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Lake, Olivia

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Transcriber: Dominique Jean-Louis

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): This interview is with the Bronx African American History Project, it's Sunday, December 17, 2006. I am here with Olivia Lake, who is a longtime resident of the Bronx, a native of Antigua, who also resided in Trinidad as well during the course of her life.

Olivia Lake (OL): Trinidad.

NL: And a very long life she's had, she's a hundred and one years as of November 26th of this year. I'm here, this is Natasha Lightfoot, and I'm also here with Mali, M-A-L-I, Olatunji, O-L-A-T-U-N-J-I. Mali, say your name?

Mali Olatunji (MO): Mali Adelaja Olatunji

NL: Okay, so now I guess we can get ready to start. Well, Mama Lake I just wanted to start-oh yes, one more thing, she's mentioned she's always been known, lovingly, as Mama Lake to many people that know her. So I'll be calling her Mama Lake throughout the interview. But again, Olivia Lake. So the first question I want to ask you is when and where were you born?

OL: I was born in the British French Indies, Antigua. Free Town Village.

NL: Free Town Village. That's St. Peter's parish, right?

OL: -----

NL: Aha, so your maiden name was Peters?

OL: Peters.

NL: Very good. And what year were you born?

OL: 1905. They told me so, but I don't believe it.

NL: Really? What year do you believe you were born in?

OL: Whenever. [Laughter]

NL: Wow. Well, tell us a little bit about your family.

OL: What -----

NL: Your family. How many brothers and sisters did you have in Antigua?

OL: I have, they told me I have but I'm not acquainted with them.

NL: Oh, you never knew any of your brothers and sisters.

OL: No.

NL: And what were your parents' names?

OL: My mother's name was Jane Anne Michael from Free Town Village.

NL: Jane Anne Michael.

OL: Jane Anne Michael from Free Town Village.

NL: Okay, and what was your father's name?

OL: George Peters.

NL: Okay. And he was from Free Town, too?

OL: Yes.

NL: Okay, okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

OL: I don't know, they pick cotton, they grow cane, and I mostly help them, too. You understand what I'm-

NL: No, I understand, you pitched in with the family's work in the garden, cane, cotton.

OL: Not much.

NL: Not much

OL: Not very much.

NL: Okay.

OL: I left and I went to Trinidad.

NL: What year was that? How old were you when you left for Trinidad?

OL: I was there in '18, something like that.

→ Eighteen?

NL: Okay, so you were in Antigua from the time you were five-the time in 1905 when you were born until you were eighteen years old.

OL: I say that.

NL: Okay, okay. And you spent your childhood with your parents, in Free Town?

OL: No.

NL: Okay, so who were you raised from?

OL: No, I went to Trinidad. I was ten years in Trinidad with my father, George Peters.

NL: Okay. So you went to-

OL: Then I was in St. James Village.

NL: And around what year do you think you went to Trinidad?

OL: I don't know.

NL: You don't know, you can't remember. But what age were you then?

OL: I was about eighteen, because I went a little time in Trinidad. At the Catholic school there.

NL: Oh, okay. And what was the name of the school?

OL: The name of the school was Marabelle Rhodes.

NL: Marabelle Rhodes School.

OL: In Woodbrook.

NL: In Woodbrook. Oh, okay, okay I see. In the area of Port of Spain.

OL: Port of Spain. Right there, Woodbrook.

NL: Okay, okay. And I wanted to ask you if you can remember a time before you went to Trinidad. Any time that you spent as a child in Antigua. What was your childhood like?

OL: What was my what?

NL: Your child-the years that you spent as a child? What was that like, in Antigua?

OL: With my grandparents.

NL: Oh, you were with your grandparents.

OL: My grandparents. This is my grandmother's name. Her-my grandmother name was Susanna Peters.

NL: Susanna Peters. Okay. And what did Susanna do for a living?

OL: Susanna them must have used to pick cotton or somebody.

NL: Right, same thing as your parents did. Why were you raised by your grandparents?

OL: Because my father, I think they told me, he left to went, the young children together, he went to Panama.

NL: Oh, to work on the canal! I see. Okay, there were a lot of people going.

OL: George Peters

NL: A lot of people at the time to work on the Panama Canal.

OL: I'm one of the only child.

NL: I see. So you were his only child.

OL: I was here, you understand, my grandparents. Not much with my mother. But my grandparents. After the death of my grandmother, we went to Trinidad to my father.

NL: I see. Okay. Okay. And what exactly do you remember, anything about Antigua?

OL: No, I think when I was small we used to run around again. Some things the bay.

NL: I see.

MO: The bay?

OL: Yes, some things, but I can't remember.

NL: Okay, so it sounds like you had a good childhood, then? You had a good childhood in Antigua?

OL: As much as I know, but when you forward in the bushes, better share your meat.

NL: So what was Trinidad like?

OL: Trinidad. I-I loved Trinidad. That's why, I went to Santo Domingo in 1931 to my mother-

NL: Oh, that's where your mother went.

OL: Yeah. They took me away from Antigua after the death of my grandmother, which is Susanna Peters. They took me away, and sent me to Trinidad to meet my father over there. So that's the most time I remember having my father when I was child. I go with the Babardian, I go with the Grenadian, I go with the coolies, with him.

NL: All in Trinidad. I see, so that was what Trinidad was like, it was a mix of people?

OL: Yeah.

NL: and what did you do in Trinidad for a living?

OL: Well they gave me out to a lady, that was friend to my father. And after he came from Panama, they could not agree, and he gave me to somebody else.

