

Oral History Interview: Kentina Washington Leapheart (part 1)

Interviewer: Monique Moultrie

Date: October 20th, 2019

Monique Moultrie Officially to put us on record, my name is Monique Moultrie and today is October 20th, 2019. And I'm here with Reverend Kentina Washington Leapheart. We're conducting an oral history for the LGBTRAN website and my research project currently entitled Hidden Histories: Faith Activism of Black Lesbian Religious Leaders. What we're going to do today is an oral history, which is a life story. So, we're going to hit several milestone moments starting with your early childhood moving forward to today in an oral history. This is your story so you're going to talk more than I am. I'm going to ask some guiding questions, but largely this is your story to tell. I'm going to ask questions, you have the right of refusal. You don't have to answer the question, you can answer the question in whatever way you want. I'm not going to sort of push the agenda and get you to answer the way that I'm looking for a response.

Monique Moultrie So, feel free to pass, feel free to ask a question altogether or answer part of the question. Once this is all done, this will be transcribed and the audio and the transcription will come to you. The company I've been using is Rev.com and they will send you the transcript and the audio file. So, if you hover over the words, you can hear yourself say it. Why I like that is that if you want to make adjustments where it doesn't really sound like that's something you would have said, you can go back to the audio right there and see and you can hear yourself and sort of figure it out.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie Or if there's something that you want to remove, I can remove it in real time, both in the transcript and in the audio.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie So, you have the right of doing that once you get the transcript. If you tell a story and you decide, "Oh, I really ... Yeah, that wasn't there. I don't want that to be public record." It's not an issue to take it out.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie And we'll do that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie Okay. So, I have got audio files everywhere. I record on two devices.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Just in case.

Monique Moultrie Yeah, because life happens to me on a regular basis. God forbid my computer go wonky. Oh, right. So, I know you're raised in the suburbs of Cleveland. Can you tell me about your early life? What type of neighborhood did you grow up in? What did you do for fun?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I grew up in a suburb of Cleveland on the East side called Cleveland Heights. So, grew up in a racially, ethnically, religiously, and economically or socioeconomically diverse area by design. My grandparents had moved there when my mom and her siblings were teenagers in order to give them better for schools. The school district was one of the best ones in the state at the time. And so, they bought a house on a residential street that had a lot of young families. So, I grew up, even though this was my grandmother's house, I lived there until I was with my mom, who's a single parent, till I was about 10. And then my mother bought a house, maybe about 15 minute drive from my grandmother's house. 10 or 15 minute drive, but still in the same suburb.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I spent my time really mostly at my grandmother's house or between the two places. So, grew up on a street where there were a lot of kids. So, spent my kind of super young years from elementary school through middle school playing outside. So, we would ride bikes and there was a pool in the neighborhood. There was a library so I spent a lot of time in the library. I was an only child. I had cousins that were my age, but they weren't around all the time. So, if I didn't have an occasion to spend time with the friends that were in the neighborhood or cousins or whatever, I spent a lot of time by myself and was able to entertain myself. So, the library was one of those things.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I remember spending a lot of time, it was within the neighborhood, walkable distance within neighborhood. And back then, they didn't call us free range kids, but we could, kind of walk around the neighborhood and our parents weren't really super worried that anything was going to happen to us. I would sometimes ride my bike or walk and I would just spend hours in the stacks and go home with a stack of books or a bag or books of all different variety. So, that's how I spent kind of the younger years.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Once I got to high school, my afterschool time was spent ... I had a part time job, I was doing extracurricular activities. I was spending less time at my grandmother's house than I had when I was younger because I was able to stay home by myself now and my mom worked. So, I didn't have the daily kind of experience there. And the school I was going to, was not right by her house at that point. But still, it was the matriarchs house, so it still was the nucleus kind of our family. So, certainly for holidays and things like that, that's where we would be.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: What else did I do for fun? So, I was really ... I didn't play sports much or at all. I mean, I did what I had to do in gym class, but I definitely participated in an extracurricular. So, when I was in middle school, I remember being in the

drama club and doing community service. I was really interested in sort of giving back. So, I remember doing volunteering with kids that had special needs in the community. I worked as a camp counselor a couple of summers when I was in high school with kids who were attending a Jewish community center camp in our area, but had special needs. And so they needed kind of one on one support. They were integrated into the larger camp but needed one on one support, so I remember doing that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: What else did I do in high school? I worked. I had a part time job so I worked like 20 hours a week, more than that, probably. My last couple of years of high school and several of my friends worked at this grocery store. We all worked together so we had a lot of fun doing that. And just hang out with my friends and sang in the gospel choir. I did do that. I'm trying to think how many years of high school I did that, maybe two or three. And so, the gospel choir director was also one of the English teachers at the high school. He's a very popular, very well beloved, great guy. And we would travel around the city singing. So, we would have a concert a couple of times a year at the high school, but we also would go to different churches and things and he was ... I didn't know much about Christianity and religion and all of that at that point. I now know that he was a COGIC minister.

