

I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Lola Flash

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lola Flash conducted by Jenna J Wortham on January 31, 2023. 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: Lola Flash

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Jenna J Wortham

Date: January 31, 2023

Flash: Hello.

Q: Lola, hi.

Flash: Hi, Jenna, how are you?

Q: I'm really good. I'm going by J a little bit more now.

Flash: You're going by what?

Q: J, just the letter.

Flash: Just the letter, okay, J. I actually was going to ask you that because I was kind of confused.

Q: Yes, it's a new shift. Thank you so much for making time. How are you today?

Flash: Yes, I'm good. I'm just having a very nice kind of leisurely day today.

Q: As it should be, I love that.

Flash: Yes, I got like a mani-pedi, and I got my eyebrows done, and went to the gym. Now I'm watching tennis, so it's just kind of like okay [*laughter*].

Q: Oh, that's so good. Well, I'm really honored to chat with you and to hear some of your stories of living the gay life by the water, which I love talking to people about. And so much of your practice involves that as well, so I'm excited to hear a little bit more about that.

So just to start a few things, I would love it if you could just say your full name, your date of birth, and where you are right now.

Flash: Okay, my name is Lola Flash. My birthday is February 10, and it was in the year of 1959. And right now, I am in Manhattan on the east side.

Q: Thank you.

Flash: So are you writing an article or something about it? What's happening?

Q: So this is going to be for the oral history project that I was telling you about. I've been working on a couple of different things at the same time, but this in particular is the oral history project called *I See the Light in You* [I See My Light Shining: An Oral History of Our Elders].

And then I might roll some of these interviews into maybe an art project or a book project; I've been thinking about that as well, which is something I would love to see.

Flash: And I guess you saw some of the articles last summer about Fire Island [New York] in the *[New York] Times*.

Q: I did, yes, I saw Zach's [Stafford] piece. I thought that was really great, and your work was paired with that, which is incredible.

Flash: And I'm so happy about that.

Q: How did he feel about that piece?

Flash: You know, I mean everyone has their own experiences. I think especially boys, and Black boys or guys, have different experiences than Black dykes do. So I was like okay, well that's what he experienced. It wasn't really the kind of experiences I have had. But you know, I think it's important for people to hear and to see how people feel. And I think especially now, since more Black and Brown people are able to afford to go out there and buy homes and things like that, it's really changing, which is really great.

Q: When did you first start going out there?

Flash: Gosh, I started going out there, it must've been in the '90s—yes, I would say early-'90s. Because my friend Jeanette [*phonetic*] and her partner at the time, they had a place. And then people like—oh gosh, what's his name—Johnny Dinelle [*phonetic*] used to DJ out there, and my friend Aldo Hernandez, he's a DJ out there also. And then different people would perform and stuff like that. I used to just kind of go out there to party, so more like go out for evening events, party all night, and then get on the next ferry home [*laughs*]. In the beginning, that was really my experience. And I lived in London [England] during that time, so when I would come home for the summer, I would go out there.

I remember one summer, there was the [Fire Island] Pines Party. So for the most part of my time in Fire Island, I spent a lot of time in the Pines. But anyway, I went out there one year, I remember, to go to my friend's house. It had turned out the Pines Party was happening, and it was right in front of their house. And so that was a trip, because I remember the theme was—oh gosh, what's the guy who does all the drawings of men in leather, what is his name?

Q: Tom of Finland?

Flash: Yes, the Tom-of-Finland-themed party, so that was pretty cool. Because back during that time, I was a big leather girl, so that was just like the ultimate. But I remember partying and partying and then having to leave there and go to London. So I remember I had like three bags, and I was still kind of like high, [*laughs*] and I remember going one, two, three bags, like just counting my bags. I just remember that was like the craziest trip from the Pines to London, and

then getting to London and having to open up my suitcase and get my coat out because it was cold like way back in the day.

So then when I actually moved back—so I was in London for twelve years—then when I came back, my friend Joyce had a share, and she couldn't afford it that year, so she asked me if I wanted it. And I was like yes, it was really inexpensive because it was just like a quarter-share, so you just to out once a month for a week. And it was like this tiny little house, it didn't even have a TV or a pool. We had a nice little back area where you could barbecue and stuff like that. And it was so close to the ocean, you could hear the ocean at night in bed.

And so after that first experience, I asked them if I could do a half-share, so that was great. I was out there every other week, it was just great. And at that time, my mom was unwell, so I had moved back to America because my mom was unwell. And I'm an only child, so I just couldn't bear her being here without me, so I came home. So having the share for at least the first couple years was just like a great way to escape from all the stuff with mom and sort of rejuvenate and come back and basically kind of be her caregiver.

And back then, there was like no cell phone service at most people's places, so if you wanted to get any cell phone access, you had to go into like where the pier is. So that was also great too, because I think for me, one of the best parts about Fire Island is just like getting on that ferry and sort of like not looking back. And you sort of just think, okay, I'm leaving the world behind, and I'm going to this kind of crazy fairyland place where there's just queer folk, you know? So it was just a really great way to escape everything here on the mainland, so to speak.