NL: Oh, okay. And you did housework for these people.

OL: Well they become my family, then. That's the most people I would be with.

NL: Okay.

OL: Katera Bock on Robert Street in Woodbrook.

NL: Okay, on Robert Street in Woodbrook. And that's who you lived with when your father was in Panama.

OL: Yes.

NL: Okay, okay. And did you attend school in Trinidad?

OL: Yes, yes I attend a little bit. Because, you know, after you becomes eighteen, and all those kind of years, the public don't directly take you. They couldn't afford to pay, you understand, so I stayed in the house to keep help with the lady that I was with, with the children.

NL: I see, okay, okay. And, I was going to ask you, if there were things you did socially in Trinidad, did you go out to church-

OL: Yes. Saint Christine Church. In Woodbrook.

NL: And that was a Catholic Church?

OL: No.

NL: It was Anglican.

OL: Yes.

NL: I see, okay. Okay. And were you active in the church?

OL: Well, I couldn't go out much. I'm stable. I'd go to Sunday school, and back home in the house. And I go to the Catholic school, but the Catholic School almost would just have-not much time.

NL: So you didn't spend much time in school. Because you were close to eighteen.

Right, right. So did you do anything in the meanwhile to have any kind of recreation, any kind of fun in Trinidad, as a young woman.

OL: When it was masquerade time, I look at the carnival, and watch the parade. I never go dancing or nothing.

NL: I see, so you would watch Carnival.

OL: Yes.

NL: In Woodbrook you would be right in the midst of the carnival was.

OL: Right, Woodbrook.

NL: But you never really took part.

OL: No.

NL: It was not, was it seen as not a good thing for a woman to do?

OL: Well I don't-well I like it. And if I had a mind to do-the people that I was with, I could not do it. Because they are not the type of people to jump out. But I would stand at the corner, and look at the people going around.

NL: Did you listen to music, though, as a youth? Did you listen to the popular music?

OL: I used to.

NL: Yeah?

OL: Yes, all the carnival, you know.

NL: Do you remember any calypsonians that stick out to you?

OL: Don't remember them.

NL: I meant to ask if you had any questions- Okay, all right. I wanted to ask you if you ever returned to Antigua, while you were in Trinidad, did you ever go back and look for your family?

OL: I went from-When I left from Trinidad, I went back to associate with my mother.

NL: I see.

OL: With my mother. At that time, my mother, I think, went to St. Kitts. And it's from St. Kitts-after I wanted, after I grew up, I wanted to be with my mother, and I told the people I want to know my mother. Somebody got in connection with me, from Antigua, to tell me, something or the other. Anyway, I wrote the direction of my mother and I told her that I wanted to see her, I wanted to know her. She sent to me, sent me from Trinidad, car, you know, to meet a boat in St. Kitts, to bring her down to Santo Domingo.

NL: Oh, I see. So you went with your mother to Santo Domingo.

OL: Yes. And I went and I work.

NL: And where did you work?

OL: Wash clothes. Washing white people's clothes.

NL: You washed white people's clothes.

OL: I worked with a family.

NL: So you lived in the house with them.

OL: Yes. I was there with my mother. Sorry (clears throat). I was there with my mother.

NL: And you washed clothes.

OL: I worked, yes. Yes, and go down the lines, and I'd wash, and go home at night.

NL: Were a lot of West Indian women in Santo Domingo?

OL: Spanish, all the West Indies, the Santo Domingo people, I mean, Antiguan people.

They went down from Saint Kitts to Santo Domingo at that time. Santo Domingo.

NL: It had a lot of work, right?

OL: Not for me. They cut cane.

NL: Right, exactly. A lot of people, a lot of men, I'm sure, went down to Santo Domingo to cut cane.

OL: Yes, it is. And there's the most time I had with my mother. I lived with them three years.

NL: Did your mother remain in Santo Domingo until she died, or did she go back to Antigua, too?

OL: Well, Mom, after I came here, I sent my mother-I am the oldest, and I brought everybody here.

NL: Oh, to the United States. I see.

OL: My mother came to visit, I visit twice.

NL: I see. So you were able to make money for their passage.

OL: How much a day? I work for twenty-one dollars a week, and I couldn't make it, because the unemployment-And I buy my job, my job, my job I bought it, I think it was ten dollars, to get into the factory to work

NL: Oh and that was in New York.

OL: No-

NL: Oh, in Santo Domingo.

OL: Yeah. I lived there twenty-one years.

NL: Oh, I didn't realize that. Okay, I thought you just spent most of your time in Trinidad.

OL: I got married there.

NL: Oh, you got married there! And who did you marry in Santo Domingo? Did you marry someone from there?

OL: His name was Joseph Molyx.

NL: Molyx.

OL: He was from St. Kitts.

NL: Okay, I see. So met another-

OL: After I went back to Santo Domingo, then I got in touch with my mother. I got married.

NL: Okay. And what did he do, was he a cane field worker?

OL: No, I don't know about him with the cane fields. I know when he was living in Consuelo. You ever heard the name of Consuelo?

MO: Yeah, but I can't put any significance to it.

NL: What's Consuelo?

OL: It's an estate.

NL: An estate. Okay.

OL: A sugarcane estate.

NL: I see. And what year did you marry your husband, Joseph?

OL: Joseph?

NL: What year did you marry him?

OL: 1931, I think, 1932 or something. I can't remember.

NL: And that was the Depression. That was during the Depression, do you remember what it was like during the Depression?

OL: My depression?

