I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Alexis De Veaux

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Alexis De Veaux conducted by Jenna “J” Wortham on December 22, 2022. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center | Session Number: 1

Narrator: Alexis De Veaux | Location: Richmond, VA

Interviewer: Jenna "J" Wortham | Date: December 22, 2022

Q: This is my backup.

De Veaux: Yes. I have something [*unclear*]. This is a funny thing [*unclear*].

Q: Oh. Thank you.

De Veaux: Yes, there you go.

Q: Love that.

De Veaux: Yes.

Q: Okay. I'm so excited to be chatting with you, and how best to start? Okay, can you tell us date, time, name, where we are?

De Veaux: Yes, okay. Today is Thursday, December 20 —

Q: Three?

De Veaux:—twenty two, 22.

Q: Two, yes.

De Veaux: Yes, we are in my home in Richmond, Virginia, on East Broad Street. It's about 3:20 in the afternoon on a rainy, very melancholy, make you stay in the house in bed with a book of Netflix or some Prosecco or all three.

Q: Yes. [*Laughter*]

De Veaux: And my name is Alexis De Veaux.

Q: Perfect. Okay, oh—

De Veaux: Yes, I was telling you about Valerie [Jean] Maynard, the artist. Valerie passed away on September 19, 2022, this year. This most recent face, what we called, tattoo, I got for her, it's the West African adinkra symbol, it means give me your heart. And I got it because the heart was such a—such an image and such a narrative in Valerie's life. Valerie actually lived with congestive heart disease. She died of a very quick, fatal heart attack. It's called cardiac arrhythmia. In her work, the heart was always an image that she worked with. My last book Yabo, the cover of which is one of her—it's not a drawing, it's—yes, it's a drawing—one of her drawings, which is called me *Get Me Another Heart: This One's Been Broken Many Times*. She just did a lot of images of hearts in her work, and the fact that she just died of a—just a really

quick heart attack was, in some ways, a fitting aspect of her narrative. But in other ways, it made her passing very quick, and in that way, I'm thankful she didn't suffer long.

She was diagnosed with dementia and some adjacent Alzheimer's [disease], so we were all working with that thinking that was the way we were to go because that's what was being pointed out to us, and then she left with a heart attack. I also think that Val didn't want to live out that diagnosis given that it would mean she would have to give up so much independence and so much of herself. This was—is a woman who was a sculptor, who had worked with massive ideas and massive materials, stone, wood, steel, and this was her life. In the end, I don't think that she wanted to stay here with that illness because it was—she knew what was happening. She knew something was happening to her, and she would say she was on a slippery slope, and that's how she would tell us about the impact, the mental impact of one disease and another. So, yes, I saw her on Friday, and she was gone on Sunday night.

Q: Wow. I'm glad you—

De Veaux: So this heart thing really keeps her in me, yes.

Q: Yes.

De Veaux: Yes. I met Valerie at that time when the '70s became the '80s, this whole period that we're going to be looking at, and she—more than anyone in a kind of quotidian, like an every day way, she raised me. She raised me up as an artist. She made it clear to me when she thought I

was just being much, she will give me that Black woman side eye like—and I would just sit my ass down. And I was in my mid-, late twenties when I met her, so we had an almost fifty-year relationship.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: And she was my everything. She never let me feel like I wasn't worthy, or I didn't belong to her, or she didn't love me. There was nothing I could do that she was not accepting of, not that I was out trying to prove that differently. But she let me know that who I was as an artist was important, it was necessary. And she actually began my sense of collecting the works of other artists whether actual works or posters or programs, whatever, but building an archive, she started that for me. She was my mother, she was my sister, she was my friend, she was my confidante, she was my teacher, she was everything. We were never intimate lovers, and I don't think we needed that. We had something well bigger, you know, just infinitely bigger and stronger and everlasting, yes.

And so now, I feel like I guess I'm gone. I guess I'm gone because she's gone, or maybe I'm not gone, but she gave me everything she could teach me up to the end, beyond the end really. Because I can say pretty much every day, Oh, Val taught me that, oh, I got this from Val, or Val said or—you know the thing that you do when someone's gone. You remember how they were in your life, not just that you knew them, but they were in your life. Val taught me how to see. Before I met Val, I would just look, but she taught me how to see.

Q: Yes, yes.

De Veaux: Yes, yes, yes, yes, everlasting, that will be Jay Maynard [*phonetic*].

Q: It's so nice to be here too because your home is full of so much of her too, even the planter from behind you or the sculpture.

De Veaux: Yes.

Q: That's one of hers.

De Veaux: Yes, and she had a way of sticking little things in her plants.

Q: Oh, my God,—

De Veaux: So this one—

Q: —so the frog in the plant?

De Veaux:—got a little frog, right. I have another one upstairs in the boudoir that has the head of like a Chinese character or an Asian character. She would just stick things in her plants. [*Laughs*] Oh,—

Q: That's great.

De Veaux:—too much, yes.

Q: Thank you for talking about her.

De Veaux: Yes, yes.

Q: How did you two end up being in each other's lives?

De Veaux: One of my plays was being done, it was called *The Tapestry,* and it was being done in New York City. And I forget now where, and I also forget the name of the director, a Black woman, but I can get that name for you. Valerie and her former lover at the time, Carole [Marie] Byard came to do the scene work for the play. Okay, it wasn't *The Tapestry*, it was *A Season to Unravel*. Yes, they came to do the scene work. *A Season to Unravel* was done at the Negro Ensemble Company in 1979, and they came to do the scene work, and they were such like—they were both visual artists. They had known each other for forever, they were just over their lovership, and they were still deep friends when I met them. And I knew immediately that they have this intimate connection because people kind of wear that on themselves. You know like, Oh, those two people are together, or they've been together, something, ah, there's something there or was there, still there. So I knew that about them.

