'm also wondering: How do you see the labor of the others underneath their practices? And the fact that they have the privilege of working with many many people on many many bodies, and the names fall away?

And so I think it's important to find mechanisms—even though they're sharp, sometimes, like this—to be able to say, "Oh, right, there's other ways that you are known. And we should find out." And also that we shouldn't do that when people are already dead. You know? Like, I think we're all going to do that dying thing. But I think it's really important to have some of these more rich conversations and to challenge people to keep remembering people and bringing other artists and other contributors and critics to the front. [00:32:20]

ALEX FIALHO: That's really powerful to hear, and I think it also points to one of the reasons why I felt—and continue to feel, in nearing the end of this oral history—I feel like your perspectives are really essential to this project and across many different arenas.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: I want to talk a little bit about the work *Honey*. And I think it feels fitting too, because J M de Leon shared their thoughtful reading of that work with me. And one of the readings that came through was this idea of time, and a request or a hope for more time. And I feel that right now, as we reach about the last half hour or so on this oral history, it's like, "Oh, there's always so much more that can be done or said in these—in any context, really." But I'm curious to hear about excess and sweetness and Pigpen and *Honey*. [00:33:27]

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yes. Okay, so, *Honey*, just the quick logistics. *Honey* is a duet that employs 50 pounds of honey and it is distributed between us. It's between us via a line of 11 gold threads. And on that line, Pigpen sits actually on a hunting blind that's sort of stripped

down, which is this large metal structure, and crafts using a squeeze bottle, crafts this honey into globes, like these little globes that move down the line. And I wait underneath wearing kind of a leather skin dress. And I'm standing in a small, black, low container. There's just one action, you know: Craft the globes. And I just wait with my mouth open for the honey to drop into my mouth.

So there is meant to be an overt kind of poetics to that image, that direct image. And it's complicated by the fact that that line of honey doesn't stop for up to or over five hours. It's complicated by the fact that my head is in a receiving position. Like, my mouth is in a receiving position, my mouth is open. But it's in the shape of an O, which is both an ecstatic, orgasmic, you know, receiving state, but it's also the exact state of one's mouth when you die. Like, your mouth always—mostly—well, usually—opens. [00:35:48]

So I'm pulling those kinds of ideas together while trying to stay steady as the honey's dropping into my mouth and I am also trying to ingest the honey. There's also the fact that the honey continues to build weight and momentum, so it starts to move more quickly. It still stays in these globes, but the line itself gets thicker and thicker.

So there is a way that the honey starts to fall out of my mouth and it's slowly moving down my body. So as time goes on, the way that I swallow is based on the score—there's a score—I create a score from the way that the honey moves on the line. So as the honey moves around, that sort of gives me a clue of how and when I will swallow. In my score, it gives me a sense of when I can make an adjustment in my body, to be able to keep accepting the honey. Because I have to keep moving even though I'm fairly still. I have to keep making little adjustments in order to not slip or—you know, because my head is back and my back is tilting back, I can easily get disoriented.

Other things that are happening is that—you know, the sweetness is probably [laughs] the least thing that I am thinking of because it's almost as if the honey starts to move past my palate and it moves just directly into my—like, it's more about it going into my body, and also it falling out in a way, and also covering the palate and the taste buds and the place where you would actually taste the honey. [00:38:04]

So I start to lose my connection to the material while the material starts to work on me. So it's creating this stickiness all over the place. My hair is starting to stick to my body, which makes kind of a glue to my back which makes it impossible to do those movements that I'm describing. And the slow accumulation of the honey starts to also disrobe me, and it also heats up my body because the honey itself is a kind of a heating agent when I swallow, internally and externally.

So there's this heat that's being generated that also reorients the skin, the leather skin. So the dress actually starts to widen—also kind of heat, as the skin—and then start to fall off and move off of my body. So I basically, in this work, am just asking for time to allow the process that's really happening. Like, there's only one swallowing. We call that the choreography of the throat. And there's one action of squeezing the honey down the line.

And there is something about that directness and the incessant—you know, that kind of intensity that is always coming—that we're just looking at, and experiencing, and putting into view, and also trying to manage. So the way that the management happens is that I hold two or three analogue audio recorders in each hand. And one of them has the song by Chavela Vargas that's called "Soledad." [00:40:25]

And that song—she spends most of her time in the O sound. So it sometimes gives me a lot of comfort to hear that. Like, the support of the O just goes right into my jaw. But what happens is the stickiness is also affecting this outdated technology. But I try to play it and then record it in the other recorders, and then play it and record it. So I'm basically trying to distribute the sound throughout—it's only once in one recorder, and then I'm trying to get it into the other recorders and back so that we—like, it's actually trying to fill up while it's overwriting the others. Do you know what I mean? But it takes a little bit of my mind to have to remember who is the recorder and who is the receiver. And it starts to get very mixed up. You know, I sometimes get confused. And eventually, the honey sometimes freezes the machinery.