NL: No, during the years of the Depression, in the thirties, in the 1930's.

OL: You're like everybody, I tried to live.

NL: Right.

OL: I don't do nothing.

NL: Right, right, you just try to make ends meet.

OL: Down the lines, washed the white people's clothes.

NL: Okay, I wanted to ask you-

OL: I got married then, and I was married, how many years? I'm going to bring it. And, he took sick. He went to the hospital. He was working on Consuelo. I got sick. We got sick.

NL: And what was he sick with?

OL: I really don't know. Oh, he was working in the sun, a lot of sun. Used to drive a wagon or something like that.

NL: A wagon

OL: Probably in the sun so many, he got hit hard with it.

NL: And so he passed away?

OL: Yes. Sad. The doctor said-I got sick then! And the doctors say I should have an operation. I went. He said you go, I'll stay. And I leave somebody in the home to take of him, which was a brother of the society that he in, too, to stay in the house.

NL: And what society was that, do you know?

OL: Ethan society.

NL: And is that like an association of workers.

OL: Yes, yes, yes. They are all workers, and most of them is foreigners, and Spanish.

NL: I see. So a lot of West Indian men were members of the society.

OL: Yes, men. They come down here to cut cane and-

NL: And they join association. So this person was taking care of your husband while you went to get an operation?

OL: Yes, with the society people. He had one child.

NL: He had a child not with you? With someone else.

OL: That was my first husband, and he had a child, one daughter. Margarita Molyx.

NL: How do you spell Molyx?

OL: M-O-L-Y-X.

NL: Okay. And so, were you able to back to health easily, after your operation?

OL: No. I had, after ten days I was in the hospital, after the operation. They used to see me that day, friends, you know. I had nobody in there but me, and then my mother. My sister, nobody was there but me. And when I got home, the doctor look at me one. His name was Dr., Dr. somebody, can't tell you now. He said well, your husband's sick? I said yeah, doctor. He was sick, and I've been sick. I say what happened. He died. I said, well I want to go home now. And the friend came to see me in the hospital, because they used to bring the food in the hospital. And the lady, gentleman that used to take care of my husband, oh God, she does this, sorry, I can't help it.

MO: Tell us the story.

OL: When I went home, (crying) all I meet there was an empty house!

NL: Oh, dear.

OL: All I meet there is an empty house, and the gentleman that he is from the society, he was odd fellow, see.

NL: He was an odd fellow. Oh, dear.

OL: So they, they bury him is when we had ten days. When I went home, I meet an empty house and people around. I said wait, what happened? Where is Molyx? And someone, 'Oh, Molyx died.' Ten days ago. It's a good thing I had a few, because he is all cutting cane and all. I had-Doctor had told me he was about the end of it. And I had him all set up, clothes, and everything.

NL: Oh, so you had made preparations for his burial. I see.

OL: Odd fellow took care of mine.

NL: Societies, that's what they do, they take care of their members.

OL: Take care of mine.

NL: That's true, that's something I learned.

OL: When everything right, that was clear. But I was the sufferer then. He had one daughter, but that daughter was not living with him. They were not together. Margarita Sam, that's her name. She is Sam now, but she was Molyx before, by the father's name.

NL: Well, thank you so much for sharing that story. That's such a sad story.

OL: Oh, it's a long story, that I said I could write a book.

NL: I'm sure you could.

OL: I went to the-after the death of him, he was not looking right. I said I would like to go back to Trinidad, I love Trinidad because my father was still in Trinidad. He came from Cuba, all these places here, and then I'm the only child.

NL: So did you return back to Trinidad then?

OL: I went to-1951, since then I went back to Trinidad. And they cut- They wanted my father's life, because they came the Santo Domingo life, and I wanted to go back to Santo Domingo. And there is a friend, which is I have a godson, from him. She got the papers, because they said I would have to go- I went to Trinidad, and when I want to return back, they had to go through papers, Trujillo.

NL: Trujillo, yeah, the Dominican dictator.

OL: TO sign papers because I was not born there. And they're ashamed to know that I have all those papers. Because here, you don't find.

NL: So it was difficult.

OL: Yes! I went back to Santo Domingo. I brought, when I went back to Santo Domingo, I leave from Trinidad because I didn't like the life of my father's living. It was different to what I know in Santo Domingo, and I wanted-

NL-So you thought Trinidad was better, and you went there are found out it wasn't.

OL: I grew up there, but I did, how they ought to look, as I know in Santo Domingo. It was a different life altogether.

NL: So you wanted to go back to Santo Domingo.

OL: And they had to sign over the papers, now, to get me back in Santo Domingo, before I could get back to Santo Domingo. And I didn't know-I heard about Antigua, I know about it, but I didn't grow up in Antigua. I'd rather Santo Domingo.

NL: So what year did you return back to Santo Domingo, that second time.

OL: 19-I don't remember it, let's see, I'm sorry.

NL: So I wanted to ask you, when did you find out that you wanted to come to the United States?

OL: Oh! After I did not like the life of Trinidad anymore, then time that I went back. What did you ask me?

NL: Well, I was saying, you went back after you didn't like Trinidad, you went to-

OL: Back to Santo Domingo.

NL: And then how did you determine-

OL: Oh, I get from Santo Domingo by a lady who was coming here, had two children. And I sign here with her, for forty dollars a month, she brought me to this country. They are the people from the city used to ship cocoa, and all those kinds of things. And they brought me back, brought me, pay my way, bring me back here to work for that money, in New Jersey.

NL: In New Jersey. Oh, that's where you first lived when you came here.