For me, at that point, I really liked the Pines, loved the Pines more than the [Cherry] Grove because it was all boys, for the most part. And I mean there's always been straight people there, but there was really no kids, the queer folks didn't have kids back in those days. And so it was just like me and the boys, so I was like checking out their outfits. I can remember, like after a few drinks, I'd be like, "My arm is going to be as big as yours next year," and they'd just look at me like, "Okay, Lola, if you say so." [Laughter] I mean as an artist, men's bodies, I love looking at them either naked or with clothes on, either way. Like I don't buy *Vogue* [magazine], you know what I mean, I would look at *GQ* [*Gentleman's Quarterly*], you know what I mean? That's like more my fashion sense. So yes, I just enjoyed that.

And also, I don't want to sound like feeda [*phonetic*] or anything, but I just felt like for me during that time, I didn't want to be misunderstood. So you know, like you start to drink, and then you're dancing, and then you're jumping around. And I could just jump around or hug the boys, and they knew that I wasn't coming on to them, you know what I mean? And so they would hug me back, and I would know that none of them would misunderstand that we were going home that evening.

Whereas I feel like with girls, with all the stuff going on with my mom, I just really didn't want any kind of girl action, and I didn't want to just like glance at some girl and her thinking I'm coming on to her. So I kind of spent almost all of my time in the Pines. Sometimes I'd go over to the Grove for like a drag show or a drink or so at Cherry's, but it was really like kind of a safe haven for me for many years.

And also Lina [Bradford] was DJ-ing, so Lina was the main DJ. I can remember this little place where I stayed at was just like maybe one or two walks down from the pier. So like at night, you do the normal, you go to the beach, and then you come home and make something to eat, and then if you want to, you go out. But I would always be like no, I'm not going to go out, but then I would start to hear Lina playing because I could hear the music at my place, and my little feet would start shuffling. And all of a sudden, they started shuffling me into the club. Lina is just love, you know.

Q: Are you talking about Lina Bradford?

Flash: Yes. Because everyone loves her, there's just like this feeling of love. Like you all feel like you're all related, because everyone thinks they're related to Lina, you know what I mean, we all think we're her family. And so therefore, it was just like, for me, a really beautiful warm experience of just dancing to this great music that Lina was playing. And then I would just go home and do the same thing again the next day.

Another thing I remember about it was, during the week when it was kind of quiet, my friend, Shawn [*phonetic*]*—*I have to tell you Shawn's last name, I can't remember his last name right now*—*oh, Shawn Reeves [*phonetic*]*—*he's Black. He, Lina, and I used to hang out together, and we used to go*—*like we would be walking into town, and we'd be like, "Here comes the chocolate express." [*Laughter*] We would just be like, "Choo, choo, choo, here comes the

chocolate express.” And that was really nice getting to know her more away from her being DJ Lina. I think I must have had that share for about five or six years, I can’t really remember.

But then something kind of weird happened; I can’t really remember because I tend to block negative stuff out. Like I had gotten this guy to come be my roommate, and then he somehow talked to the people who were like the main people, and got me out of the share even though I had gotten him in. And so I was just like, you know what, maybe it’s time to go. And I’m also like not much for confrontation, so I was just like okay, I’m out. I would go out there for day trips and stuff like that, but for, I don’t know, ten years or more, I didn’t really go out there, or even think about having a share, and it wasn’t until I did the BOFFO residency. Do you know people who have done that?

Q: I do, but I’m also hung up on—so this person ousted you, and then that kept you from Fire Island until this last summer?

Flash: No, it didn’t keep me from Fire Island, but I think it just was like—I mean it’s fun to have a share out there, but then it’s like your whole summer is committed to that, you know what I mean? So it’s like you do a week out there, and then you come home. You know me, I would probably do photo shoots, and then it would be time to go back out again. It’s not cheap, you know what I mean, so it was just I don’t think I really looked at it that way. I think I just thought to myself, it was just like a sign from the universe that it’s time for you to finish this part of your life on Fire Island, you know?

Q: What years were those when you were kind of going through that five-or-six-year chunk of time?

Flash: I came back to America in 2002, so it was probably like 2003 to 2008 or something like that. And then in 2021—which was a big gap—I got the BOFFO residency. And they had just gotten a new pool in this place. Have you been to the BOFFO [Show] House?

Q: I haven't been yet. It looks great.

Flash: Yes, I mean you're right there on the bay, you can have breakfast on the bay. You don't even have to go shopping. Once a week, you tell them what you want, you tell them how many guests you have—because it's like a three-bedroom place—and like I order salmon, and I tell them I have five people, and they get five slabs of salmon. It's just so nice.

I mean I worked every day. Like they really are one of those residencies that are very helpful. And at first, I was just like I've been doing photo shoots for twenty, thirty years, like I don't need any help. But then I realized, wow, it really was nice to have help. I probably had like three shoots a day. So even though I had my friends out there, they all knew—you know, I only invited my giver friends because I knew that they would either cook or clean and not be like, "Stay up late, Lola." You know how some people do that, even though they know you have to go to work or whatever.