From the very beginning, Valerie chose me and I chose her. It was that kind of friendship. We were always funny with each other. I was always—well, let me reframe that. I learned to be very respectful of her wisdom. I was still young enough when I met her to think that I knew everything, and she was old enough to know that I did not, and she took her time with me. And I came to know her and Carole. I also have a lot of Carole's work here, Carole Byard, who was good to me also as a friend. I think there was something between Valerie and I that just went to the core—to a particular core that Carole and I went to a different core. I love them both, I love them both, and I met them at a time when they each were taking other lovers, and they were still friends. It was a wonderful model actually of how to be an artist, be with an artist, and also separate from an artist and still have that artistic connection. Yes, yes.

Q: So you were both living in New York at this time?

De Veaux: Yes, I was living in Brooklyn [New York City] on Eastern Parkway at the time with my lover of the time, Gwendolyn Hardwick [*phonetic*], and both Valerie and Carole were living in Westbeth [Artists Housing], an artist community—

Q: Oh, wow.

De Veaux:—in the Village. They later, some years later, bought a building together in Brooklyn that they used as a studio, and it ultimately flooded, so they had to get out of there, but yes, they were both living in Westbeth at the time.

Q: I don't know about Westbeth.

De Veaux: Yes, oh, you might want to know because there are still some amazing Black artists who live there.

Q: I know, sorry, Westbeth, yes—

De Veaux: Yes, yes—

Q: —that big—

De Veaux:—Westbeth.

Q: —building [*crosstalk*]—

De Veaux: Yes,—

Q:—sorry, that took me a second.

De Veaux:—a big old—

Q: That big, old building.

De Veaux:—industrial building.

Q: Yes, yes, yes, okay.

De Veaux: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: Yes, I just—

De Veaux: On the [Upper] West Side.

Q: That's right, I only just learned of that actually.

De Veaux: Yes, it's close to the [Joe DiMaggio] West Side Highway.

Q: That's right. It's amazing.

De Veaux: Yes, yes, they both had studios there, living studios there.

Q: I would love to hear a little bit about your childhood, what you remember if that feels okay for today?

De Veaux: Yes, I'm one of eight—I was one of eight. We were poor. We lived in tenements in Harlem [New York City] on Fourteenth Street, on Twelfth Street, moved from the West Side to

the East Side. Four East on Twelfth Street was one building that I will never forget. That was between Lenox and Fifth Avenues, so we were not that far from what we used to know was called La Marqueta, which is the market that went under the subway there, where most of the people in the neighborhood would just go to buy their groceries and their foods. It very much stocked foods from the Caribbean and from Central America. Then, I was the second oldest girl, so there were six girls and two boys at the time. We were in welfare for most of my life with my mother. I left home when I was eighteen. I was on welfare with her until I left home.

There are ways in which my childhood absolutely made me, made me an artist, made me recognize that I'm queer, made me recognize that I exist in a female body. And all those things were the pluses of poverty and racism. We lived in Harlem, obviously at the time, and Harlem was built by racism. And certainly at that time when I was growing up, the '50s, '60s, early '70s, Harlem was known as the ghetto, and it was known like that for a reason—for reasons because primarily that's where we were corralled. We, Black people and Caribbean and Latin people, were corralled into that space. It was a neglected space, so I came to know material neglect very early.

I came to know that men could be abusive to girls, Black men could and did. I certainly was victimized by that. And I use the term victimized intentionally because that's what those behaviors did, they victimized me. I came to a sense of being Black, what that meant in Harlem, both as something to be proud of—well, the pride didn’t come until later. I came to know Blackness as something that you suffered basically. We suffered Blackness first in terms of poverty, gender abuse, just lack.

At the same time, I had an understanding in school that I was smart, that I was, in some ways, "exceptional," and I had teachers who promoted that sense of myself in me. So I had this kind of dichotomy, this imbalance going on. Like out in school, I was a something, and at home, I was a nothing. And my mother made clear to us there were different sets of children with different men. Like this father had these two children, and that father had that three, and so on, but there was always one mother. My mother made it clear to us that we couldn't be distinguished one from the other. We couldn't be treated differently, we'd all be treated the same even though we were very different, and we've grown up to—those differences have grown out of us as we've grown up. So I would get at school that I was something different and exceptional, smart even, and I would get at home that I was nothing. I was nothing to praise, like get a grip, get a hold of yourself kind of thing.

So it's not even that I would have wanted a perfect childhood or necessarily a different childhood. What did I know? The only difference that I knew was the white difference that I saw on TV, and I certainly wasn't going to get that. I was certainly not going to get *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. First of all, where the fuck was father, okay. There was that okay. I certainly wasn't going to get, Oh, you have a bicycle, you throw it down on the lawn and go in the house, and you wake up the next morning, go outside, the bicycle is still there, it's still there. I'm not going to get that. [*Laughter*] That clearly was TV as was *Amos 'n' Andy on* TV. That was our TV too, we were still nothing, we were jokes.

So I grew into life understanding that Blackness was suffering until this—until I understood what was happening was the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s, then I began to see something else. I remember asking my mother right after the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, I wanted to go South. I was like all-of-nothing years old, but I wanted to go South, and my mother looked at me like I was crazy, and that was a clear no, don't even think about it, I don't know who you think you are, but no. But I was now aware that there was some Blackness going on that we needed to pay attention to. So I grew into Blackness in different ways as I got older.

Q: What year were you born and your birthday too?

De Veaux: September 24, 1948.

Q: Okay, Libra baby?

De Veaux: Yes, so by the time of 1963 and the bombing of the church, I was, what, fourteen, fifteen years old?

Q: Wow. How did—I mean it's kind of a heavy question. I'm just thinking about being an artist, being a writer, being an observer. Now thinking back, how do you think living through all of that shaped you as a person or as a young person?