OL: Yes ma'am, they dropped me off there. I was there with her, and her two children. After I came, and I saw how the place is going, the worst thing she could have ever told me, if you don't stay with me, she says, if you don't stay with me, you'll have to go back to Santo Domingo. We sign you to come here. From the Dominican Republic. Am I right, the little that you hear?

MO: Oh, no, it's typical.

NL: They had you under contract. And so they didn't want to let you go..

MO: This happened up until a few years ago.

OL: And she didn't want me to get in touch with nobody in this country. And be with her.

NL: And did you know anyone here?

OL: I knew her, I get to know, some of the people from Antigua in my mother's time, you understand. They join in with me because I was the only one, you know, but they know me. And just like a real child.

NL: And so you got in touch with the Antiguan living in New York?

OL: Yes.

NL: Were they involved with the Antigua Progressive Society.

OL: No-what? I am Eaton Progressive.

MO: There's an organization called Eaton.

OL: Eaton.

NL: Oh, okay, an organization called Eaton was here.

MO: Society.

NL: And that was an Antiguan society.

OL: Yes, Eaton Benevolent Society.

NL: Okay.

OL: Eaton Benevolence and Lenox Avenue.

NL: Lenox and what street, you remember?

OL: I don't know the people that- Mr. Somebody, something. And I signed the paper for my sister come. Then is when I know my sister.

NL: Oh, so you were able to get her up here.

OL: Yes.

NL: To their house.

OL: Yes.

NL: And your sister was in Antigua at that time?

OL: And I take him five hundred dollars to get the paper, for my sister come here.

NL: That's wonderful. And your sister-

OL: I alone.

NL: You worked for that, with this woman in Jersey. That's how you were able to make the money for your sister's passage.

OL: Yes ma'am. Yes ma'am.

NL: And, was your sister in Antigua at the time? She was in Antigua and you brought her here.

OL: Yes, I brought- 1960, 19-sixty something.

NL: I see. And you were here since the fifties.

OL: Yes, from the fifties.

NL: Wow, okay.

MO: Do have any idea of about what time in the fifties you came here, to the United, to Jersey?

OL: To Jersey? Fifty-one.

NL: Okay. 1951. Okay. I see. So, then I wanted to ask, what did you do to get away from that lady in New Jersey.

OL: Well, I got away by encouragement, from the city here, in New York.

NL: From the Antiguans here.

OL: By friends helping me to get away, to be in-

NL: In the city.

OL: New York.

NL: I see. And where did you end up? When you got away from her, where did you leave to, to go to in New York.

OL: Well, I didn't-I was staying with a friend, that lady she's dead. And she get me on how to get a job, and I stand up for twenty-one years, ironing, pressing.

NL: Pressing?

OL: Right here in this New York.

NL: In a factory? In the Garment District.

OL: Yes, ma'am.

NL: Ah, okay. So you pressed clothes. Was it a union job?

OL: I used to, I used to sew on buttons first, because I didn't know the job. Then they teach me how to press, and pressing's not-I knew to iron, but to press, I didn't know how to press. There's not about to kill yourself and make five cents, I used to sew on a button, five cents.

NL: Wow. Was it hard for black women to get jobs in the factories.

OL: At that time. I paid ten, I think ten dollars to get that job. And at that time it was Italians, and Jews. Hard to get in there. Am I right?

MO: Oh, absolutely.

OL: Because that was-if you can work, and learn the work, you can do better than in the hospital, school. Am I lying?

MO: No.

NL: No. So, did you have a union representing the workers in the factory? The women workers?

OL: I had to get into it, the union.

NL: Do you remember the name of the union?

OL: Oh God, let me think, let's think.

NL: Was it the International Ladies Garment Workers Union?

OL: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

NL: Okay. Okay. All right. So what was that like? Did you enjoy the work, or?

OL: Well there was nothing else, I had nothing else.

NL: Nothing else, nothing else.

OL: I know how house work, and I got to get out of the house.

NL: So you were glad to get out of it. I'm sure it was difficult.

OL: I used to pay a room like this. I used to pay a dollar, something.

NL: To live in? And where was the room?

OL: Family room. I had a room as big as this.

NL: In a family's house. Was that in Harlem?

OL: No, right here in the Bronx.

NL: In the Bronx? Where in the Bronx did you live?

OL: On Tinton Avenue.

NL: On Tinton.

OL: Tinton Avenue. I live with that family I think five years. And then, I went, after the
-----inaudible-----

NL: So you were working in the Garment District.

OL: All the time.

NL: And were the ladies there racist towards you? Did the ladies, the Italians and the
Jews, would they socialize with you?

OL: Yes, they have.

NL: They socialized with you.

OL: Yes. Oh, Yes.

NL: Okay, so it wasn't like you felt a racial divide. They didn't-

OL: Well, I was happy with them because I wanted work, I had to work.

NO: How were they to you?

NL: Did they treat you-

OL: Oh, yes! Oh, yes!

NL: They treated you well.

OL: Oh, yes! D'Orio.

NL: That was the name of a friend.

OL: The company I was with.

NL: Oh, the company. D'Orio was the name of the garment, the factory.

OL: That's right.

NL: I see. Okay. Wow.

MO: Italian, it sounds like.

NL: Italian, yeah. So, in the Bronx, now, you lived on Tinton Avenue with this family.

And, what was the Bronx like to you? Did you like living there?

OL: Well, I didn't know the difference.

NL: And in that neighborhood, were you a member of a church?

OL: I-yes.

NL: Which church did you join?