So I feel like I'm using these very, very heavy metaphors to just articulate—well, I think I've just never really quite named exactly, but I am trying to articulate the kind of directness of

communication between people. And the loss of information, the stickiness of it, the libidinal quality and the kind of sensuality of what communication can be like or what communication offers. [00:42:24]

And also, I think that I'm expressing the opposite of that, which is the difficulty of being able to speak, the distance between people, the ways that you can hear what you want to hear. You know, like it can just be a one-way receipt. The way that the thing that you're crafting kind of ends up in a whole other state. So I would like to think of that work as always working on me, and working on us, as challenging as it is to be a viewer.

But, you know, I think that the piece really offers something that I don't mean to happen, which is that, you know, there is some suffering in that piece. So I'm not afraid of the suffering. I mean, I'm not afraid of demonstrating or—but I'm not performing. I'm not affecting the performance of it. I'm just allowing the real thing that's happening to happen.

And I try not to complain about it because I made it. [Laughs.] And I think that's a really important aspect of the way that I'm also thinking about these challenging and slightly masochistic performances, is that I am working with them. I'm not just demonstrating them as something I can do. I think that's really important. [00:44:00]

ALEX FIALHO: Yeah. I love the *Honey* work. I love the visual of the *Honey* work that I've seen and then also the readings that come from it I think are really evocative.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: I think it's interesting—

JULIE TOLENTINO: Actually, can I just say one thing? I mean, one other reason why I really appreciate the work of *Honey* is because—I mean, it's very hard to find conditions in which to do that work and to do it well. The last time that we performed *Honey* was in Abu Dhabi. It was an incredible experience, and we also adapted the work so that we could acknowledge the call to prayer that would happen multiple times during the performance.

So what we did was using empty *eau de* bottles, like perfume bottles, we smuggled back the honey that fell into the small box, and then transformed it into a permanent piece that is a work that we had placed in Commonwealth and Council and that was curated by Young Chung. And he allowed us—well, we had made an exhibition in his space in a show called *Raised by Wolves*. There were two works that he asked to live in the gallery as a permanent exhibition. One was this deep, seven-inch hole that we bored into the wall that emits light down a staircase that had been boarded up. And this window that had been concrete-blocked. We had done a piece on it that slowly over one year, we aged. So slowly it became a block wall. [00:46:12]

And so when we came back from Abu Dhabi, we transformed one of the concrete blocks by removing it—it was, you know, in this window space—and replacing it with a glass block filled with the honey. And the honey has been sitting in that gallery for multiple years, and every year it has a significant shift. And now, we're at the point where the honey has completely evaporated, but the gold threads still maintain their position. And all of the crystallized honey actually now looks like a honeycomb, you know, that's left over.

So I think we're just waiting for it to take its most minimal materiality. Like, just let it go as far as it can go and see how much of it will be just absorbed by the sun, the light, the heat, and then people. So there was something about the fact that that work has taken on a different shape, that it's actually been offered more time. You know, it really has been offered more time.

ALEX FIALHO: And endures, as always.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. Absolutely.

ALEX FIALHO: That's great. I think to wind us down in these last few minutes—and I think also just to point to some recent histories and some of the ways that our work intersects—is in a Visual AIDS capacity. And [first– AF] that was a commission for Day With(out) Art 2014, which was the 25th anniversary of Day With(out) Art, coordinated closely with Tom Kalin, *ALTERNATE ENDINGS*, which was your video *evidence*, [with Abigail Severance –AF]. And then we also worked on a program called THE HARD CORPS, which is my favorite event title

in my many years of Visual AIDS. [00:48:15] H-A-R-D, C-O-R-P-S.

JULIE TOLENTINO: [Laughs.]

ALEX FIALHO: And I'll just read a few—one is a note that you sent me about the *evidence* video and the other is a post that we made around THE HARD CORPS program—because I think it puts interesting language to some of these contexts.

So for THE HARD CORPS, we solicited responses and remembrances. And it said, "For the program, we are hoping to bring together anecdotes—fabulous fierce and forgettable too—from comrades; compatriots; partners in crime; participants; revelers; and the like from parties such as Clit Club, Tattooed Love Child, MEAT & PORK. We are particularly invested in considerations of HIV/AIDS activism, community building, and creative escape in the scenes and spaces fostered and frequented at the time."

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: Which I just thought had a nice poetry and resonance and reflective quality. And I think people are interested in those histories. The audio for that event is on the Visual AIDS website.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Great.

ALEX FIALHO: And then, for the *evidence* video, we were sort of talking about the different threads.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Well, I mean, just before we talk about the *evidence* video, we should just acknowledge that that work was made in collaboration with Abigail Severance, who is a filmmaker. I just want to make sure that it's clear because it was—can I just talk about the direction of it? So, Abigail and I made a work in 2010. And it was based on a conversation between, like, a filmmaker and an image-maker, a performance-maker, and the kind of eye that is employed in documenting work or in creating new work. [00:50:05]

So in this case, the first part of the piece was this very evocative way that Abigail was documenting and moving in the space where I was performing. And she produced this really incredible video from that. And then we took our second part where we went into the studio and I just was working on one specific line horizon. And then she was working around how she could see that same line or horizon. And then in the third section, it was a work that I was performing live. And I wanted to consider what it would be to perform it for camera, to understand what it was, because I really didn't understand what I was making. And I sort of felt that it was like—by putting it as a performance for camera, that I was sort of holding it until I could figure out what it was for.