De Veaux: Yes, well, I was eleven years old when Lorraine [V.] Hansberry play, *A Raisin in the Sun* came to Broadway [theatre], I was eleven. Before that, I had no idea that Black people, let

alone Black women, wrote anything, no idea, was not taught that in school, didn't—certainly didn't get that at home, not a part of my community life, no idea. So this splash was that Lorraine Hansberry because, as we all know, she didn't live very long, much longer after the play, but this splash that was Lorraine Hansberry just broke open the world, broke open the world. And that was my first inkling, and I mean it was like a inkling, a tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny, tiny star that, oh, we can do these things. Black can do, we do do, we do these things.

And I began to pay attention because in school, I used to love to write, I loved to write. I always turned in my book reports on time, ahead of time. They were always fabulous, they were always a presentation, they were always a thing, and I loved stories, I loved stories. In my family whenever our mother went out, I would be the one watching everybody and telling the stories when she came back, "Oh, Ma, Vicky [*phonetic*] did blah, blah, blah and then blah, blah, blah, and then—" That was the story, I loved telling stories. I love my uncle Frank [*phonetic*] who was a great storyteller. He was such a trickster figure in all of his stories. He was always the best thing since sliced bread in the story. He would tell us stories about the man, meaning the white men, that he always bested no matter what. And we would be cracking up laughing, and my mother would say, "Frank, stop telling them children those lies," and he would say, "This isn't no lie," and he would keep on. It was amazing. He was a great storyteller, great storyteller.

And listening to him, listening to him knowing, beginning to learn that Black women could be writers, marrying that to my own love of writing book reports and loving books, those things combined to put me on a path. A path that was also determined by growing up in the civil rights—in the days of civil rights and then being a young adult in the days of the Black Power

movement. And then being a full adult in the days of the '80s and what we called the Third World lesbian and gay liberation movement and then from there the feminist movement and then from there, the queer movement. So I grew up in social movements, and I was aware each time of the impact of that particular social movement on me. Like the Civil Rights Movement helped me to understand that I was a human being and entitled to certain rights. What was that thing, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Well, wasn't I entitled to that? That's what civil rights was, wasn't I entitled to vote, wasn't I entitled to sit where I wanted when I went into a store? Money was green no matter of it was in a Black hand or a white hand, right?

Q: Yes.

De Veaux: The Black Arts Movement, which came out of the Black Power movement, helped me to understand not only was it my responsibility—not only did I love writing, but it was my responsibility to write in ways that forwarded the race. That my people were not to be made jokes of in my work, not like the way white people made jokes of us or certainly didn't give us any dimension. So it was my responsibility to do that. Meeting James [A.] Baldwin in the '70s in a workshop that I was in when I was in my twenties, and he very—Baldwin had the biggest, fucking eyes in the world, and he had the biggest mouth. I had read his—a lot of his work, what was then a lot of his work, including *Giovanni's Room* before ever meeting him. So when he swept into the workshop, he was like, oh, this tall, and I was like, What? I thought he was like a fucking giant. He was a giant, but he was this tall.

Q: My God.

De Veaux: Like what, four foot five, probably just five feet, you know what I mean?

Q: I can't even imagine.

De Veaux: And he had on his scarf, and he had this cigarette, and he was on—he was like in his queen thing. And he was talking to us and then he just looked around at us. He took those eyes, and he looked around at us, and he threw that smoke on us.

Q: Oh my God.

De Veaux: He said, "Don't just write, have something to say." I was like, Oh, my God. I was completely terrorized by him in the best possible way. He wanted us to know that he was charging us with that, don't just write, have something to say as he did himself. And that workshop actually gave me access to a number of Black writers at the time. It was called the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop [Inc.] of the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, which was housed in a church, Salem [United Methodist] Church on 129th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem.

Q: Do you remember when you took it?

De Veaux: This would have been the early '70s, like '70—beginning 1970 through 1975 probably because I—after that, I moved out of New York City. I went to live in New Haven [Connecticut]

with this woman that drove me crazy. [*Laughter*] But during the time of the workshop, I met James Baldwin, I met [Wilsonia Benita Driver] Sonia Sanchez, I met [Edward] Ed [Artie] Bullins [Kingsley B. Bass Jr,], I met [Miltona Mirkin Cade] Toni Cade Bambara.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: I met [Chloe Anthony Wofford] Toni Morrison, I met—well he was [Everett] Leroy Jones then—Amiri Baraka, and probably— Vertamae Grosvenor, probably several other people, but these people were all foundation for me. I met the playwright Adrienne Kennedy, I in fact studied with her. I did a tutorial with Adrienne Kennedy who's now in her nineties.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: She's now in her nineties, and she lives here in Virginia somewhere.

Q: Oh, really?

De Veaux: Do you know her work?

Q: I don't.

De Veaux: Oh, you have to know her work, she's amazing. Adrienne Kennedy, A-D-R-I-E-N-N-E Kennedy.

Q: Okay.

De Veaux: When you get to know her work, you'll see—she was a playwright—she is a playwright—how phenomenal. In fact, one of her plays is being done now and Audra [A.] McDonald is starting in it. It's called *Iowa City Murders [Ohio State Murders].*

Q: Oh, okay.

De Veaux: Yes, that's one of her plays.

Q: Oh, I'm going to go see it.

De Veaux: Oh, yes, it's playing now in New York City, yes, so. Yes, Adrienne Kennedy was quite a mentor for me because she taught me to make use of the things that were in my head like dreams. That dreams were powerful spaces of imaginative work that you were constantly doing in this state that you call sleep. And she was an advocate for sleep consciousness, we'll call it, for dreams, for nightmares because these were the spaces where she could, and therefore we could, interrogate racism and sexism at the time for what it was. I mean this is well before, well before we had all this language that we have now. So there was this whole—again she lived in New York City on the Upper West Side. Adrienne Kennedy was—she had a fear of going out, that's a word, it's called agoraphobia?

Q: Okay.