Monique Moultrie So you were] in a gospel choir?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yes, I was in this gospel choir, and I know we're going to talk more about faith formation, but from my family perspective, I didn't have ... Like, I wasn't churched. So, I had no, at that time, real concept of these churches and we would be singing in, theology, any of that. I now know that our director is a COGIC ... He is COGIC. He's not ... I don't know if he's ordained, but he was certainly very involved. Hence, why we ended up at some of these churches where we would be singing, but I didn't know anything about that. Gospel choir was sort of the thing to do.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So there was ... It wasn't necessarily that you had a particular ... Like you had to be a particular profession of Christianity or whatever. It was just ... I had several friends that sang in the gospel choir and so I thought I would try it out. I wasn't really a musician, but it was fun. I learned a lot. It was, I think, where I was first introduced to black sacred music in any kind of intentional way. Because like I said, I wasn't churched. So, I had an appreciation for choir music, black choir music, and those songs, many of those songs have stayed with me. So, I'll hear them now and be like, "Oh, I remember when we sang that." And all of that. So, it became a very big part of my life, singing in the gospel choir the last couple of years of my high school career. And I think that was it.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I babysat a lot. I liked the kids. I had folks around me that had babies and young toddlers so I babysat from the time I was like 10. So, I did that a lot on the weekends of one of my peers who was a friend that lived a couple doors down from my grandmother, we played together a lot. Her sister, older sister, became a teenage mom at some point in our growing up and had this baby and

was trying to, I remember both juggle being a teenager, trying to kind of live her teenage life and having this young baby, and their mom was a minister. It was Seventh Day Adventist, I think at that point. She had had a few different iterations again. I didn't understand that then, I understand it now. And so I've watched that baby a lot who is now like 30 and is in the military. And so it's really bizarre to see pictures and stuff of him because I remember when he was my charge. So, that's what I did for fun in my young adult or youth years.

Monique Moultrie So, talk to me about some of the values you were given as a young person. Did they come from home? Were they coming from school?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I don't remember a whole lot of kind of intentional kind of conversations about values, but I do as an adult person now, particularly as I'm parenting now, I think a lot about how certain things were modeled for me or that I came to have kind of an understanding about particular values. I think to build off of the point, I knew that having a good education, like my mom trying to provide for me to have a good education, was important. And I know that making an intentional decision about where she was going to buy a home and dealing with the sacrifices, financial sacrifices, that it would have been for a single black woman to pay really high property taxes, for example, because of the school district. Like, I got it growing up so to speak, but I definitely get it now in terms of having to make decisions about education for my own child.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I think I learned the value of what it means to be in environments where there's all sorts of different kinds of people. And I don't mean that from like a kind of a ... I don't mean that from a sort of Pollyanna, multiculturalism perspective but I do think that growing up in the environment that I did where I was exposed early on, and where it was normative for me to be around students, classmates and peers and neighbors who were Jewish ... The area I grew up was heavily Jewish and so having Jewish holidays off of school and seeing Orthodox folks in their garb walking down the street and celebrating Hanukkah with friends, that was just normal to me. It wasn't ...

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Having classmates whose parents were immigrants and didn't speak the language, having my grandmother's neighbor, two or three doors down from us, who were a gay couple, male couple, it just was ... I think that obviously in 2019, living in progressive communities is not as much of an anomaly, but I think in the 80s and 90s, that community was an intentional sort of experiment. And so, I'd know like my parents may not have had all the ... Immigrant parents may not have had all the language and all the kind of woke, whatever that we have now, but I know that they were trying to do what they thought was best. And so, I think that I learned the value of what it is to be in an environment that's not homogenous.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I think I learned the value of hard work and making it happen. I think about it, like I said, now as a parent, more than I did when I was growing up. But my mom bought a home on her own and worked really hard and we weren't rich. And I saw the value of what it meant, what blue collar employment meant

at the postal service, which is where she worked and retired from. Meant for so many black families in that era, such that you could buy a home. Thank you. Send your kids to college make a life for yourself and sort of this "middle-class" kind of class status even without the benefits of the college education.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I was not the first person in my family to go to college, but I was only the second. So, my aunts ... My mom has eight siblings at that time, none of them had gone to college. Or if they had gone, they hadn't finished. Like they had done community college classes and things. But even if they didn't or when they didn't go to college, they all had great jobs and were all able to kind of, for better or for worse, live into sort of the middle-class trappings and sending their own kids to college and their grandkids, and that kind of thing. And so, I learned the value of longterm employment and commitment and kind of what that looks like.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I think I learned the value of family. I mean, my family ... My mom has eight siblings. Six are living. And so, I grew up mostly around all of those folks. Some of them lived away, but the majority were there. And my family wasn't a very kind of outwardly emotional kind of family. So, I didn't learn about like ... All the sort of emotional intelligence stuff came from me later doing that work as an adult. There's been a lot more emotionality in the last year since my grandmother died. And so, folks are making sense of the matriarch being gone. Thank you. Thank you. Making sense of the matriarch being gone and how the dynamic of the family has changed.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: But I did learn via kind of my observation about the importance of family, the importance of kind of wrestling through some of the difficulties and challenges that are present in all families or black families and different personalities, different ways of looking at the world. But I don't think that I was able to synthesize what I saw growing up or didn't see growing up until I became an adult, until I did family systems work, until, until, until. Until I was sort of in a role last year when my grandmother died, as trying to walk through with some of the family members what was happening. She was dying and all the stuff that was coming up between the siblings about who had been taking care of her and not and all of that, and me as the sort of resident, minister in the family. And so, I think that for the things that I lacked, because my family just wasn't those ...

Kentina Washington Leapheart: They weren't those kinds of folks growing up in terms of sort of outwardly emotional in that way, like I've always felt like I could depend on my family to show up for me and show up for each other. And so, I think that that was a value that came too, even if it was sometimes a little prickly around the edges. On my paternal side, which I didn't spend as much time with, but my grandmother in my paternal side instilled in me definitely the value of education. Reading, she was a huge, is a huge reader. I am a reader and was a reader growing up. The arts, on my paternal side, my grandmother growing up, took me to plays and concerts all the time; black theater, orchestra concerts,

museums, art museums. Cleveland has a great cultural scene there. And so, I learned the value of those experiences in my life growing up too.