OL: I joined St. Andrews.

NL: St. Andrews? Wait, but that was, no, St. Andrews is around here, but in the area by Tinton Avenue, was there a church there, before you moved up here.

OL: At 62nd. One sixty something with a three down here. I can't remember what it was, that church. Too much head. I go long time.

NL: Oh, it's okay, it's okay. You're remembering so much. Don't you worry.

OL: You heard me, dear?

NL: Oh, yeah!

MO: Let me ask you a question, I want to go back a little bit. We're talking about the church, and your church life. And you spoke about school.

OL: Yeah.

MO: Church and school in Antigua. You must have gone to church.

OL: I was Wesleyan.

MO: Wesleyan, in Antigua. And what were the services like?

OL: Well, I don't know. I don't know what the church is like. You go to church because, you know, you was taught to go to church and started to learn God. And if you learn God is here, there, everywhere, and where I can meet a bunch that can satisfy me is it's all right.

MO: What about school? You had a bunch in school too. Growing up as a young girl.

OL: I don't know. Where, here?

MO: In Antigua, the school.

OL: I don't remember time in Antigua, from child growing up, I told you. I leave there.

MO: They had a school in Freetown. A little house.

OL: Freetown, I don't know much about it. I'm telling the truth. I don't know much about it. I know they sent me to school, and I go to school. It's after you come out of those places in years gone by, you know what you are into, and what it is like, and what should you do.

MO: So then the Antigua experience taught you how to-

OL: A little but.

MO: Okay.

OL: A little bit.

MO: What did the societies do for their members in New York City. The Eaton Society.

OL: Here?

MO: Yes, in New York City.

OL: Well, I don't know.

NL: Did you pay membership dues?

OL: Yes.

NL: You paid dues. And what did they do.

OL: When I could, you know.

NL: When you could afford it. And what did they use the dues for?

OL: I don't know. I go to church, and they did all the business there [Laughter] I don't know.

NL: I see.

OL: I am where I like. And if I like it, I stay, if I don't like it, I go. You pull out.

MO: But you were looking for, kind of, companionship, friends and people who could satisfy what you wanted?

OL: I didn't have nobody friend, I had nobody. I had me, alone.

NL: Right. So this was a social network, really, the Eaton Benevolent Society. I see. I wanted to ask you a bit about the family you lived with on Tinton. What kind of family was it?

OL: Ms.-she had boys. They came out of the army, and made me live with their mother and father.

NL: And what kind of family was it, were they black,

OL: Yeah, they're from those little, small.

NL: Oh, the U.S. British Virgin Islands.

OL: Yes.

NL: I see. I see. And how did you find them? You just asked around?

OL: No, well, I was with a friend first, for a little while, they pull me out from Jersey because I was glad. And it's a friend I met on the street, because the friend of the woman I was staying with, she was very peculiar, and probably things that she used to, I didn't used to, you know, I want to learn.

NL: So you didn't get along that easy with her.

OL: No. She told me that I was mean, she said, I say, I told her what happened to me, with the one that I am with, and she said well, oh, you know. Just out there I am living there, she says, she was from that way. And we have a room there now, we can go and find out. And I went. Mr. Fory.

NL: Fory?

OL: Fory.

NL: And how do you spell that?

OL: F-O-R-Y. I think it's something like that.

NL: F-O-R-Y. Okay.

OL: And when I went, the gentleman say, the gentleman say, 'Yes, we have a room, but you can't have no stranger.' I said nobody is coming. And I say, "Mr., I don't have no money. This is what I get from the unemployment. And I say, pay for the room out of this. From the unemployment.

NL: So you were on unemployment.

OL: Just a minute!

NL: Okay.

OL: Just a minute. Come in, come in. He said, 'No, I can't take it. It is for you. It is from the unemployment.' And it had a little soda place to the corner. And I say, "Lady, can you change it?" It wasn't even thirty one dollars. You hear what I tell you. And I go back and pay for the room. And when my friend came home that I was staying with, and I told her what happened, she said, 'Where you can find a room so fast?' I say, this lady, because I met her on the bus that told me about the room, and the people were so kind, they took me right away, with the check from the unemployment. And that was 1951, somewhere around there.

NL: Somewhere around there. And I wanted to ask, so when you left Jersey, you were able to get unemployment from the city.

OL: I don't know what I did. Because I wasn't at customs, I don't know nothing. You have to learn. You got to learn. You have to learn something and how hard with it. I had to learn.

NL: You sure did.

OL: And when I lay down at night, everything comes right in front of me.

MO: Did the people in Jersey try to get in touch with you after-?

OL: No.

MO: Ok, good.

NL: They never tried to get you back.

OL: No, no. Only name is Emma. Somebody. They used to ship cocoa from-

NL: Right, from Dominican Republic, I remember you were saying. So how did you end up finding the garment workers job?

OL: By this friend that put me out, and tell me to get some place to go. You understand. They made ten- At that time, you had to buy, ten dollars. I think it's ten dollars, out of thirty-one dollars I had to pay them.

NL: To let you in.

OL: To get a job for me, you had to buy it.

MO: It had been a job agency or something.

NL: Right, right.

OL: And I pay- Agreement is that every week from my payment that I'm getting from the garment industry, I'll have to pay them so much.

NL: Ah, I see, I see.

OL: A couple of times they shipped me from one place to the other until I get stable there. At seventy, seventy? Anyways, about twenty-one years I work with these people.

NL: Oh, okay.

OL: Oh, Lord.

NL: So, did you remain in the area around Tinton Avenue?