De Veaux: Yes, she had that, so she didn't go outside. So in order for me to see her, I would have to go to her house, and it was just very—it was a very interesting environment. I don't know if she goes out now, but she damn sure didn't go out then. She lived on the Upper West Side in New York City, and she did not go outside. She did not go outside, so that was pretty amazing. But she was—not but—and she was part of the fabric of people and times that I was interfacing with that were all going to shape me. Even the heterosexism of the Black Nationalist movement shaped—was to shape me. First me thinking that that was the way it was supposed to be, Black women were supposed to go behind Black men, fuck that, to that space where I can say, Oh no, fuck that. So everything gave me something, everything gave me something, so I'm shaped by a whole period basically of intense realities in this country. From the 1950s to the 1980s, I'm shaped by that time.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: Yes, so anything I am today or I am not is situated in that thirty-year period of US [United States] history, primarily US history. It would become global history from the '80s forward—the 1980s forward.

Q: Yes, yes, yes, I'm still thinking about you as an eleven-year-old just getting excited about book reports and—

De Veaux: Oh, my God, I love books.

Q: Do you remember what some of the early books were that really moved you or what those—some of those early reports—like what were you writing back then or what was—?

De Veaux: Unfortunately, I don’t remember those books. What I can tell you about, what I do remember is they weren't written by Black people. That's for sure. They were not written by Black people. But as to what they were—and it's no accident I think that they're washed from my mind because they weren't about me. They weren't about me or us or anything that I was really familiar with. These were books that were sanctioned by the school, sanctioned by the teacher, and you'd write a book report about it. So no, I don’t remember them, and I'm happy that I don’t because there—that deadness doesn’t fill some aspect of my head.

For me, at the time though, given that I didn’t know anything about Black history and Black literatures, they were books, and I love books, so I came to them with that sort of naivete. If you gave me a book to read when I was eight, nine, ten, eleven years old, I was going to read that book. I had a library card, excuse me, so I could go to the public library. I loved to take books out, but I never like to bring them back. [*Laughter*]

Q: I'm the same way,—

De Veaux: Oh, my gosh,—

Q: I'm still the same way.

De Veaux:—I would have fines because I would just—it's how I built my library basically [laughter] with books that didn't belong to me, but they were books. Also, the other thing about book reports is I—you had to have a cover, you had to make your cover. So that gave me a chance to—chances to—opportunities to express like draw and making drawings and using crayons and stuff like that. So that's what I remember most that I could express myself both in terms of the written and also the visual. Writing about I like this book and also drawing, so making some fabulous book report cover. I wish I still had some examples of those things, but I don't. At the same time, the fact that I make book states today reflects for me that same thing of the book reports, of the text and the pictures—the narratives and the pictures.

Q: Yes, can you describe what some of those are?

De Veaux: Right,—

Q: —that you were making?

De Veaux:—book states?

Q: Yes.

De Veaux: Yes. I have been making book states since about 1980 and forward, and they usually are based on some literary idea or some literary statement. In the case of the *Mama Said* [phonetic] book, which is a collection of cutouts, cutout narratives of the things my mother would say when I was a child and we were children. And that one is really based on the one thing she would say, "Don't do like I do, do like I say do," which is one of the images in the book itself.

I have another one that's about my grandmother, and it's called *This Far by Faith*, and it's actually a cigar box that's filled with cotton. It's in the living room, you can see it before you go. It's also decorated with cotton, and my grandmother Ruby Moore Hill, she didn't pick cotton as a child, but she worked in the fields, and she picked peanuts. And her grandparents had been enslaved, so she knew about that history as she grew up in and came forward. And I titled it *This Far by Faith* because she migrated in 1929, 1930 from North Carolina—this is my father's mother—from North Carolina to New York City. I know now that she left the South because of the conditions in the South for Black people in the 1900s, 1920s. I wish I knew whether my grandmother had been, in many ways, personally abused by those systems, sharecropping, white men, but she did leave. She left and she took her two children with her, my father and my uncle. She told me that her husband George [*phonetic*], she discovered that he wasn't very motivated, and she described him as kind of lazy. And he lost their family's land, their family's farm and so they began to sharecrop on their people's land, which she—he lost to some white people. That's all she would say about him. She didn't really say much, but I understood.

Now I know more about the great migration, now I know more about women who left the South, thanks to books by people like Saidiya Hartman, *Beautiful Lives, Wayward Experiments* [*phonetic*]. That book helped me to think about my grandmother's life a lot. Like what happened to those women who came from South up north and began living in these more urban realities and had to address themselves in more public streetways than they had been used to in the South. So that's *This Far By Faith*.

There's another one, this is also for my grandmother, it's called *Who Set You Flowin'?*, and that's the title of a book by Farah Jasmine Griffin? Yes. And it also has to do with the migration. It has images of my grandmother when she was a young woman and my father and my uncle when they were little boys and it has—when my grandmother died, I inherited most of her material possessions, and there was in her things, a little white leather purse, and it had like thirty-eight cents in it, and I put that as part of the book state. It actually sits on a piece of black cardboard, and the biggest part of it is like an old cigar box, and there is the coin purse with the thirty-eight cents still in it.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: And I covered the cigar box with one of her diplomas. Yes, so I have another one, which I showed you, *I Am Your Negro*, which is a lot of different ways of saying, no, I am not your Negro, which has to do with James Baldwin. I have one that's in the living room, which you can also see. It's called *No Nigger, Never*, [*phonetic*] which is Valerie Maynard's philosophy of

Black life and white mouth. And it's got three slots and all cards interchangeable, but it's called *No Nigger, Never*.