Monique Moultrie Okay. So, let's, I guess, hold in juxtaposition those values with a specific, if any, commitments or messaging around social justice issues. Was that something that was talked about in your household whatever the cause was at the time?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I don't remember anything explicit. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, the one I have been talking about, the matriarch who died in May of 2018, I very, very distinctly, because I spent most weekends at her house up until I got to be in high school, late middle school ... When Cokie Roberts died a few weeks ago, I posted on Facebook that I remember waking up on Sunday mornings many, many times growing up as a kid and a middle schooler, and watching all of the Sunday morning shows. So, Face the Nation, Meet the Press, all of that with my grandmother.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And she watched the news incessantly, like the local news. So, she would always have that on and one of my uncles was living with her at the time and she would ... I remember overhearing the conversations about what the latest political this or that, that was going on both locally and nationally. So, I grew up in an environment where there was constant conversation about the goings on of the world, where newspapers were read regularly every day, where the news was watched, where the Sunday morning political shows were discussed. And so, I grew up in an environment where talking about political engagement, and we didn't necessarily call it social justice at that time, but that was just the fabric of what was going on in my life and what was going on in lives of the family members.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: My mom, not so much. Like I don't remember any kind of intentional conversations with her or from her, but absolutely my grandmother. And even on my father's side, my paternal grandmother, even to this day, has always been a conversationalist with me around issues of justice. So, political engagement, women's rights, race, all of that. I talk to her a little bit, as an adult, a little bit more regularly about those kinds of topics than I did my maternal grandmother. But both of them modeled for me what it looked like to be, if nothing else informed. Now, nobody at that time was wanting to protest or standing on the steps of the Supreme court or whatever, but the absolute commitment to being informed and reading the news was something that was a regular part of my life from an early age.

Monique Moultrie Okay. So, I'll give you time to drink your coffee.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Oh no. It's fine. It's too hot so I'm waiting on it. A lot of this stuff is always scorching so we have some time.

Monique Moultrie Let's transition to talk about you choosing Miami University. And why did you choose that school, why a major in public administration? What other than its close proximity to where you were, was appealing?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So Miami was not my first choice or my second choice. It actually wasn't on my list at all. I had aspirations to go to an HBCU, so I applied to Hampton and I think Howard. I think those are the only two that I applied to, that were HBCUs. I applied to a couple of other PWYs, but those were the only two. So, Miami wasn't even on my radar. Didn't get into Howard, got into Hampton. But as is the story with a lot of people, the financial aid situation was no, no. So, I couldn't get any answers or if ... I don't remember all the details, but whatever it was going to be, it was going to be a situation where I was going to be able to go there to be able to afford what they were going to give me in financial aid and scholarships plus what my mom was able to pay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I can't remember how I ended up going on a tour to Miami. I don't remember how I found out about it, but I found myself on a tour, went down maybe on a spring break or something like that, with some other students from my school, and it may have been black students or students of color if I recall. But anyway, it hadn't been on my radar. Went down. I was impressed, but I still had my heart set on figuring out if I could get in ... Somehow figure out a way to get to Hampton. But ended up applying to Miami and got in and had a pretty good financial aid scholarship package. And so, decided that that was, or that it was sort of decided for me that that's where I was going to go.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: The semester that I was going to start was in the same year that Miami had had a really major racist attack on a black person who I don't think was a student at the school, but was just in the community by a white person. And it had made national news and it was a disaster, and the school was trying to respond to that. And so I remember when it came out that that had happened, and this was the first kind of inkling of them talking about diversity and racial justice and stuff like that, my family was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe you're going to go to this school. Like what are we going to do about this?" But I was like, "Oh, I think it'll be fine."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, I was, in many ways, naive about racism. I had been in this, multicultural, multi ethnic, diverse socioeconomic experiment from K through 12 at that point. And so, I had not experienced what I perceived any way to be blatant overt racism at that point. So, seeing something like that happen was very strange to me. And when I went to Miami and enrolled there, it was a wake up call because it was the first time that I had been around a particular kind of white people. Like I had gone to school with all sorts of people my whole life, but not wealthy white people who had never been around anybody but other wealthy white people. I had not been in an environment where it wasn't 30/30/30 or 33/33, in terms of a split as far as ethnic groups. So, going from where I come from to a school with 16,000 students, 500 of them were black, that was a very different experience.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And the school, at that time, was really trying to wade through a lot of racial unrest that was bubbling up because of things that had happened in the town. And so stuff happened. I stood in my first protest when I ... My first semester while I was there. I wrote an op-ed in the school newspaper about microaggressions. I didn't know that word back then, but that's essentially what I was experiencing. I know that now, from white students. I lived in the diversity dorm and so again, I was coming from a particular kind of environment at home. I lived in a dorm where people were intentionally living in a multicultural diversity dorm and we were having conversations about race and gender. Nothing on really about sexuality back then, but I was surrounding myself with folks who were like minded. And I was still living in this larger kind of fishbowl situation in Miami where I was learning about race for the first time in that way.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, that was how I ended up there. I had a pretty good experience for the most part. I mean, it wasn't like a terrible college experience. I made the most of it. I made friends. And public administration was sort of a default choice. I had a number of different majors trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I think I was a religion major at first, randomly, which who the hell knew that this would be my life? But was a religion comparative religion major because I was interested. I was just curious. It had nothing to do with, at that point I wasn't a Christian or professing any particular faith. I actually was leaning towards converting to Judaism honestly at that time when I first went to college, but was just really curious, theologically curious. And so, signed up for that as my major and then switched, I think later, to early childhood education.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I thought I might want to be a teacher. And then finally public administration. And what happened with that was I think I was concerned about getting a job. And I wasn't going to do a business degree because I didn't want to take calculus. So, public administration, all of the courses for the most part, at least the core courses were very similar to the business students' core courses that they had to take, but you didn't have to take calculus. You could take statistics, which I did and still have the accounting and the econ and the whatever, whatever. And of course, obviously the PA specific classes too.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I thought that that was my way of sort of getting a quasi business degree without having to deal with calculus that I had been avoiding like the plague for ever. So, that's how I ultimately ended up in ... It wasn't because I had a particular love for that at all. It was more of a function of I need to get a job after college and this is how I think I'm going to do it so ...