OL: Yeah. I was in Tinton. I was in Stebbins Avenue.

NL: Oh, okay. So you moved from Tinton to Stebbins.

OL: From Stebbins I get here.

NL: Ah, from Stebbins you moved here.

OL: Because it had a center and over there on Westchester. And the proprietor of the center, I don't how story go, anyway, (laughs) I got in touch with the people there, in the center, that I, I think at that time, I don't know the time it was. And, I worked there on Longwood Avenue, in the garment industry, while my husband was in the hospital.

NL: Oh, you were married again!

OL: Yeah.

MO: That was her first husband.

NL: Well, let me find out now, how did you meet this second husband?

OL: Because I was introduced to him, by friends from Antigua.

NL: Oh.

OL: I came when I was small, we all had grew up. I left, and I went to Trinidad, and I came back and I meet them. The Lakes

NL: I see. So you meet the Lakes-

OL: Oh, many a story.

NL: You meet the Lakes in the Bronx.

OL: Well, the other Lakes, them, they found out I was from Antigua, they know my, knew my parents, which I didn't know much. And then they get me in there, in the whole- you know what I mean? I was glad. And I had a lot of the Lakes here.

NL: I see. And what was your husband's name?

OL: Who, my husband?

NL: Your second husband.

OL: Grenville Lake.

NL: How do you spell Grenville?

OL: G-R-E-N-V-I- double L-E.

NL: Okay. Okay. And what did Granville do for a living.

OL: When he came here? What's the name of this hospital on Lenox Avenue, here?

NL: Harlem hospital?

OL: Yes. I think he work there ten years, something like that. Only. I think something like that.

NL: And what did he do in the hospital.

OL: I don't know if I don't ask. [Laughter]

NL: Well, you just knew he brought home a paycheck, right?

OL: He take a part, and I take a part.

NL: That's right. I see. And at the time you and he moved to Stebbins together. Does that-you and he-

OL: No, I moved to Stebbins alone.

NL: Oh, okay. And then you met him when you were living in Stebbins, is that it?

OL: He came to look to look for me, Stebbins. At that time, I had bloody send from my sister-I am the one let my sister know my mother! Because after I came here I had nobody but me. And they took me on to my mother in Antigua. My mother send for me from Antigua, to come down to Santo Domingo. And it's there where I started out.

NL: So, Mr. Lake worked in Harlem Hospital, you worked in the garment district-

OL: Yes, ma'am. And ----inaudible-----...I feel that I'm out.

NL: So, what was the Bronx like at the time? Did you like where you lived?

OL: Well, the street I had was to like it. It didn't do me nothing. I work, I get paid, and I go as far as the money can go. I leave it there. I don't know where else I am-up to now, I don't even know where I am. I don't know who I am.

NL: I think you do, you have a good idea of the story. You know a lot.

OL: It is a-you think you get it, yeah?

NL: I'm sure, I have more questions.

OL: I tell you, when I lay down at night, it's like-

NL: You can see all your history, all of it, in front of your eyes.

OL: And I always say, when I see my mother, she didn't have much to do with me. You know, because, when they have children, outside children, you understand? And I am the only one. My grandmother die and leave a house there. Tixie Peters, Helen Peters, was my aunt, and she leave a house. Who get it? Who?

-----Tape Break-----

NL: Hold on one second. Okay. So, Mama Lake, I had more question.

OL: Come on, baby.

NL: Did you and your husband attend church together, in the Bronx.

OL: No, no.

NL: What religion was he, what-

OL: He was always a Wesleyan, as that I know, from Antigua, Free Town Village.

NL: And you, when you were in the Bronx, what kind of church did you go to?

OL: I used to go to 152nd Street. I used to be, but the Frenchman, Adrian, you know? A missionary.

NL: A missionary!

OL: I used to be with a missionary. Because I had left it in Santo Domingo. And I came here. You understand?

NL: So the missionary was of what church? Was he Catholic-

OL: Well, he was a direct missionary going around Free Town and-a Haitian man, from Haiti.

NL: I see, so he just had his own small church.

OL: Yeah.

NL: And you went to that church.

OL: Yes.

NL: I see. And then, did you join any larger church, or were you always in Adrians' small, you know.

OL: Church. After that, I told you, I go here, 172nd. I don't likely remember the church. They switch me, I switch from 152nd Street, because it was easier for me to get to the church here, then to go down there every Sunday. And I switch, I got my recommendation from, what's the name of the church?

NL: St. Andrew's?

OL: No, not St. Andrews. They sent me from that church to St. Andrew's. It's there on Nett Lane.

NL: Oh! St. Margaret's?

OL: St. Margarets.

NL: That's- okay. So you were in an Episcopal church.

OL: Yeah.

NL: I see. Okay. So you went first to a small church, with the Haitian man. Then you went to St. Margaret's? I see. Were you active in St. Margaret's church?

OL: No, go to church, you know.

NL: You know, just come home.

OL: It was close to me.

NL: Right.

OL: From Sebbins Avenue, just walk across.

NL: And what was the congregation like, were they mostly black?

OL: Yes.

NL: Mostly West Indians, or some-

OL: They were mixed.

NL: or a mix with American blacks as well. I see. Okay. Did you socialize much with American blacks?

OL: Yes, when I'm able, I have to work.

NL: And they lived in your neighborhood too, so.

OL: It's just how we go.

NL: Did you go any, do anything recreational in the area? Any kind of-

OL: Well, since I used to go to the center. And I go the center here. You know the center here? Oh, gosh. I cannot even-too much at one time.