And I was talking with Val one day, [*laughs*] and we were talking about her and her work and how she wasn't expected to be anything in this culture, in this society. She was an enormous personality as an artist, Black female artist, female identified, and yet she just did not get the kind of recognition that some of her peers did or that she deserved. And by her peers, I'm talking about people like Faith Ringgold, Betye [Irene] Saar, I mean these were—Howardena Pindell, these were all of her peers. And we were talking about that and she was saying how that's how she understood life. And so I was like, "Cool, so what do you mean that's how you understand life?" She was like, "No, nigger, never."

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: "No, you can't have it, never ever, nigger." And I was so struck not only by the alliteration, but just by the depth of that understanding, no, nigger, never. I was like this is what Saidiya Hartman calls after life of slavery, this is what we're living through.

Q: That's right.

De Veaux: This, we're not supposed to, we can't, don’t even.

Q: Don’t even.

De Veaux: No nigger, never, right.

Q: Right, right.

De Veaux: Right. And like you, it's not a word that I like to use. I don’t use it like as an everyday. I will call it up when there's a historical moment. I will say this is how they saw us.

Q: Absolutely.

De Veaux: This is who we—no, this is not how they saw us, this is how they see us.

Q: I was going to say—

De Veaux: Hello, hello, this is how they see us.

Q: Oh [unclear]—

De Veaux: Yes, I listen to that episode too. I pretty much listen to every episode they're still processing.

Q: Ah, they're all dedicated to you, I love that you listen.

De Veaux: [*Laughs*] I listen to them at night in bed. I think about them as I'm on my way to sleep, and I often wake up with the earphone still in my ears. The episode is over though.

Q: Right.

De Veaux: Because they all run continuously, yes, and I have to wake up, put in another episode, and then let it take me back to sleep. [*Laughter*] I love it though, I love it.

Q: I love that.

De Veaux: You'd been giving him some shit to think about.

Q: You think so?

De Veaux: Oh, I know so, oh, I know so.

Q: He gives me some to think about too, he—you know? Yes.

De Veaux: Yes, but—okay, to be honest about it, yes, he do, he do, but you be swiping him in such a way, he would have, "What?" Oh, he has to think about it because what?" Okay, I mean regroup. Yes, you be giving him some stuff to think—well, you be giving us all some stuff to think about.

Q: Yes, I mean I'll read like three books for an episode—

De Veaux: Oh, Lord.

Q: —I try to think about when I think about something, you know? But also—

De Veaux: It comes through, it comes through.

Q: Thank you, but also always want to—I'm like, Who can I bring through on this episode, you know what I mean?

De Veaux: Yes, yes.

Q: Like who can I mention, who's relevant and not just to name it, but what's relevant—?

De Veaux: Right, who's—

Q: Who's doing—

De Veaux:—the context?

Q: —work in this way that feels—

De Veaux: Right, I've heard that—

Q: —like—

De Veaux: —[00:42:04] yes.

Q:—you know?

De Veaux: Yes.

Q: Because I think that matters too.

De Veaux: Yes, I think so too.

Q: Just trying to say people all the time.

De Veaux: Yes, yes.

Q: Yes, so where are we in your life right now do you think?

De Veaux: By the '80s, we're in my—I'm in my early thirties, I'm getting my work published. I published my first book when I was twenty-five.

Q: Which book was that?

De Veaux: That was *Spirits*—

Q: This one?

De Veaux:—*in the Street,* yes. This is an old baby.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: This is 1973—1972.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: Yes, this is way before. This is 1974.

Q: What was publishing like in 1974?

De Veaux: This is Anchor Press Doubleday [phonetic]. This is when white publishers actually discovered "Black writers," and they published everybody and anything. And at this time, at Doubleday, there was a Black woman to whom I owe so much, Marie Brown, Marie Dutton Brown who, I believe, is still living and still lives in Harlem in her brownstone in Harlem. I know she's still living in that. Marie Dutton Brown was my literary person. She introduced me.

She worked for Doubleday and she—because of the writer's workshop, I was talking about earlier, she came through that venue also, and she brought me on to the white publishing world. She brought me in to Doubleday rather.

I was also publishing with Cotton Roe [*phonetic*] a couple of children's books, so. By this time in the early 1980s, again, I'm in my early thirties, I have published, I'm working for *Essence* magazine, I'm getting my name out there. I have a play that's done by the Henry Street Settlement House Theatre. *No*, it was the first play—well, it was considered a play, but it was also—the director Glenda Dickerson who has passed away now, came to me and asked me for some of my poems that she wanted to dramatize. It was like that, it was plays we dramatized, and it was a cast of seven or eight women and one man. And it was the first queer, queer piece that Henry Street Settlement House had put on. Woodie King [Jr.], the first. And you have to know that, at that time, members of the Black community went stark raving mad, I mean absolutely, I mean absolutely, absolutely mad about it. Just we were an abomination, we were—at that time, you can just think how—it wasn't just homophobic, it was nationalist, the Black community in New York City was, and the reaction to us which is awful.

At the same time, it was a whole community of people who came through, who came out. They were like, "Oh, my God, have you seen that thing? Have you seen that shit?" It was pretty, it was sexy, it was poetic, it was everything, it was everything. I don’t know that Henry Street has done a play like that since.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: I don't know, I don't know. I know Woodie King thought it was going to be the next *for colored girls [who have Considered Suicide/When The Rainbow Is Enuf]* and so he tried to treat it like that. But there was no way it could be the next *for colored girls* because it was a queer production.

Q: How interesting.

De Veaux: It had so much—so many of the realities of living queer then in it that there was no way it could go to Broadway as the next *for colored girls*, nor would I have wanted to be the next *for colored girls* if I have to look back on it. Because *for colored girls* was for colored girls, and *No* was for something else, and it was very political in that way, so yes.