Monique Moultrie Okay. And so, you mentioned prior to that, you were theologically curious and that Judaism was a possibility. Did you have any spiritual practices or any language behind what it is you believed in?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah, I think at that time in my life I was kind of all over the place. So, when I tell you that I used to go to the library and spend hours in the library, one of the things that I would come, or some of the books that I would come home with would be all of these books that I had taken off the shelves that were

about religion in one way, shape, form or fashion. So, I remember there was a book that I had begun reading maybe the summer before I went to college, the summer between high school graduation and college. And I don't remember the name of the book, I can see the cover in my mind now, but it was written by a rabbi and it was basically for people who were considering conversion. So, you are thinking about Judaism, here's kind of some of the steps, blah blah blah.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I think I just ... Growing up, I went to all sorts of religious services because my family ... I grew up in kind of a secular Christian family so we were Christian ... Like a lot of black people are Christian. You pray at dinner time, at meals and you pray for this or that, but there was no church going. There was no any of that kind of stuff on my maternal side, which is where I spent most of my time. My paternal side, my grandmother did go to church, a Baptist church. And so, occasionally if I was spending the weekend with her, I would go with her, but that was like here and there. But I had friends who lived on my street and I went to school with, that were every flavor of Protestant Christianity as well as Catholic, as well as Jewish, as well as Bahai.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, if we were hanging out and they asked me to go, I would go. So, I had been to all sorts of services. As I mentioned, my one friend and her mom was a Seventh Day Adventist evangelist. And so I had gotten to know that faith a little bit because I was close to her. And I had spent maybe two summers working at a JCC Jewish community center, summer camp, working with these kids with special needs. So, I had also spent these summers immersed in Judaism. So, learning Hebrew prayers and celebrating Shabbat and all of that. And so, I think that that, at that time, felt the most intriguing to me if I was wanting to choose a particular path, but I didn't have a particular practice. I will say that at Miami as is the case in a lot of PWYs that have small numbers of black students, black students congregate and get together and figure out ways to be spiritual together.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, the school was not a faith-based school, but there was a chapel on campus. And so, there were a number of black students that would reserve space at that chapel on campus and curate Pentecostal esque kind of services. There was a black church in town. Miami is a small town. There was an AME church in town, but I never really attended that church. And then I feel like there might've been a Baptist church in town too, but some students would commute and go to Cincinnati, which was an hour away. But for those who didn't or didn't have a car or whatever, weren't from there, they would have services on campus. And so, there were folks within my friend group or people I knew ... I never was super integrated into the churchy folk because I wasn't churchy.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: These people had all grown up in a church and whatever. But they were folks who were like lay ministers or some people who had been ordained in their nondenominational kind of holiness situation growing up. And then they would just curate services and they would sometimes invite people in. So, I remember that there was a student whose mom was an evangelist and would

come in and have prayer and healing services for students and touch folk on the forehead and they would fall out and that kind of stuff. So, that was a spiritual practice, so to speak, because we would go to these serves. Myself and some of my friends would go to these services. I never went to any Jewish services when I was at school. I decided not to convert, partially because I was too lazy to do all the work it was going to take for me to be working with a rabbi and going through all that. And so I was lazy and I was like, "Oh, I'm not going to do this." So I didn't. So, I just sort of attended church here and there, not regularly when I was in college.

Monique Moultrie Okay. So, how did you shift from there to you graduate, you're working in the financial services world, to feeling a need to go to seminary?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Well, yeah, a lot of stuff happened in between that. So, when I left college, my college roommate's father is a Baptist minister. She came to school and was very green and had been very sheltered. And when I graduated from college, I was moving to her hometown. She was going somewhere else for grad school. She was actually moving into my hometown to go to grad school and I was moving to her hometown to go to work. And so she was like, "Oh well, if you're looking for a church, my dad has this church or whatever."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I went a few times but never really kind of joined. So, I still was just sort of out there in terms of being a church orphan. I had some interest in Christianity and interest in church I think at that point because I knew that was kind of what you were supposed to do, maybe or I thought that. But again, I didn't have the language, but I can say now in retrospect, the theology was ... There was something that wasn't lining up with who I was becoming in terms of how I was thinking about God. So, once I got to Chicago, I was still working in insurance industry and I started attending Trinity United Church of Christ. One of my sorority sisters, actually two of them were members there and had been members for awhile and they would invite me all the time, "Oh, you should come."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I'm like, "Ah." And more of it for me was about ... I had a lot of perceptions about ... I had to look a particular way to go to church, I had to have fancy clothes, I had to have whatever. And they're like, "No, we go with jeans and it's just kind of come as you are. You don't have to worry about all of that." So they kept asking me, asking me, asking me every weekend. I would be, at the time I was living in the suburbs of Chicago, but I would be in the city on the weekends hanging out with them. And there was a six o'clock, they still have it, there was a Sunday evening service. It was like an hour and a half long. So, they badgered me for months and I finally went and liked it. And so kept going, kept going, kept going for awhile, for about a year.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And then I joined the church. And kind of immediately after I joined, I sort of fell into the fold. So, I was churchy. Naomi and I laugh about this all the time anytime there was a service, the doors of the church were open, I was there. Anytime there was a guest minister, any singles, worship service, any