Anyway, I just got my good giver friends that came out, and it was lovely, you could have a meal at a table. Like I don't know what your place is like, but most of my friends don't have tables to eat at. So it was just nice to have a place to commune with friends that some of them I hadn't seen for a while. Or some of them I invited out, like April—do you know April and June? April is a DJ. I can send you the full names. But April is lovely, and I was able to have her and her partner out and get to know her on a more social level.

And then plus, get all the series that was in the *New York Times*, I started that series there. I had my cousins out, I told them about it, my cousin, Andrea [*phonetic*] and her husband, George—but of course, all the people that know me know how much I love Fire Island—and they were able to come out for a whole week. I think for them, for straight people who don't really have a lot of gay friends, it's a real experience. It was really great for them to meet my friends.

I remember George, at one point, said something like, “Gosh, they're so smart.” He didn't mean it to be patronizing, but I think probably because of what he sees on TV or whatever in the media. I think things are changing, but George is older than me, so I think he didn't really know intelligent queer folks, you know.

He saw *Watermelon Woman* because I did a film series, and he came and watched *Watermelon Woman*. And it didn't dawn on me, but luckily now, we can stream movies, but we've grown up on so much straight films. So straight people, they don't see queer films, you know what I mean, unless they're queer-adjacent or something, you know? So it was a really great experience for me and for him.

I remember one time, we were walking into town, and someone hollered, “Lola Flash,” and I turned around, and I just kind of waved, like do I know that person? And he looked at me and saw me looking puzzled, and he said, “I love your work.” And so George looked at me like, “Oh, you’re like that now, huh?” So he was really sweet. And then sadly, he passed away in the fall. And he has some gay grandchildren because my cousin and him got married later on in life. And so I think that also helped him understand more about queer life. But that was I think one of the highlights of the residency. And so then that made me think, like oh my god, I love this place, I’d forgotten how much I loved it.

And so my friend Beck Manson [*phonetic*], who does my re-touching or post-production for my *Syzygy* work mostly, they were out with me. I kept encouraging them to stay longer because I would go out and shoot, and then I’d come back, and I would just give them my files. And then we would just sit there, and they would just—you know, for my post-production stuff for my work, I don’t make people look younger or anything like that, but it’s more like they make it so that the work flows nicely together, so tonally it works well. So they were able to do my work like right after I finished shooting it. Plus, they have their own business, so they were doing their own work. So Beck and I were like, “We should do this again next summer.” So we did, we looked into a place, and we got this wonderful place at the very end of the Grove. Last year, we were there for three months.

I had actually planned to do—so the series that I started, it’s called *Unsung Fire Island*, and so that was like photographing the Black and Brown people of Fire Island. And I had hoped

actually to get more day trippers, but the schedule that we created, I was just like going from one person's house to another person's house, photographing different Black and Brown folks. And as you could imagine, most of them were men, except for the Black women that I brought in, my friends.

So I had planned to photograph, and I met this wonderful—actually, again, BOFFO introduced me to this wonderful woman named Diane Romano, and she's kind of like the mayor of the Grove. She's the trippiest [*sic*] woman, she's something else. And talk about cancer, she got cancer, and she was just like, "It's not taking me," and she's now cancer-free. And her girlfriend's cancer from like twenty-five years ago came back, and she got herself sorted, and she's cancer-free now.

So these two women, I think they've been together for like fifty years J, I can't believe it. They're just wonderful. I'm actually going to photograph them this summer for my *Salt* series, which is women over seventy. Anyway, I went over to hang out with them for an afternoon, Beck and I did, and they were like, "Come next summer. We'll introduce you to all the women." There's some great women, there's more Black women homeowners out there now in the Grove, and like they know them all.

So I did go out there last summer with the intention of kind of leveling out the *Unsung Fire Island* series, but I just rested, I was like tired. I retired from teaching last year in February, so it's almost been a year, and there's no place like relaxing out there. So we had a pool, a hot tub, outdoor showers—can you hold on one second? I'll tell this person I'll call them back.

Q: Yes, of course.

[INTERRUPTION]

Flash: Okay, are you there?

Q: Yes.

Flash: So anyway, Beck and I are renting the same place again this summer, and so I'm going to go out there and properly do the rest of the photographs. One of the people I've been chasing is Wanda Sykes. I don't know if you know, but she has like one of the biggest houses out there.

Q: I always see her, yes, pretty amazing.

Flash: Yes. So she said yes, but as you know, her career has really skyrocketed these days, and so she's busy, and when she comes there, she wants to relax. So we worked on it last summer, and it just didn't happen, so hopefully this summer, it'll happen. And there's this wonderful woman, Kay, who I photographed last summer actually. I don't know if she's the head of the fire department, but she's wonderful. So I'm looking forward to actually doing a little bit of work.

Last summer, mostly what we did was, I did a lot of underwater stuff, so I went to a lot of different people's pools and did my underwater stuff with Syzygy, which has been really fun. I'd

like to go someplace where there's clear water so I can actually get into the ocean. I'm not getting in the ocean in Fire Island, that's for sure, but the pools are really fun to play in, and Beck is really good at photographing these, so yes, we have a laugh. So I guess that's my Fire Island story. I don't know what kind of questions you might have.