So this is the time I have *Spirits in the Street* out, I have *No*, 1980, I have *Don't Explain [A Song of Billie Holiday]*, coming out in the early 1980s, so I've got—I'm a young writer now. I'm an emerging writer getting established. I have this relationship with *Essence* magazine, thanks to both Susan [L.] Taylor who was editor in chief at the time and Cheryll [Y.] Greene who was my editor—my ride or die. Because of them, I had this space and essence where I could write. I was asked to write the social and the political pieces for the magazine, and it was kind of being like a gorilla, like a revolutionary gorilla because I was in this fashion and beauty magazine. So I was in this space that you didn't expect me or somebody like me to be in there writing, but I was doing that. And that was an amazing to be in because *Essence* had a readership of millions of

women who were reading and or buying the magazine and reading it. And this was a magazine that also got passed down and got passed around.

In later years, I met young women who said, "My daughter—my mother who—I'm the daughter of So-and-So, and my mother gave me your piece and such and such that was in Essence magazine," so I know that that work has impacted generations. And I was at *Essence* from 1978 to 1992—'93. I've done one piece or so after the piece on Nelson [R.] Mandela, and I was there. I was there for a long time. So this is the '80s, and I'm—this is all—I'm doing all this work, I'm getting all these. I'm getting published by some of the mainstream publishing houses, but then the Republicans come in the mid-1980s, and they shut all this down.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: They shut down access to the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants, they shut down—

Q: Sounds familiar—

De Veaux: Yes, they shut down publishing opportunities. They ghettoized Black and brown people for our sexualities or because of our sexualities rather. They let us die. They let us die from the thing we now know as HIV [human immunodeficiency virus], AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome].

So the '80s was both I think, to just answer the question, a time of tremendous personal evolution. It's not just growth, but it's evolution for me in the context of this enormous—these enormous shifts in social realities in this country, enormous shifts. This is also the period during which Gwendolyn Hardwick and I created this loose collective of Black—mostly Black, queer female artists. It was called the Flamboyant Ladies Theater Company [Salons]. We did both performances and also we did the salons in our apartment in Brooklyn in New York City. And it was also an attempt to read the world as we understood it, and the salons were an attempt to make a space for women who identified as lesbian and straight and bi [bisexual] or whatever—we didn't really care—to come and have a cultural experience with each other because it was always an event in the—it was like the—we fashioned it on the Harlem rent parties. We wanted to kind of look like that and feel like that, so we made food, we sell food, we sell wine and beer. We really didn't do it to make money, we didn't really do it for the rent money, we did it for the history and also giving—

We had a huge apartment in Brooklyn, so we had the space to give women an opportunity to come someplace where they could be free, where they could be with each other, learn with each other, be artistic, hit on each other, do drugs. And it wasn't like going to one of the white lesbian bars where there was always only the Black woman's night.

Q: Right, right, right, like why?

De Veaux: Yes, right, and plus, they didn't like us being there. They just thought they were being woke by giving us a night.

Q: Interesting.

De Veaux: Yes, a night. So we had this alternative space that we imagined and we made happen because we understood it, what it was to try to go to those bars. We knew we weren't wanted but nor were there any Black lesbian bars that we could go to either. Most Black women that we knew generally went to a house thing, generally went to a house party, or they went to each other's houses, but there was no public space again like the white lesbian bars. We saw them as much—they had much more than we had. They, at least, had some place public they could go and be, we didn't have that.

Q: Yes, yes, maybe this is a good time, too, to ask about [Jacob] Riis [Park, New York] and think about how that plays in as a space for convening if—? I don't know, I'm curious how you think about the beach as part of that fabric?

De Veaux: Well, I knew the beach in this context. We knew it as the nude beach. We knew that this was the place that we could go and show our bodies, enjoy our bodies, express our bodies that was safe, that was public, and that was for us. And that was an important part of this moment of the '80s when we were being ignored by the federal government, we were being harassed by the police, we were coming out as a group, coming out. We had spent the '60s and the '70s, and even before that for those of us who were still much older, the '30s and the '40s ion this country, dying inside because of who we are—were and are. And the '70s and the '80s gave us language and also struggle, also a movement for being able to live in our bodies.

And so when I was going to Riis, I was—I don’t even remember how I knew about the nude beach. Everybody knew about the nude beach; everybody that was queer knew this is where you go. You go to the nude beach where you're going to be able to do your thing, the boys had a section, and the girls had a section.

Q: Interesting.

De Veaux: As I understood it, as I experienced it, rarely were the two mixing. I don't think it would have been an issue if we had, but we didn’t as I remember it. Because I remember that the part that we were in was women, and we had to pass the boys to get to the women's part. Well, the women's part was at the end I think.

Q: Oh, interesting.

De Veaux: Yes, I think it was at the end.

Q: That's not like historically very Black queer and trans? Does that make sense?

De Veaux:Yes, yes, it makes—

Q: I like that.

De Veaux:—a lot of sense, it make a lot of sense. And my lover at the time was much younger, well, ten years younger than me, and she was just coming into herself as a queer woman. And being at Riis together, we always went together. Well, as I understood it, we always went together. I didn't know, she may have gone by herself, I don't know, but whenever I went, I was with her, let me put it that way. It gave us a public space that was dedicated to our bodies. These are bodies that had been vilified, beaten, killed, erased, used, and abused as queer bodies in our lifetimes.

So Riis provided an opportunity to have an expressive body—bodily reality, in that you could, if you wanted to, take your clothes off because it was the nude beach. Nobody gave a shit, so you could be in all of nature with nothing on and no worry about it. Nobody was googling you or ogling you or—googling. Nobody was ogling you or in any way making you feel unsafe, not that I experienced, or was voyeuristic. I mean, yes, you'd look if you saw a woman that was all of that, yes, you would look at her, and, hell, yes, who wouldn't? You didn't do that in some way that made it hopefully—well, I didn't do it in some way that made it uncomfortable for her to be—to feel safe just like I wanted to feel safe.

So Riis Beach, just to get—making sure I'm answering the question—really was a way in which we could be in our bodies openly, very openly and not just in our bodies but in our cultural experience. So you would see boys that were way femme, way femme. Like these femme boys now, nothing.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: Nothing, nothing—

Q: Love it.