women's worship, any revival, anything, Sunday, Wednesday, Monday, Tuesday, whatever. I was there soaking it up. And so, became very, very involved. Not so much, I didn't join in ministries or anything like that, but was a worship person, constantly coming for that. And I started to feel ... I was working at the time and I knew I wanted to get a master's degree, but I knew that my job was only going to pay for me to get an MBA. And I was like, "I don't really want an MBA," but I didn't know what else I wanted.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I started to become aware that I was theologically curious or had always been. But what does that mean for me wanting to get additional education? What does that look like? And I took a Bible class at Trinity and there was two classmates in my class that I made friends, both ended up being my sorority sisters. One woman was like me. She was working full-time and trying to figure out, "I really feel this call or I feel like I want to do something more with what I'm thinking about from a theology perspective. I don't know what to do." And then the other woman had already gone to seminary. She had gone to Garrett and had graduated and I had never even heard of Garrett at that point. And she had a journalism degree from Northwestern and she wasn't a pastor. And I was like, "Huh, you can go and study this stuff." And she was and is, marrying her two interests and her two areas of expertise into her career.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, she at the time was working for a Christian publisher. So, she had this journalism background degree, she had this MDiv and she was like, "I don't want to be a pastor. That aint my call." She's not ordained, none of that. And she has over the course of 15, 20 years, has had a series of jobs writing full-time as well as editing and publishing and working for a publisher with this background. I was like, "That's possible." So, a whole world was open for me. So, myself and this classmate, this other classmate who was working full-time, decided we were going to go to Virginia Union because Trinity had this relationship with Virginia Union or wherever, all of that. All that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, we had made all these plans and we're doing quit our job the next year, we were going to move together and be roommates and we want to go to Virginia uni, she and I. Well, she went to Virginia Union. She has since graduated. Actually, and I graduated before she did. It took her a really long time, but she was working full-time and was taking one class at a time. I got pregnant so I wouldn't go on to Virginia Union. So, I did not go to seminary at first, and it was about five years between when I first started thinking about the possibility of seminary. Not because I felt called to ministry, not because I wanted to pastor, but really because I wanted to explore theology more. And I didn't quite know how I was going to do that and work. The job that I had at the time where I was traveling all the time and whatever, and then later had a baby. It was just a lot.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, it was about five years from when I first thought about it to when I actually went. Somewhere in between that, maybe a year three or something, or four, at the time, there was a program in Chicago, the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education that had a kind of taste and see sort of

thing for folks who were thinking about seminary, but who didn't have a bachelor's degree. I had a bachelor's degree, but it was supposed to be kind of an opportunity for you to get a taste of what a seminary class might look like.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I took a course, like an intro history of African American religion or Christianity, something like that. And the professor was like, "You need to go ... Like, why are you in this class?" Because everybody else in the class did not have a bachelor's degree. Folks had been working in ministry and kind of lay or whatever. And he would read my writing and be like, "This is above your pay grade. Like you need to just go on and go." And I was like, "Oh no." Whatever. And so, the next year, maybe year and a half or something after that, I ended up going. So, that's how I alternately found myself. So, it was a long road of kind of figuring out how I would do it, but eventually got there.

Monique Moultrie And so you chose Garrett and what did you think your end goal was going to be? So you had your friend who was like a journalist and Christian publisher, you-

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I had no end goal. When I started, I actually chose Garrett ... Well Garrett ... So, I applied at Garrett and I applied at Loyola in Chicago, the Institute of Pastoral Studies. And at the time, their MDiv program was not accredited by ATS. It is now, but it wasn't at the time. But Garrett was in Evanston, far North, Loyola was downtown. The campus that I was attending was downtown and I lived in the Western, on the near West side of the city and had a toddler. So, I was like, "I can't do Garrett because I can't make this traipse up and down in the snow and whatever. And I got to figure out childcare and all of that."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I went to Loyola for a semester because it was an easier situation with my commute, but I knew ... So, I was missing something. I didn't know what I was expecting from seminary, but I knew that Loyola wasn't it. It was very much a commuter-centered program so there was no residential option of living in community. It was obviously Catholic and so then the women that were in the program, many of them were working in churches as directors of religious ed. And I'm thinking to myself ... Again, I didn't have all the words at that time or the analysis, but I'm like, "You're working in the church full-time, but you can't get ordained. That's not going to work for me. If I'm going to go through this program, I don't know what I'm going to be doing, but I don't want to be in a situation where my gender is going to hinder me."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I did a semester there, did well, learned a lot. And I decided I was going to move to Evanston so I could go to Garrett. I wanted to live in community, I wanted to be fully immersed full-time in the experience. Again, I didn't know what it was, but I knew something was there for me. So, that's what I did. So, I transferred the following fall and moved, lived in the seminary apartments and my kid was with me on campus. And so, that's how I ended up. I had no end goal. I walked into my orientation and all of my classmates who I love dearly, we were a great class that came in together, all were like, "I'm going to be a pastor." And I'm like, "I don't know what ... I'm just here because I'm trying to learn something."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Pamela Lightsey was the Dean of students at the time, and I know we'll get to this later, but she got up there and said something about being queer and I'm looking at her like, "You're a minister?" Even though I had been at Trinity, this progressive church, I didn't know anything about my own identity at that point. Everything, it was like the heavens opened up. And so I remember going to her office and saying, "What does that mean? What do you mean you're queer and you're a woman? What it is a woman ..." Like I didn't know any of that.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so she sat down, and it's funny to think about it now, nine that years later. But yeah, so I had no end goal. And how I ended up in chaplaincy initially was that the director of vocational formation at the time had just come to Garrett in that role but she had spent 10 years or something prior to that as a chaplain. And she was the charged with helping us get placements for our field placement and all of that. And I remember her saying, "I chose not to do parish ministry because I was a single mom." She was a single mom. "And I needed a 9:00 to 5:00. I couldn't be at something that was going to be all these kind of unpredictable hours and my daughter was ... I needed to go to work at nine o'clock and leave at 5:00 and be able to do what I needed to do at home, and the church was not going to offer that kind of ..." And I was like, "Huh, okay." Knew nothing about chaplaincy.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So for me, when I heard her, it was a practical. Like that was what I first heard. And so that set me on a trajectory to exploring what chaplaincy looked like because it felt doable in terms of my situation as being a parent and seeing this woman who had been a parent. She later went back into the parish ministry, but her daughter was much older by that point. And so she felt like it was a little bit better. But yeah, so that's how I ended up exploring what per chaplaincy was and the possibilities for me.