So it became this—like, for me, the invitation to participate with Tom and with Visual AIDS was to return to this piece that was sort of dangling. And I felt like it was a way to communicate a certain kind of articulation through the body. And also, this kind of presence of loss where you can't actually see the loss, but you can maybe feel the loss, which is indicated by the fact that there is one cup missing and you see the imprint on the body. And that the body too has this kind of excess where, you know, this experience goes behind the viewer, like that ass keeps coming and it goes past the screen. [00:52:13]

So it was a very particular choice to go back to something and bring it forward, and to of course continue to acknowledge its origin. But to also know that it was being held for something else, and then to be able to come back to it with this audio addition that is articulating relationships that are either lost to AIDS or broken from the difficulties of who we are as a result of our experiences. There's relationships in there of trouble, and there's relationships that reflect just pure grief or collaboration. So yeah, sorry, long description.

ALEX FIALHO: And I think I'll just point also to—Vivian Crockett wrote a response for the website, the Visual AIDS website [. . . –AF].

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yes.

ALEX FIALHO: And in some of the dialogue around this oral history, we were going back and forth and I asked you about the names list that starts [*evidence* –AF] as perhaps a way to start with some of the prompts. And I think we've discussed a lot of those folks over the

course of this oral history. But the note that you sent—and in some of this conversation—you noted that the point of the list is the impossibility of the list. [00:54:00]

[This is me reading the note you sent me: –AF] "Of course, when you name, the other names missing also rise to the top, so who is here is just pointing towards that impossibility—just as the video is pointing to this impossible capture, this backward rush towards the present. This is perhaps a good research sample of how my work [. . . –AF] attempts to address the impossibility of those early years, of influences, influential people, of lovers and game changer folks. It's both personal and hopefully intriguing—Who are those people? Do we know them? And frankly, if we do not know them, if they are lost to our memories or not in our purview, what is key is that I am naming them, regardless of the legibility." And I think that this feels like an appropriate place to end.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEX FIALHO: And I'm curious how that video—or how this process of reflection and looking back but also being so conscious that it's always there—has felt or feels in your work or in your present?

JULIE TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, the experience is overwhelming because I think—you know, some of my makeup is holding this material close so that I can express myself in other ways. And I think that it's very meaningful for me to be able to find words even if I struggle with them, to recognize that the difficulty of those losses that remain difficult. And I think that that, in itself, is a testament of honor that I think I wouldn't have ever said if I wasn't in this situation. [00:56:00]

But there is a way that those experiences we all had together, and the experiences that we all live with in our community of friends, and how we hold our people in trouble, you know, in these troubled times—you know, it's hard because we are getting older and everyone has so many needs. And I feel like I recognize that. I feel like the whole time I'm speaking, I feel a lot of listeners. The people that I'm speaking about, but also people who aren't here, who—and I think that there's something very haunting about that. It's very difficult to be faced with that.

I notice that I don't feel responsible for the accuracy of our history, because there's some way that perhaps even through my work I am insisting on a kind of cyclical, non-linear and sometimes even opaque space to be able to continue, because the language doesn't get easier. And maybe sometimes I hope that maybe my work just gets more and more committed to this kind of life that doesn't always have time or space to express itself. [00:58:11]

I mean, it would be one thing, I think, if there was, like, some vacation or something where we could just sort of re-celebrate lives or something. But I don't think that that's—that's not my circle and that's not my life. So I think I'm appreciating that I still have a practice. I feel very fortunate that I still have an art practice that might be sort of slow and continuing to be a burgeoning practice.

But I feel like it's the slow burn that keeps me in touch with this history, even the difficult parts that I don't talk about that much. But it's hard to reconsider, what kind of activist you are, what kind of advocate you are, what kind of friend, what kind of lover you are, after all of these years. And it's hard not to feel like the same person that I was when I first moved to New York or when I first came into the early part of the '90s, when shit was going down.

But I think that there is something to be said about anyone who could get through one of these long interviews. That if anyone listens to any of these all the way, which I'm sure, but—there has to be some kind of exchange that's happening. And I think, you know, that's really all that we have. [01:00:09]

ALEX FIALHO: Thank you.

JULIE TOLENTINO: Thank you.

ALEX FIALHO: It's been a privilege and honor to bear witness.

JULIE TOLENTINO: It's so intense, Alex, really. Thank you.

ALEX FIALHO: Much appreciated.

[END OF TOLENT18_2OF2_SD_TRACK03.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]