Q: Who first told you about Fire Island, and what did they tell you? Do you remember that?

Flash: You know, I don't really. So I was always a Provincetown [Massachusetts] person, so I would say late-'80s like around the time when we were doing the Clit Club and all, I was doing Provincetown. And so I would spend the whole summer in Provincetown. I was an ice cream scooper, I worked at Spiritus. Do you know Provincetown, have you ever been?

Q: Yes, I've been a few times.

Flash: And so I mean, as far as I was concerned, I had like the best job there. I made more money scooping ice cream than teaching [*laughs*]. And so I was always like I'm never going to be a Fire Island person, I'm always going to be a Provincetown person, and I said that for many years, because I think I did Provincetown for like maybe ten years. I'm sort of thinking about the calendar. When I was in London, yes, there was some crossover, but anyway, I just never really thought I would be a Fire Island person.

I guess when I lived in Provincetown, I heard about Fire Island. I mean it was different back then too, like everything, you know—I guess that's kind of passe to say. In Provincetown, I was a

teacher, there were lawyers who were dishwashers. People just got like really kooky jobs to just kind of maintain for the summer. Whereas now, it's really different, it's really expensive. I mean I remember paying for my little shack that I had at the beginning of the summer, and then all the money I made for the rest of the summer, I would just bank. That's how I ended up going to London, because I had saved all this money. And then I would also photograph during the summer and have a big show in Provincetown at the end. So between the sales and the savings, I was looking cute.

So yes, I mean it's interesting. Like for me, growing older, it's really interesting just to see like the different stages of Lola. And why I like the Grove more now is because there is a really wonderful community of women, and they are my age. So like I did a talk out there for Juneteenth, and when I was talking about like my time during ACT UP. I was looking, and everyone was like nodding, I saw some tears, and I knew I didn't have to say like everyone knows what ACT UP is. It's like sometimes when I say ACT UP, I just see like blank stares.

And so I felt like they were all like kind of from the same age or same era of people. So there's this kind of commonality even amongst the white women that is just really nice. I don't even think I went clubbing, I went and had drinks, but I wasn't up until like three in the morning, like I used to be. And so it's just a really nice kind of quieter time, like getting up early and taking a walk. That's when I would usually see Wanda, like taking a walk early in the morning or going on the beach early in the morning. It just feels really different now, so the Grove suits me better for the pace that I am at.

And then you also see people that you know, maybe you don't really know them, but you know their names. What's that girl, Alison Beckel [*phonetic*] or something like that, the one who did that play, *Home*, or something.

Q: *Fun Home*, are you thinking of Alison Bechdel?

Flash: Yes, Alison Bechdel.

Q: If that's still the name [*crosstalk*] I'm not sure, but yes.

Flash: Something like that. Yes, I saw her out there, I just breezed by her. There's this woman that I used to always see, she's a teacher also, and we taught school near each other in Brooklyn. And so we see each other like in the morning; I saw her up there with her partner. And so yes, there's like this community that I like in the Grove for the Lola that I am now [*laughs*].

Q: I want to come the same time as you. We have to coordinate our dates because I would really love to be out there at the same time.

Flash: Yes, we're out there, it's like the last weekend in July, like the twenty ninth or something, that last Friday in July, to two weeks into August, that's when we'll be out there. You know, I don't know if I'm going to do it again, as much as I would like to. Renting is just so expensive, but it's also like what are you worth kind of thing.

I never really felt much like a grown-up with teaching, it's always been just kind of a check-to-check kind of thing for most of my life. And I'm definitely not balling now, but I can afford to treat myself to stuff that I never used to. So there's that part of being able to just like spend a lot of money on myself, which is nice.

But there's also like residencies that I want to do and, and there's projects that I want to finish, and more traveling around other places that I want to go. So I'm contemplating, should I do it again for next year, and maybe just do a week, as opposed to three weeks. But three weeks straight through is really lovely. I never had that, [*unclear*] like every other week. But you can really get into a nice little kind of groove when you're out there for three weeks or more.

And then, of course, I have all my friends in the Pines, all the BOFFO people, who are just amazing, I'm they're like my new little family. And there's so many wonderful things, events that they plan and, like I said, the movie series and all that. But yes, it's definitely different, and I guess that's what's nice about the island, it's like there's something for everybody. I mean I would not even have thought about going to a movie back in the '90s, like a movie? I think I'll take a disco nap and then go out [*laughs*].

But now it's just meeting more people. And I know some lovely guys that have homes out there, Black guys that have homes out there, that are just really wonderful. Interesting, though, that the Black guys that have homes out there, at least the ones I know, all have white boyfriends, so I don't know what that is. I mean I've dated white people, so I'm not saying like, but it's just—

Q: Just observing.

Flash: Yes, I mean it's just about patriarchy and race and how deep our pockets are, and why some of our pockets are not as deep as others. I remember, I do have a story. I was just going to say I never had any problems with race there, but I did have this problem once. My friend Shawn that I was telling you about, he and his partner had a house, they just sold it.