Monique Moultrie So, while you were a Garrett, did you feel a call to preach? A call in a specific direction?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: No, I got asked to preach and actually it's funny because my friend ... Do you know Shonda Gladden?

Monique Moultrie Yeah.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah. So, it's her fault because she was serving a church at the time. She was at Garrett and she was serving as an associate at AME church on the North shore of Chicago. And they were having a seven last word service, which when you ask somebody to preach and that's the first time they ever preached and it's the seven last word ... And she asked me if I had felt a call to preach and I was like, "Not really." I mean, she'd asked me this in a conversation and she invited me to be on this seven last word service. And that was my first time ever preaching anything. I mean, I hadn't even taken preaching class or anything because I think that was actually, in my first year. Yeah. If it wasn't my first year,

I'd have to look back on my Facebook memories. I don't think I had taken preaching yet at Garrett.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So the point was she saw something in me and decided to ask me if I would be willing to preach. And so, I did and I survived. But prior to that point, I mean, I knew I was going to have to take preaching class, but it wasn't something that I had been itching to do. And so, I would. I did some seven last words there several times and was a guest minister on more than one occasion there in her absence. And preached at ... Ultimately took a preaching class at Garrett and preached multiple times before I left. But yeah, there was not a particular call. Preaching is not my favorite thing to do. Not the actual act of it, the preparation is very anxiety ridden for me.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I do not refuse. So, if somebody asks me, I will, unless I have some other obligation, I will accept the invitation and do the work to do that. But it's not my favorite thing to do because of the preparation. Because I just feel a lot of anxiety in the preparation. And I'm married to someone who's a very good preacher. And so I'm always like, "You help me." And she does, but that's how I ... The very first time I preached was because my good friend said to me, "Well, you might be called to do this." And so I did. And got a preaching award in seminary and was very ... It's still not where I think that my strong suit is, though other people say differently. And so I just try to pull myself together if somebody asks me to come.

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: But I don't go looking for for it so ...

Monique Moultrie So when you finish, you do chaplaincy because it's going to work.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yes, I did a residency.

Monique Moultrie So when you transition to chaplaincy, what skills were you building? What part of your destiny did you see that fulfilling?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, the summer after my first year of seminary was when I did my initial clinical pastoral education internship. I spent some summer in Atlanta and most people didn't do their CPE until their second year, but I was really itching to do it my first year. And my professor, I had taken a class on grief and loss, and I had said to my professor, "You know, I really want to do this. I'm really interested in this." And he was like, "I think you would be great, please go right ahead. And so I'll write your recommendation." And I think that the biggest skill, the initial skill that I learned in terms of CPE and chaplaincy was getting in touch with my own sense of grief. Like I hadn't had a lot of death losses in my life at that time and still haven't in that time but I had experienced a lot of loss in lots of other ways.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, I think that attending too and sitting with people who were experiencing loss, whether it was death loss or loss of physical health or mental health and et cetera, it brought home for me kind of what I had been experiencing but didn't really have the words to articulate. So, that was one thing that I learned, was getting in touch with myself. Also learning to listen. I think, we took one pastoral care class in seminary and I remember reading a book about listening. The art of listening. But definitely spending time on a daily basis in deep listening with people was a skill that I learned and still have to sharpen even after having done that for a really long time.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And you just learn how not to run out of the room when you're very uncomfortable or when it's chaotic or ... To stay with it. And I don't have an issue with that in chaplaincy, but I do think that sometimes in my real life or my other life, I can have that. So, it's been interesting for me to think about the ways that I'm able to show up in chaplaincy or I've been able to show up in chaplaincy that I hadn't in home or vice versa. Or ways that I need to work on it in both. So, that's kind of ... Those were some of the initial things that I think I learned.

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah.

Monique Moultrie Wonderful. So, from those skills, from my timeline, it looks like shortly thereafter, you went to the Religious Institute. So, what prepared you for that shift? What made you say yes to that, be interested in that as an opportunity?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah. So, I actually spent six years in some form of chaplaincy before I went to the Religious Institute. Because when I was in seminary, after I had done my CPE, I began working as a part-time kind of on-call chaplain at one of the hospitals systems there, and did that until I left Chicago. So, I was in some form of chaplaincy between doing the on-call part-time, my residency, and then the job I had right after seminary or after my residency and did, which was as a chaplain at a retirement community before I went to the Religious Institute.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So the shift for the religious Institute for me was twofold. One was, I was thinking about leaving my role at Presbyterian Homes anyway. I had been working as a chaplain at this retirement community for a year and a half. I had done an internship there when I was in seminary and so I had been connected to that community for several years at that point. And while the job was a good one and I learned a lot, I knew it wasn't going to be somewhere that it was going to be my forever place to do ministry. I really missed being a healthcare chaplain. So, my job at Presbyterian Homes felt ... While it was chaplaincy, it felt very much like being a pastor because I was in these longterm relationships with folks, which was fine. I loved them. There was no complaint there, but I was missing working in a healthcare environment.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: The second part was a more practical thing which was we were in a long distance relationship at that time and we didn't want to be in a long distance relationship. And so I was trying to find work out this way, she was trying to find a work in Chicago and we were sort of like, whoever finds something first, that's where we'll go. The Religious Institute had come on her radar because she had met my former executive director at a conference. And so, the executive director, they had connected on Facebook and she posted it and Naomi sent it to me and said, "Oh, you should consider this." And I'm like, "I'm not qualified for this." I had never worked in a nonprofit from that perspective, hadn't done reproductive justice work from that perspective. But she encouraged me to think about all of the work that I had done and how that might translate into transferrable skills into this particular role.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I did that. I began to think about the work that I had done in chaplaincy, the work I had done with human beings for the last six years and how that would translate into doing advocacy work on behalf of these actual human beings who are making healthcare decisions, which I think sometimes gets lost in these movement spaces. The other part of my job was working with seminarians. I really enjoyed working with seminarians. As part of my chaplaincy job, I had supervised seminary interns, which I really enjoyed and this job afforded me that opportunity to work in education with seminarians on these topics.