De Veaux:—nothing, these boys were way femme. And they would be with their butch boyfriends, and those boys were way butch, and it was like—it was amazing, and the same would be true of the women. You'd see the most fabulous women, whether they were express themselves as femme or butch they were all fabulous.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: And so this idea of fabulousness was what we were able to show. That our bodies were fabulous, that we were living fabulous, that we were resisting, fabulous. I mean it was just about like—we knew we were everything. And so in that cultural reality that was American of the 1980s when we were beginning to understand things like police violence against Black communities, and the shooting of Black people, and the realities of people who identified as gay or lesbian or queer, the larger realities of the economics of the times, of just living communities that would just, oh, nearly destitute. And of a Blackness and a queerness that was being shut down and shut down in the most brutalizing ways.

We had Riis, we had this space that on any given hot day in the summer, you could go to, and that's where you could exercise freedom. That's where you could exercise freedom, queer, Black

freedom, and it was exercise, it was seriously exercise. Or you'd smoke your joint, and you could just get out of the city and get near the water. And you could just for a few hours just get away from everything that was your life in that apartment building or that place where you lived or wherever you didn't live, where maybe you were sleeping on somebody's couch. But you could get away from all that and go to freedom, and you could live in freedom until the sun went down, until there was no more sun to warm your body. You would have whatever you needed to go back to that apartment building in a stressed-out, fucking life in New York City and try to make it another day. Riis was very much a part of how we resisted, very much a part of that.

Q: When's the last time you were there, do you think?

De Veaux: I left the city in like '85, '80—in the later '80s and maybe around '86, so it might have been—well, I was traveling in '84. It might have been in '84, end of '83, '84. Also no longer had that level of so, that experience kind of ended with her.

Q: Interesting.

De Veaux: Yes, it was interesting. She was very interesting for me physically, and it was no surprise that we would have enjoyed Riis together, it was no surprise at all. I don't think we ever swam. I don't think we ever swam.

Q: I mean it's like half the point.

De Veaux: Just being near the water was enough.

Q: That's right, that's right.

De Veaux: And also being able to be nude. Those were the two things, nude and community and being near the water.

Q: My gosh.

De Veaux: It was freedom, that was where freedom was.

Q: Did you ever, after that, end up going to other queer beaches, or did you ever do like Cherry Grove [Fire Island, New York] or Ptown [Provincetown, Massachusetts]?

De Veaux: I have been to Ptown, right. I did Fire Island, but I've never beached at Fire Island. Did I beach at Fire Island? No, I didn't. I've stayed at a timeshare in—on Fire Island. I had been to Provincetown, I love Provincetown, I keep threatening to go back because I think it's important to have those spaces and also to present oneself as part of the history of that.

Q: Yes, true.

De Veaux: Even if it's just in your own memory as in, oh, I remember we sat over there, that kind of thing, oh, I remember—

Q: We spent the summer there—

De Veaux: Yes. I remember we did this and got the ice cream dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. Yes.

Q: Yes, that makes sense.

De Veaux: The one that stands out for me though is Riis. Riis was the foundational community in the sense of recognizing our bodies as a public space. Our bodies were the public space. Riis did that for me.

Q: Wow. Can you say more about that idea, our bodies were the public space?

De Veaux: In the ways that we were able to show them.

Q: Okay, I see.

De Veaux: To show them freely.

Q: I see what you were saying.

De Veaux: I was saying like the femme boys, the butch women, we were able to show ourselves freely or more freely and to not have to wear the shame or something that was hidden—

Q: I hear you.

De Veaux:—or had to be hidden in order to survive. Those femme boys couldn't get on the subway and just go anywhere they wanted to without risking not just a beat down but death. Same true of the hardcore butch women, come on now. So—

Q: Still feels that way sometimes.

De Veaux: Yes, absolutely, it is that way.

Q: It is that way.

De Veaux: Right, it is that way, it is that way. Like the other social movements that I had spoken of prior to this moment, Riis was itself a social movement, and it did for definitions and understandings of queer bodies what was essential to the language and presentations that we have today. Without that, we couldn't have—I don't see, I don't see that we could have this. Without that time that I was there, and I could be naked in my Black body with my big titties and my lover, has everything to do with how I can write about those bodies today and my body today. That's the evolution.

Q: The cultural shifts that [*crosstalk*], the movements that shaped the shifts—

De Veaux: That’s right.

Q: —is what I'm hearing you say.

De Veaux: Absolutely.

Q: It's so nice to think about that way too because in the moment, that freedom you're talking about, you feel it, you're showing up, but it's nice to connect to this bigger ecosystem.

De Veaux: Absolutely, absolutely. And I'm sure there were people who would say, "Oh, girl, we just went and did our thing," but, yes, you did, you did do your thing in this larger thing that you were doing.

Q: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

De Veaux: Girl, we went out there, and we didn’t get back until the next day, yes.

Q: Exactly.

De Veaux: Yes.

Q: Oh, my gosh, I went to Riis this summer at sunrise and—with a photographer friend to just take some images.

De Veaux: Yes, oh, my God.

Q: And there were just all these people already there. Like the sun came up but I was like—

De Veaux: Yes, oh, my God.

Q: And then we knew who they were, do you know what I mean?

De Veaux: Yes, yes, yes.

Q: It was like walk there, I was like, "Who is that?"

De Veaux: Oh, my God.

Q: He's my [*crosstalk*]

De Veaux: Yes, yes, oh God, you know I need to go back.

Q: Why?

De Veaux: It's still community there.

Q: It's still community there.

De Veaux: I need to go, I need to go before I leave this planet.

Q: I mean it's shifting so fast which is—I worked on this story this whole summer that hasn't been published yet. I'm doing this project now, I had been hearing a lot of rumors actually that the beat—the bathhouse was sold.