NL: It was a senior citizens center?

OL: Listen, I can't walk, and so on, I don't go. When, when I'm-the center here, the center and somebody.

NL: So when did you retire from working in the garment factory?

OL: I retired in fifty. Fifty somebody. I don't know. After my second husband died.

NL: Just after your second husband died. Okay. And you were fifty something years old, or was it.

OL: Oh, yes.

NL: Okay, okay.

OL: Sixty somebody or something.

NL: Oh, so more like in your sixties you retired. Okay [Laughter]

OL: Somebody. I know I'm here!

NL: Right. So I wanted to ask you. Why did you leave Stebbins Avenue? Was it getting unsafe?

OL: No.

NL: Okay.

OL: I was alone there, and while I'm there is when I sent for my sister and she stay a little time with me. I leave Stebbins Avenue through getting in the center, there right and Westchester. Not Craw, just around the corner where I was living. And they told me- because I met with friends there, and they told me things going with houses and everything like that. And the gentleman, I can't remember his name, made the application for me to get in Section Eight.

NL: Oh, I see. I see. And when you moved-you got Section Eight and you came here.

OL: Right here from- I am in this apartment here from 1973, '75, because my husband in '73-I came here '75. So it's right here.

NL: So your husband died in '73?

OL: Three.

NL: And you moved here in '75. Okay. And how did you like this neighborhood?

OL: Well, I don't like it, I love it.

NL: Yeah? You love it?

OL: All back there was water when I came here.

NL: All the back there was water. There were no houses?

OL: All of those houses there, I could have gone through there, and drop out in the other street.

NL: And what was the neighborhood like at the time?

OL: I don't know, darling. I keep my big mouth shut, and my eyes closed sometimes. I got to live.

NL: Were there a lot of black people here?

OL: No. I don't know, this a new building.

NL: It was a new building when you moved in. What kind of families did you see?

OL: Well, the family peoples goes up, and we all live like here. Everybody cannot be the same.

NL: Did you know your neighbors that came in here?

OL: My neighbors?

NL: In this building.

OL: Most of them died.

NL: Most of them died.

OL: Leave me right here.

NL: And were those people Section Eight as well?

OL: Yes. Not-this is not a real Section Eight, it has, I don't know, I don't know.

NL: So some people were Section Eight. Some people weren't.

OL: I guess so, I guess so.

NL: And were.

OL: Because when I came here, it was only fifty-one dollars.

NL: Wow.

OL: And now I pay three hundred dollars. What can I say. I don't have no, no brother, no sister, no, to help me with my little one brain. With my one, little, brain.

NL: I'm sure you have a much bigger brain than you think. You're able to get through so much.

MO: You have third -----

OL: No, just the Olivia. They said parents never gave me name after. He be dead, which I don't-but she's dead and they gave me her name.

MO: Let me ask you a question, though. I'm a little curious to know. Even if, if you left Antigua at sixteen,

OL: Childhood.

MO: Yeah, sixteen, seventeen. Was there anything that you ever thought about, that caused you to sort of block Antigua. Because you're so articulate with Santo Domingo and Trinidad.

OL: Yes.

MO: Yeah, which was not much longer-.

OL: No.

MO: than when you left Antigua. Especially Trinidad.

OL: Yes.

MO: Was there anything that you can think of that cause you to have blocked Antigua.

OL: No.

MO: Age twelve, thirteen, fourteen.

OL: Mister, what is they lying about? (Laughing) I know that they're living. I mean, instruction that we are getting now, I never had, is something different. You understand?

MO: What do you mean, like that, 'the instruction we are getting now'?

OL: The instruction that I would think on. You feel you're living. You know? Different to the little experience that I have outside.

MO: So your maturity really began, as far as you concerned, Trinidad, Santo Domingo, and that carried you into New York. Bring you to New York. Okay.

OL: And I'm right here going, I tell them when I die, can't bury me. I don't have no one to bury me, to lay me out. After the soul is happy.

MO: The soul is happy. So is the soul happy?

OL: I try.

NL: You try.

OL: None of us is pure. None of us is holy. But I've tried.

MO: And has the soul always been happy?

OL: I tried to make it good.

MO: Okay.

OL: Because, they tell me, 'You're not scared to live here?' and I say no.

MO: You know what, I want to say something here. I am sitting here, listening to you.

OL: Yes, child.

MO: Watching you.

OL: I mix up.

MO: No, no, no, no. Let me finish. I have this, we have these two tape recorders going, and we can only record your voice.

OL: Oh.

MO: But half of the conversation I honestly believe is missing. Because of your expressions, the way you throw your head back, the way you think of-bringing forth the memories.

OL: the memories.

MO: And the hands. You got to do it by videotape. I am sorry, if it is possible, because there's too much that you have to tell.

OL: Oh, yes!

MO: That cannot be told only in the voice, and that's all we're getting here, the voice.

There's another part to the communication, that you articulate so well. In your facial expressions and your hand movement. That is missing. And I think, I think, you know, it is good for the people later on to have. I really honestly believe that.

OL: Let me tell you something, here.

NL: Would you be okay with a video tape?

OL: What, I said, lady, I don't care-

MO: Got to do it, got to do it. Look at that.

OL: God make me live, and I'm going to live until he die. And most people have thought, I would have gone. All, most of the people that I knew, they are gone. And I am here.

MO; And there's a special satisfaction in that.

OL: Yes, I'm satisfied, tell him I'm satisfied with life.

MO: And the spirit is good.