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So that's how I marketed myself, so to speak for the role and got the job. So, I think that I was prepared because as I said, it's one thing to be talking about, for example, reproductive justice, sexual health and all of that, and the difficult or complex decision making, I should say, that women and families are doing related to pregnancy on either side of the spectrum. Completing a pregnancy or not and everything kind of in between, is one thing to talk about that and protest about that and rail about that. And it's another thing to actually have sat with and spent time with and walked through those experiences with human beings who are making them, who are people of faith in many ways.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I think that that uniquely prepared me. My pastoral sense was key to how I showed up in that work. And I think having been a seminarian, having a love for seminarians, thinking about ways that seminaries do well and fail students in terms of education around sexual health, education around vocational discernment, beyond parish ministry, all of that, it gave me an opportunity to really think through kind of what that would look like. So, I felt prepared in that way.

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah.

Monique Moultrie So something you snuck in and we haven't addressed is you mentioned you were in a long distance relationship.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: We were.

Monique Moultrie But now you're in a long distance, same sex relationship.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Well, we're still ... Not long distance anymore. Well, yeah. We were in a long distance ... Yes. We were in a long ... She and I were in a long distance same sex relationship. Yes.

Monique Moultrie So, for the record, when did you decide to identify as queer, have that as be a part of your identity formation?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yes. Excuse me. The summer of 2012, was when I named out loud and came to really understand myself as queer. I'm sure that that was probably percolating long before that, but I think what happened was I met somebody who I did not enter into a relationship with, never told that person that I ... And it felt like I had been run over by a truck in terms of my crush/attraction to this person, woman. And I was flabbergasted. I had no idea what to do with that. And I remember that it really ... I just felt discombobulated the entire summer. I had met her through another friend at the beginning of that summer, we had all hung out, had a good time or whatever, and I found myself feeling about her, how I had only ever felt or allowed myself to feel about men prior to that point, and was mortified.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Not because I thought that there was anything wrong with it, but because I just didn't know what to do with that. And so, one of my classmates from seminary, close friend, had come out to me prior to that, the previous year. So, I remember just talking to him about it because I'm like, "What am I going to do? I don't know what to do." And he was still trying to sort of figure his own stuff out. And so we had lots of frantic conversations via the phone that summer as he was off doing an internship and I was in Chicago. And so, that was the first time I think for me that I became aware of feeling different as far as that was concerned.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, later that year or that, this was in the summer so that fall, I'd met someone else, not this same person, and expressed interest in that person after I found out or they said in a conversation that they were queer. And myself and that person had a relationship. And so, I was identifying then as queer, as in the same sex relationship. I still was tiptoeing kind of out. So, I was kind of like out at school, I was at seminary and I was sort of out with my friends but not out with my family and kind of bits and pieces related to that. And so, the coming out and sort of being fully out was a process of some time. But it started in 2012, the fall of 2012.

Monique Moultrie Okay. And so one of the questions that I had was around ... You had a quote about ... Let me just read the quote. About living faithfully and doing so requiring you to be your authentic self.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yes.

Monique Moultrie How does your authentic self show up in ministry? How does your authentic self show up in justice work?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah, so I think a huge part of me in my authentic self is feeling, especially in ministry, is feeling like I can bring all of me into whatever space that I'm in. So, one of the challenges that I began to feel at Presbyterian Homes, which was the job I had before I came to Philly, was I was not fully out there. And much of that had to do with feeling ... There was another woman on the staff who was a lesbian, self identified. She was an older woman. She had been working as a chaplain for 20 something odd years. She was in her 70s, 60s and people knew who she was, the residents, the staff. I did not feel the same level of comfort in terms of being the only black person on our pastoral team, and we had like six of us, seven of us.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: The CEO of the retirement community was a Southern Baptist guy. The residents were all white with the exception of one black resident who when I did come out to her later after I had left, basically told me, "God's word says this and you're doing this and so ..." Which devastated me because she and I had had a really good relationship. So, I knew then that that ... Like I felt ... Naomi was around, she was coming to visit me because she was in Pennsylvania and I was in Chicago, and she was coming to visit me. And she had even done some workshops at the retirement community, but I was never being fully transparent with people about who she was. Who I was, number one, even before she and were together, but who she was to me.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And so, that was when I knew this is not something that I'm going to be able to do. So, part of being able to show up authentically is that my life, in as much as we share our personal lives, personal at work, is not a secret. And that for me is being faithful because all of me is who I am. So, I don't think that I could do ... I know that I couldn't do a ministry assignment, whatever that assignment would be. And I don't know what would've happened had I stayed there. I think I would have gotten to the point where I couldn't keep it, sort of don't ask, don't tell. But it was becoming increasingly more difficult for me to be in that environment and not be fully open about who I was.

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So living faithfully for me means that all the ways who I am in the world, not just about my sexuality but in general, are present with me. So, I walk in a space, say in the reproductive justice when I was doing that work, like me being a ... I cannot do this work and not be thinking about this from the perspective of

being a parent and what it looks like to have to think about how you're going to pay for childcare or thinking about where you live and your kid, what kind of school they go to. Like all of these are reproductive justice issues. And so, that doesn't cease to be, and actually I think it offers me a particular perspective because I'm talking about something that I've lived in many ways. So, that that is part of my living faithfully.