But anyway, I was hanging out with him, and we were playing Scrabble, and I met this woman friend of his who actually, I taught her daughter. Her daughter was in fourth grade at the time, and I was a substitute teacher in the East Village. I was like oh my god, there's Hale [*phonetic*], and Hale said, "This is my mom," so we've been friends ever since. Anyway, we found that we were going to go home on the same ferry. I had already packed, I had my stuff at Shawn's, and she was close to where Shawn was staying. So I said I'll just come over, she's going to shower, and then we'll get on the ferry.

So I went to their house, the place, the share that they were at, and I sat down and read the *Times* while they were getting ready. And this white guy comes in—girl, this white boy came in, and he asked me if I was the maid.

Q: No didn't!

Flash: He sure did. He asked me if I was the maid.

Q: Oh my god, Lola, I'm so sorry that happened.

Flash: And again, like I said, I have this denial thing. Like I remember the story, but I don't even remember what I said to him. I think I just said no, and I got up and hollered to my friend, "I'll wait for you outside." And then I told her what happened, and she was so embarrassed, because she's white also, but her daughter actually is mixed race. But yes, I could not believe it. And I'm like what maid sits around looking at the *New York Times*. I pretty much always have a shaved head. I don't know, I don't think I look like a maid.

Q: It doesn't matter how we look. It's just a matter of that's the only way someone can understand your context. It's like, "The only context that I have for encountering you is, you must be a maid," not like your someone's friend, or your visiting, it's Fire Island, but this must be the reason you're here. That's the wow part to me.

Flash: Yes, I know, I'm so glad I remembered to tell you that because that was really like wow. I've always had a sense of pride in knowing who I am, so it didn't affect my character, you know what I mean, I wasn't like sad. I was angry, but I have kind of a latent, my emotions kind of come late. So like by the time I was home, and the next day, I was just like really furious, you know? I have to say that I've been pretty blessed with not having many racial things happening towards me. Probably micro-aggressions, but not full-on like the N word type of thing, so yes. I'm so glad I remembered to tell you, that's pretty important.

But yes, everything else, I mean people just have—I've met some lovely boys that we're still really good friends. When I'm out there, if they still go out there, I make sure to see them. Of course, like the people who work at the restaurants and all that kind of stuff, it's nice to have a community. I guess at the end of the day for me, it's nice to have a community where—and I'm sure you know—just to be in a place where it's more queer people than not.

I was just in Marrakesh, and it was beautiful. Obviously, you can still feel like the colonial kind of things, even with just the language, that are apparent. But it's really nice to just be around where Black and Brown people are like the majority. But they all thought I was from there, but I'm kind of like—I think maybe you too—we kind of have a look where we could kind of look like we're from almost anywhere [*laughs*], you know, which I think is kind of nice, I mean for me, it's nice. I find I'm in Paris, and people are asking me for directions, and I'm like I don't know [*laughs*]. But what were you going to ask me?

Q: I was just going to ask if you had thoughts on what it is about waterfronts that maybe perhaps appeals to our communities. I mean is there something for you, even just personally, about being near the water that feels particularly gay? I don't know. Like I've just been trying to figure out if there is some interesting link between—you know, I think about like Chelsea Pier, and I think about P-Town [Provincetown], and then I think about that little island off of P-Town that people go to. Yes, a lot of people go—

Flash: Yes, and even in Delaware, right, there's a big queer place just off of Delaware down there, Cape May, around Cape May and all. I mean I don't know—for me, I'm Aquarius, and I just have always loved the water.

And I think about like old photographs of my family. We have a lot of family in—I mean not a lot anymore—but in Asbury Park. So my dad's side of the family, there were a lot of ones that lived in New York, like around 135th Street and stuff. And some of them were like performers and stuff like that and singers. And so they would come down to Asbury Park because I think Asbury Park had places where Black people could be on the beach and could go see performances. So I remember seeing a lot of pictures of them down in Asbury Park back in the day.

And I remember them coming to my dad's parties, and they would always sing the *Native New Yorker* song. As soon as they'd walk in, they would [*laughs*] sing that song, and I was like okay, the party is on. But I don't know if it's really—I mean it's interesting that you point that out, that they do seem to be water places. And even think about like Martha's Vineyard for Black folks. I don't know, it's an interesting question.

Q: Something you said earlier that I wanted to go back to is, you were talking about going to P-Town or just getting away, even to Fire Island, just like escaping some problems and [*unclear*] a little bit, just finding a place for respite. I wonder if that was true when you were more involved in ACT UP and doing Clit Club stuff, like just needing an escape because everything was so involved and heavy, or is that not how you were thinking about it?

Flash: Yes, I think during that time, which seems like it was longer, but it was probably like three years, because I couldn't take it anymore. But I think I was so embroiled in it that I didn't even really know. Like I didn't ever think to say to Julie, "Let's go get a massage." I was so wrapped up in it, Ray, everyone was dying.

I remember actually the reason why I left America was, one, I broke up with Julie, and she was running all the girl bars, and I was being an asshole, I was not being—you know, we both were being not very nice—so I couldn't come to any of her clubs [*laughs*]. And then just all the people dying. And I just thought to myself, you know what, if I keep up with this speed, I'm going to—like when I get to forty, I'm going to look forty.