OL: I try to make it good, honey.

MO: Oh, boy.

OL: I try.

MO: This is powerful

OL: God knows I try. When day, he'll say, you lock your door, and I say, all right. And that man come to the door to hurt me, and he look up, he say, 'not here,' go to turn back.

NL: Somebody tried to break in here?

OL: I say if.

MO: Okay.

NL: Oh, if, okay. I thought it happened.

OL; Because people tells me that, and I leave my door open here, and anybody come, and they want to harm me, and they look up, they'll say 'not here,' and turn back.

MO: Let me ask you, do you believe in the spiritual realm?

OL: I don't know. Just like how I am living here, and just my book, and read it.

NL: So you've always felt safe here, you can keep your door open?

OL: I do.

NL: You keep your door open.

OL: Some, not all the time.

NL: But most of the time.

OL: Some of the time.

NL: Some of the time.

OL: Most of the time. You understand? You see Lynn came here?

NL: Sure, Lynn came.

OL: She walked in here and I was right-the door was open. I live in a way to my custom marries. And when they come, they have problem to get in. But you don't come through the door. Everybody say, 'not here.'

NL: So you've always felt safe in this neighborhood.

OL: That's right. And everybody know.

NL: Everybody knows you?

OL: Everybody knows. And where you going now? But I can't walk. I'm not myself.

NL: I have another question.

OL: Anything you feel like asking.

NL: So, you joined St. Andrew's when you came here, when you came to live in Story Avenue, you came and joined-

OL: Transfer.

NL: Yes, from St. Margaret's to St. Andrew's. And what was the church there like, did you-

OL: I don't know who the people. I work with everybody.

NL: Who was the minister there?

OL: Father, Father, Father, Father, Father, Father

NL: Was it Father Harvey?

OL: Who? No. What was Father-Father who?

NL: Father Harvey, in St. Andrews. Was it his name?

OL: Father Harvey. Yeah, I think I remember Father. I transfer from the-yes, I had to transfer. Because it was closer to me. There I got to take a bus, and at that time the bus used to stay here.

NL: Right, right.

OL: You may not know. But the bus, before that place ago

NL: Before the mall, the shopping area-

OL: Right.

NL: There was buses there that would take you back down to-I see.

MO: I'm going to say a question.

OL: Whatever.

MO: The various churches and religious organizations that you have belonged to, do you have you discerned any serious difference between the ideo-between the way they talked, and how they, you know.

NL: The doctrine.

OL: Well, since I go along with everything.

MO: (Laughing) I knew that was going to be the answer. I knew that was going to be the answer.

OL: I'm alone, I'm about to go with somebody's.

NL: Right.

OL: I got to go someplace, right?

NL: Did you join any organizations in St. Andrew's? Were you part of the women's club?

OL: No, not exactly. I go to the seven o'clock service in the mornings. But I can't go now!

NL: Right.

OL: They give me a nice birthday.

NL: Last year, they did a hundredth birthday party.

OL: And I was there.

NL: At St. Andrew's. I was there. I was there

OL: You did?

NL: Yeah!

OL: My, my, my.

NL: We enjoyed ourselves. We sure did enjoy ourselves.

OL: Since then I haven't gone much to church.

MO: Has the church or the ministers, or anybody-

OL: The minister? Don't tell me about the minister. I don't work with them, I work with God, whatever going down. I am not a boss.

MO: Has any Godly person come to visit you, can they take you to church?

OL: Father, Father somebody there now. Was supposed to come last weekend and didn't. It's all right. It's all right. When Able will come home, he will be reached.

When he is not there, it is all right, I'm satisfied. I work with Mr. Able, because I am not my own person. As you are not me. You understand?

MO: There's a very deep philosophy here. 'I am not my own person, and you are not me.'

OL: Of course not!

MO: Could you break it down a little bit for me?

OL: Well, whatever comes to be, I give it. That's all. But I tell you I can write a book. When I see my mother. Something is wrong. Something is wrong! Something is wrong. I don't know. Something is wrong. When I see here, I say well. I can say well. Something is wrong.

NL: So you and she got along well?

OL: Who?

NL: You and your mother.

OL: Oh, yes! Whenever, I tell you, whenever I-sometimes even in bed. Get up! And my mother-my brother, and my sister, they keep away. Nobody.

MO: So your mother's protecting you.

OL: I don't really help a good God.

MO: So that's why you can leave your door open, because your mother is-

OL: I-no. I leave it open because I feel I'm safe.

MO: On your mother's protection.

OL: If it turn over, I'm not responsible. You understand. But I live with that faith. And that's just me.

MO: But, is your mother connected to that faith, at all.

OL: Yes, whatever is to be will be.

NL: Okay. Okay. Well is there anything else you want to say?

OL: I don't know. What you asked me?

NL: Oh, no, I'm asking you if you want to-

OL: I'm reading my book, you tell me what you want.

MO: Wow.

NL: I just, I just wanted to know if there's anything else you want to say about your life, your time-

OL: My life is that I had a hard life. And thank God, I got sick, you tell me, or whatever, I say whenever, however, and whatever.

NL: I see. Well, I think it's wonderful. Do you have any secrets to staying young.

OL: I don't have any secret.

NL: No secret to staying alive so long.

OL: (singing and snapping) It is no secret. What God can do. What you've done for others. He can do for you.

NL: Okay.

OL: (still singing) With arms wide open. He will welcome you. It is no secret. What God can do. You hear me?

NL: Thank you very much, Mama Lake. This was a wonderful interview. Thank you.

End of tape.