Monique Moultrie Okay. So, I'm going to shift us to talk about sort of activist oriented stuff for the remainder of the questions.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie Because that's where I think the book project will be.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Right.

Monique Moultrie Yeah, no I'm having a hard time putting together, at this point, 18 separate stories into one coherent narrative. And so faith activism is where I'm hanging my hat for a moment.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie So, can you speak about your work at the Religious Institute as a faith leader and an activist and how did the concerns about faith and justice go together for you?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah. So, I think that when I started that work, it was new work for me. I think I had been ... I considered myself to be an advocate, though maybe wouldn't have always defined it in that way because of my work in the hospital or my work in pastoral care with folks, advocating for them, not only with healthcare or their families or whatever, but advocating for them to get in touch with their own sense of spirituality, their own sense of understanding about the changes and shifts that they were experiencing in their lives, their sense of mortality, et cetera. So, I think that advocacy for me looked like, in my role at the Religious Institute, beyond sort of like the public stuff. Like speaking at this rally or I'm writing this op-ed, was I was constantly thinking about who are the real human beings behind the work that we're doing?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, if we are trying to, for example, help clergy to think differently or to expand their thinking theologically about blah blah blah issue. Let's say abortion, just for sake of conversation. How clergy in Texas might be thinking about abortion or how they can talk about it in their congregations or not, is different than maybe how a clergy person in a progressive city in Massachusetts is thinking about this. How a black clergy person, even if they consider themselves to be progressive, is thinking about this and thinking about how they might be able to talk about this, is different than how ...

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So, I think I was constantly ... Because I've been a clergy person, because I've been working in healthcare, because I've been a parent, because I've walked alongside who were making, as an example, abortion decisions, I was always trying to come back to that. So, I think I thought of myself less as an activist in sort of the way that people use that word in a lot of ways, and more as sort of a kind of Sojourner with people, students, seminarians, clergy, real life human being folk, to think through these issues and to kind of dig deep into their own sense of understanding and conviction so that they could serve the people in their congregations well or serve the people in their communities well. Those were the conversations that I was curating. That's the way that I was being an activist or an advocate.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And the faith perspective, of course, comes into that because the work that we were doing was a multi-faith route and in multi-faith understandings of what sacred texts have to say, what our sense of community and our sense of commitment to a theological narrative, whether it's the Jesus story, whether it's the prophets for folks who are Hebrew Bible, and everything kind of in between, a sense of divine nature. And all of that for people who even that have kind of multi-faith leanings in their own practices. How do we live out kind of the incarnation? Like how are we actually being with each other in the world? That's where I felt like my faith by sort of orientation towards me being compelled by the Jesus narrative, the Jesus project, drove, and my sense of connection with nature and with the world, drove that work for me so ...

Monique Moultrie Okay.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah.

Monique Moultrie So in a larger, well maybe not larger scale, but on a interpersonal scale, what do you see as your work? What are the causes that you're an advocate for? What's your work and how do you differentiate that between that's good work, but it's not what I'm particularly called to work on?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So I think, especially as I'm in this kind of transitional phase right now in discernment about what my next move as terms of my career ... Is it five o'clock?

Monique Moultrie Not yet. It's 10 minutes to 5:00.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Okay.

Monique Moultrie Do they close at 5:00?

Kentina Washington Leapheart: I think they close at 5:00 so let me hurry up. But I think they close at 5:00 on Sundays. So, I think ... What is my work? I think that as I have been thinking about shifting vocationally and figuring out what's next for me, I have a particular interest in, and this was work from a volunteer perspective that I was

doing even when I was at the Religious Institute, in maternal health and early intervention. So, while I was doing reproductive justice work at the religious Institute, because of the nature of the political landscape that we're in right now, I was spending a lot of time on really reproductive rights work.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: So abortion-centric kind of work. And I think that I have missed the work that I had had done in chaplaincy in a lot of ways, which was working with pregnant and parenting people. And so, part of what I see as my work, and I don't know how this will be worked out, whether it'd be a full-time role or volunteering, which I have been doing, is working to figure out ways that we can support folks who want to parent by giving them the resources and the skills and whatever else that they need so that everybody is starting from the same "level playing field", which is reproductive justice way.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Because I think what is often lost in a lot of the conversations related to reproductive rights, particularly because I think it's depending on white feminists or the ones that are curating that conversation, is that there are lots of people who actually do want to parent, but they can't because they can't afford it. They can't because they don't have support. They can't. And these are people across kind of class spectrum, across race, across sexuality. And so, I think that that part of the conversation gets lost in the abortion conversation. And I know that it does because I've had lots and lots of conversations with people who made an abortion decision that they wouldn't have otherwise made if they had what they needed. And to me, I think that that's an injustice, right? That has nothing to do with whether or not people need access. I absolutely think that there should 100% be access.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And I'm saying if people are not even starting at a level playing field to make a decision, that's coercion. And so I am interested in, and I don't know what this look like, figuring out or working with making sure that folks are starting with a level playing field. And then when and if these children do get here, how are we ensuring that not only does the child have what they need, but that the parents do, which is a mental health concern. Like this whole conversation with Meghan Markle this weekend, this video of her saying, "I'm not okay." And people say, "Oh, well she's the queen or the princess, whatever." I'm like, "Yeah. And like, she's not okay."

Kentina Washington Leapheart: And there's lots of women who don't even have the resources that she's had, that are not okay. So, how are we ... Like churches are not even talking, or faith communities are not even talking about that. So, I think that that, for me, looks like what that might be for my next work, whatever that looks like. I am thinking about chaplaincy. I am thinking about various ...

Monique Moultrie Okay. If they tell you, they're serious.

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Various context that that chaplaincy might look like that I haven't done yet. So, I do feel like I still have some work to do there.

Monique Moultrie Okay. I'm going to stop-

Kentina Washington Leapheart: Yeah.