I remember thinking like I felt like I needed to remove myself, because even though—since I was young, I was able to go at that pace, you know. But I just had some kind of thought, like oh, I need to get away from here, because otherwise, I'm going to like—probably what would've happened was like some kind of nervous breakdown. But my little young brain, I was just thinking like I'm not going to be looking cute at forty, so [*laughs*] I better get away so that I can sort of keep my looks and my spirit.

I was living in Atlanta at the time, and I met this kooky lady called Anna [*phonetic*]. She was like this older lesbian who liked me, she fancied me, and so she gave me this job. She said, "I have a restaurant in Provincetown. You can come up and work in the kitchen." She didn't know who she was talking to, because you don't want me in your kitchen. I was just like, "Okay, okay"

and so I ended up being a waitress. I drove all the way up from Atlanta, I remember, to go to Provincetown and work for her. And it didn't last for very long.

I ended up meeting Sharon Ness [*phonetic*]*—*I don't know if you know Sharon, but she used to be a girlfriend to Cookie Mueller [*phonetic*], and she was in a lot of John Waters' films. Yes, she's lovely. And so I met her, and she got me the job at Spiritus, and then I showed her my work. And she's like, "What are you doing in Atlanta? You should be in New York."

And so she let me stay in her studio apartment on Sixth Street between First and Second. Again, in my little kid's head, I was like I imagined a plane was going to fly me to New York to my gallery opening, whatever, but it wasn't quite like that. But yes, so I ended up continuing going to Provincetown for the next ten years. So that's what then brought me to New York, and so that's how I then got involved in ACT UP. I met Julie, I remember, at El Museo del Barrio. I remember meeting her there [*laughs*], it's funny, so yes.

I felt like I couldn't step away to even think about like what was happening. Maybe my brain wasn't developed enough or something, but I wasn't able to step outside. Even when I see things that people write, I was taking pictures, but I really wasn't showing much. I was like taking pictures and then just getting the film processed and then just moving on. Like I wasn't thinking I should have a show here, or I should have a show there.

And my work at the time was like the Cross Colour work, and so I was never like in any ACT UP shows, because one, I wasn't pushy, and two, I think that that work was not documentary for

them. It looked like all the colors, I think, made it seem—yes, I mean that’s a whole other conversation—but the Cross Colour work now, that’s what all the museums are buying from that era that we’re talking about. People didn’t understand it. And I think it also has to do with like color photography was sort of new-ish, sort of, you know. I can’t remember, it was maybe like the ’60s, ’70s, color film started happening.

And so now here I am doing this weird color, so people are like, “What the hell is this?” And of course, patriarchy and all that kind of stuff feeds into why my work wasn’t shown in ACT UP. But again, I wasn’t even thinking like why isn’t my work being shown? I was so inundated with my friends dying that it was just like okay, go to work, go to an ACT UP meeting, go to Clit Club, it was just like, you know—yes, really.

Q: What years were those for you?

Flash: I’m thinking it was like I went to London in ’90 or ’91, so it was sort of circa ’87 to ’91, somewhere around there.

Q: You were a baby.

Flash: I was. And funnily enough, I just spent time in London with three of my exes [*laughs*], and I got these really—I’ll send you one of the pictures, actually—this is your cell that you called me on?

Q: Yes, this is.

Flash: Because I got a bunch of pictures of me. I was actually like thirty, but I look like I'm like twelve. When I moved over there, I was only supposed to go for two months. And I met all these leather girls, and at that time, me and Julie, we were all like leather girls back then. And so I met all these leather girls over in London, and no one was working, everyone was on the Dole [*phonetic*]. I mean I learned how to drink over there because those people know how to drink, you know what I mean? I remember the first time I held a pint, I was like damn, I'm going to have to finish all this big [*laughs*] you know? And so yes, I called my mom on the day after Christmas, Boxing Day, and I was like, "Mom, I'm not coming home." And so I ended up staying there for twelve years, yes. It's crazy.

Q: That's incredible.

Flash: So now, my partner is over there. I have a long-distance relationship going on, and so just trying to figure out like—I don't want to leave New York, but I want to be closer to her, so that's sort of my next challenge. I mean unless we buy a big house, I don't think we'll ever be living in a small apartment together. I don't see that, but we'll see. So that's my story [*laughs*].

Q: It's pretty good. We only have a little bit of time left. I wanted to keep this at an hour just to me mindful of your time. But I would love to hear any details of your childhood that you remember or like moving to New York, because you grew up in New Jersey, right?

Flash: Yes, I did, Montclair.

Q: What were you like as a kid?

Flash: My mom was a single mom, and my dad was like a Saturday dad. I think like most only children, I was kind of mature, I think I was more mature. Like in fifth grade, I was the same size I am now, so I was like the big girl for a little while. And I was the first girl to get a bra, and boys used to pull my strap. Yes, I can remember I had a jean jacket that I wore all the way through high school from fifth grade.

My parents are both teachers, so I was very much like an apple polisher. My best friend Gloria, who we're still friends, we've been friends now for sixty-one years [*laughs*], we were always like battling to get the highest grade. If the teacher wanted one essay, we would write two. We actually wrote books together. In first grade, we used to go to the kindergarteners and read our books to them. And so sometimes Gloria would write it, and I would illustrate it, or vice versa. And yes, we're still really good friends to today.