De Veaux: Oh, no.

Q: And the word finally came out, and they're demolishing the hospital.

De Veaux: Oh, get the fuck out.

Q: So I don't know what—

De Veaux: That was in the area that we were in.

Q: Yes.

De Veaux: Oh, my God.

Q: So it's all happening, I mean it's winter now, but it's all happening—

De Veaux: Oh my God.

Q: —you know, 2023 is going to be a pivotal year.

De Veaux: Oh my God, I need to go there. I need to go there and take off my clothes and show this seventy-four-year-old body. I do, I do.

Q: Yes, absolutely. And it still feels very intergenerational, like even—I feel like—

De Veaux: Do they still call it the nude beach?

Q: Just Riis.

De Veaux: Just Riis.

Q: But it is nude, I mean it's more nude early and late—

De Veaux: Right, right.

Q: —so, and it gets cruisy at night still, which is fine.

De Veaux: Oh, oh.

Q: So Riis has a little spice.

De Veaux: I love it. I love it.

Q: Like everything in New York, it might be fine, like the changes might benefit us. But the change is scary because I wrote this new story I'm writing, but like New York is, you know, something goes down, something else is going to go up, and the price will also go up.

De Veaux: That’s right, that's right.

Q: So we'll see—

De Veaux: That's right.

Q: —what it means but—

De Veaux: That is a truth about New York City, but I'm glad that it's still—we're talking, what, forty years later?

Q: Yes.

De Veaux: I'm glad that they're still—excuse me, I'm glad that there's still like a continuity. There's still—

Q: There is.

De Veaux:—this—

Q: There is.

De Veaux: Oh, my God.

Q: I feel like even my layer, we were all there for Pride, which is really fun. I always should be in New York for Pride and—but there was a moment we were like, Oh, we don't know everybody here, you know, and it was exciting. It was like, oh, it's different, like there has been—and it's also post Panini kind of like times, everyone just will have moved or people are just having different relationships in the public space in the city.

De Veaux: Yes, yes.

Q: But it was funny to be like, I can remember when I first came to Riis and just would be like, everybody from the club was there. It was like the club from last night had just redeposited itself on the beach.

De Veaux: Right, right.

Q: And actually, that's still happening, but it's not the same people that I was out and about with and doing my thing with.

De Veaux: Right.

Q: But it's nice to feel that the need is still there, you know?

De Veaux: Oh my God, I need to go back, thank you. I need to go at least one more time while I'm on this planet.

Q: It will happen.

De Veaux: That time was everything, it was everything, yes. Plus, you also got to see other bodies. That was part of it too. You got to see what does it look like in somebody else's body, what does queer look like in somebody else's body or on somebody else's body? So you could see it, so you could have that reflection. It was about that too. It was about mirroring, so you could see yourself differently, but you could see yourself out there. So you had ways that you could reference your body where you'll be like, Oh, I like how they do that, I'm going to do that too. Like, oh, I have—

Q: I heard that, yes.

De Veaux:—[*crosstalk*], what, look at that [unclear], it'll drive you crazy. You'll be like, oh, my God. It was so much beauty, it was beauty, it was so Black, it was beauty, and you could just—you could dream. You could dream, you could just dream, and you could have all these mirrors around you.

Q: That's so beautiful.

De Veaux: Oh, it was amazing. It was amazing. When I hear people coming up behind me, younger people coming up behind me, I've heard this actually, Black and queer and brown women saying, "Oh, I moved to Brooklyn because I heard about all this women's history." Yes, we were that history, we were that history that you moved to. Yes, you're right, but we were that history, so let's make a connection here. It wasn't like some ethereal thing, we were there doing that thing that you came to be a part of, so let's make the connections. Let's see how we have evolved as a community. And hopefully, we can share with you-all what it was like for us to do that.

How did we do Flamboyant Ladies Theater Company Salons? We had no money, we weren't—we didn’t get no grants for that. We would—couldn't have gotten a grant for that, do you know what I mean? We did it, however we did it, we did it because we knew it was necessary, and we were part of a group of women who did things in their house or found ways to do things. Salsa Soul Sisters was alive at the time then. I think as we experienced them, they were much more

about organizing and politicizing, whereas Gwen and I were about the cultural work because we artists, so we were about the cultural work. But we were all existing at the same time.

Q: Yes, yes.

De Veaux: Yes, yes.

Q: Is there anything else you want to touch on for the session today?

De Veaux: I really am amazed that you asked me to share that part of my life, Riis because, one, I've never been asked about it.

Q: Really?

De Veaux: Yes, never.

Q: Wow.

De Veaux: Never been asked about it.

Q: It takes one to know one.

De Veaux: Hey, baby, [*laughter*] I know that's why, ah. Oh, you touched my pearls, I know that's right. [*Laughter*] And I'm really happy about it. I am really happy about just knowing that you're doing this because it's an important part of our history, and like other parts, we need to—it's like a—we're making this big puzzle, we need to put all the pieces in, so we could see the whole puzzle.

Q: That's right.

De Veaux: And Riis is one of those pieces, and it's a chunk.

Q: Yes, it is.

De Veaux: It's a chunk.

Q: It is.

De Veaux: Yes, for so many who were able to and are able to go to that space and have freedom and know freedom. Thank you, thank you for including me because this is amazing.

Q: Thank you for saying yes. I mean—

De Veaux: This is amazing.

Q: —glad to come visit,—

De Veaux: Oh, God, yes.

Q: —stay in your kitchen and—

De Veaux: Yes, in the kitchen.

Q: —hear the stories.

De Veaux: Yes, thank you, love, thank you so much. [*Laughter*]

Q: Of course.

De Veaux: Thank you so much.

Q: We might have to do a part two, but I think this is good for today.

De Veaux: Okay.

Q: Because we've been talking for a minute.

De Veaux: Okay. Well, I'm happy about it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]