I had a camera when I was little, so it was like my toy. I took pictures of my fish tank. I was always seeing, so I think because I had that camera so young, I was always sort of making pictures, even if I didn't have a camera in my hand. And I actually used to think, I wish my eye was a camera, and I'd just have to blink. Obviously, this was before even computers, you know, but I can remember when I was little thinking how cool it would be just to be able to do something like that, you know?

And so now there's like the technology, you know what I mean, like the camera, like sunglass cameras, there's all kinds of mini cameras that I was wanting when I was a kid. So I think that always just really, having the cameras so early on made me—I guess it was a double-fold, right? Like I was very visual, so the camera was a good thing for me, but then that just made me more into sort of like framing everything.

And so my mom was the first Black principal in Montclair, and it took her a hundred million years to finish her masters, I remember, because she was working full-time. She went to Columbia Teacher's College. I remember coming over with her and sitting in the classroom with her and drawing or whatever and being quiet. And her fellow students would look at me like, "Oh my god, that's a child." And I would just be like totally so well-behaved. So I think having both parents being educators, this made me really aware of how important education is. And speaking, as my mom would say, the king's English.

When I was a teacher, and I'd tell the kids that they can't swear, they're like, "I'm sure you swear, Miss." And I'm like well, not really [*laughs*]. Like when I stub my toe, I say "shit," but yes, me and my friends don't really sit around using words like that. So I was raised very much like that, and like really corny. I used to go to Union Baptist Church in Montclair, but when I look at what other churches were like, I was just like ours is so corny. No one was falling out in the aisles. It was just really kind of like dogma, yes.

So yes, I took tennis lessons. I was kind of privileged, since I was the only child. And my dad was a big tennis player—actually, my mom and dad both played tennis. So I took tennis lessons, I played a lot of tennis. I went to the US Open with my dad and saw Billie Jean King and Martina [Navratilova] back when the US Open used to be like you would park on people's lawns. It was not like where the big center is now, it was smaller. I did a lot of tennis tournaments with my dad, which I really loved.

I had a boyfriend in high school, his name was Larry McCray [*phonetic*]. He came from the Bay Area, so he seemed really different. But I can remember—I'm trying to wrap this up—I remember right when I was coming to get ready to go into high school, and I remember driving by the high school. There was just one high school in Montclair, like my grandmother went there, and my mom, like everyone went to that high school.

And I remember looking at the girls with their knee-highs and thinking how cute they looked. And I said to my mom, "Mom, it's okay to look at girls, isn't it?" And she said, "Yes, that's why women buy magazines, we look at other women for fashion." So I was like okay, cool. And I had a big crush on one of the cheerleaders, Lynn Cavelo [*phonetic*]. We'd go to the basketball games, and the girls were all looking at the boys, and I was just waiting for halftime for Lynn [*laughter*]. And I'd always have like a little joint rolled for her, and I'd be like, "Here, Lynn." So yes, so I didn't, I mean—I don't know, how much older am I than you, like twenty years, thirty years?

Q: Yes, that's about right, there's a couple of decades. I'm a little too tired to do the math, but that sounds right.

Flash: I spent so much time coming over to New York or walking up and down Christopher Street as soon as I was old enough to come over by myself or with a friend. And the boys were all like Marlboro men with cowboy hats on and mustaches and chaps. And I was like wow, they look so cool.

But never really seeing girls, but then if I did see girls, they were either like big macho Latinx women, or else they were like blond petite little girls. There didn't seem to be anyone that looked like me. And I kind of just thought that boys were gay—you know, honestly, I didn't realize that—because there weren't movies, there was not the L word. And so I just really thought I was kind of asexual for a long time.

But even when I was with Larry, I didn't like the sex with him, it was just like is it over yet [*laughs*], you know what I mean? But he loved coming over to New York, and we used to come over, and we saw so many amazing jazz—he actually had a car with an eight-track, and so we would just like get in the car and come over to New York and go to like the Blue Note. We both loved jazz, and so we saw so many amazing people, so many who are not with us now.

And so I actually got my first darkroom in his house. Like so many places, there was Montclair, like Lower Montclair, and Upper Montclair, and he lived in Upper Montclair because his dad was a big accountant, so they were really rich. So they had a spare bathroom on their third floor,

and my mom bought me a darkroom, so I was able to have my darkroom in their house. And so that's what really hooked me. And it was right near my high school, so after high school, I would just go straight to Larry's house and up to the third floor. The darkroom experience was like what really hooked me into like this is what I want to do.

In Montclair, there's lots of things about Montclair, like bougie Black people, which I suppose there are a lot of them. And there's like the Jack and Jill, which I didn't qualify for because my parents were teachers, not doctors or lawyers. But everyone is kind of expected to go to college, so it's not, "Are you going," but "where are you going?" I was lucky my parents were behind me. I wanted to be a scientific photographer, so I was a double-major, Science and Photography. Because my dad was a math teacher, and also, he was a science major himself, so I was really good with science and with math. I still love it to this day. So yes, I ended up being a double major.

And get this part! I followed Larry—Larry graduated a year from me—he went to Morgan State [University] in Baltimore [Maryland], and me, Lola Flash, followed him to Baltimore. I just could not believe that was me. Again, like one of the greatest things about getting older is like being able to look back and just be like really, you did that. That was your decision? And so when I was teaching, it was good, because I looked at some of my girls, and I would just be like, "Remember, Lola, you followed a boy to college." When I looked at some of the silly things that the girls were doing, I was just like, "You were just like them." *[Laughs]*

Yes, so I ended up going down there to Loyola, which was literally a stone's throw away from Morgan State. But then I realized I didn't really want to do scientific photography; I really wanted to be a fine art photographer. And luckily, Maryland Institute [College of Art] was right there, so I was easily able to transfer there. And that was the beginning of Cross Colour [laughs].

Q: Oh my gosh, what a life, what a story, and you're still going. I feel like the best is also still yet to come. Like you're just in such a really rich and fertile moment, too, like the work you're making right now is so amazing. I just feel like I can't wait to see what you continue to produce and show us.

Flash: Thanks, I know, it is great. I have so many women in my *Salt* series who—this one lady, in August she passed away, she was 105. And I got to see her last year before she passed, and she said she really was ready to go at 105, and she died two days after her birthday. So that would take me to forty years from now, so yes, I think that—even though my parents passed away like when they were in their 70s, it's like I know I'm much healthier than they were, even though they were pretty healthy.

But I do see myself having more than ten years left, and I appreciate you saying that because I'm at a very exciting time in my life. Just like my grandfather, when I would call him, it's like, "How you doing, Pop-Pop." And he'd be like, "Well, I woke up today." [Laughs]. And I kind of see what he's saying now. Like wow, I'm a Black woman in America. I haven't been tasered or shot for making the wrong turn, or whatever, you know what I mean, I'm still here and just feeling very very very thankful.

I appreciate you asking me all these questions. I didn't really know where we were going with it, but it feels kind of fun to have gone down memory lane with you. I hope that you got what you needed. Feel free to email me or something if you had questions, like if you need some of those names where I spaced out on them. And any of your other projects that you're doing, please keep me in mind.

I was in London with René [*phonetic*], and I saw your book there. And I didn't realize that she had written in it. And she's actually done the forward for my book, so I'm super-excited about that. I don't know if you know, but we've been friends since college. She was doing her undergraduate, and I was doing my graduate.

Q: Oh, that's wonderful, she's brilliant. That makes sense that you two are friends.

Flash: Yes, so we've been really good friends for a long time. And yes, I guess as an older person saying to a young person, hopefully you can keep some of your good friendships for as long as I have been, because I mean that definitely makes one feel so grounded and so loved. It's just a really important part of my life, especially because eventually, people start to leave you. So with not having my parents, and I don't have brothers and sisters, I think that it's like I never really sit around feeling like lonely or sad because I have so many rich friendships that just keep me going. It's a beautiful thing.

Sometimes you'll have arguments, but I think the arguments sometimes actually make the relationship stronger. You probably know, because you're smart, but I feel like there's some friends that you're like, okay, I can spend a dinnertime with them, and that's enough, even though I love them, like a long weekend isn't going to work. That was something that I think was a little challenging because I'm just such a happy-go-lucky person. But then I realize like actually, that person is getting on my nerves [*laughs*].

Q: Thank you for that wisdom, I really appreciate it. I'm sure there'll be more to talk about, and maybe even some follow-up. So I'm going to review this transcript when I get it, and you'll get a copy of it too, and then we can see if there's maybe more we want to add. But this feels really good to start, and I'm so grateful for your time. I know how much you have going on, and I look forward to seeing you out in the world. I feel like we kind of are often in the same sphere, but then COVID kind of spread everything even more, but it'll be nice the next time we run into each other.

Flash: Yes. I'm in a group show at the Whitney in the summertime, which I'm super-excited about.

Q: Yes, congrats!

Flash: I think that the press release comes out at the end of the month, so I'll know a little bit more about that. But I'm headed out to LA [Los Angeles]. Do you ever go out to the fairs?

Q: I did Frieze last year, and I went to the Venice at the end of last year. But this year, nothing is on the books yet. But are you going out for Frieze?

Flash: Yes, I'm going to go. I actually just bought the ticket over the weekend. I was sort of in two minds about it, but I decided to just go ahead and go. I'm having—actually, you could do this favor for me—so I met Usher, who was out there, and I got to talk to him and tell him all about my work, and so for three months after that, I think I was listening to Usher every day [*laughs*]. And so now, I'm thinking, I'm making him think, “I've got to go back to LA Frieze and meet that Lola Flash again and buy one of her works.” I'm just kind of putting little vibes in his head to come back and see me again [*laughs*].

Q: Yes, absolutely, I'm on it, I will put that on my altar, light a candle for you. I really hope it happens.

Flash: Thank you. All right, well this is lovely, and I look forward to more.

Q: Okay, sounds good, Lola. Take care, okay?

Flash: All right, J, bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]