

# Pleasure Gardening with Tourmaline

## Audio Transcript

### Introducing Pleasure Gardening with Tourmaline

**Tourmaline:** Hi, I'm Tourmaline. I'm an artist, filmmaker, and writer based in New York. In honor of Juneteenth, a holiday that celebrates the freedom of enslaved people in the United States, I explored some sites of resistance and liberation throughout New York City that have been important to me. I visited these places with my friend T. Lax.

**T. Lax:** Hello. My name is Thomas Lax, also known as T., and I'm a curator in the Department of Media and Performance at MoMA.

**Tourmaline:** The title of this tour is "Pleasure Gardening." It is an invitation to be in our pleasure, to feel ourselves, and not continue to think that we can somehow separate our pleasure from our desire for freedom for our greater community.

**T. Lax:** I see Tourmaline's project as an open invitation into Black space, a real and metaphorical place, where many people can gather in their vast differences, to practice their wildest visions of freedom.

**Tourmaline:** You'll hear from us and from a few people whose own freedom dreaming tends to these places and inspires me to dream bigger.

Cynthia R. Copeland.

**Cynthia R. Copeland:** These people found a way to be here and these people found a way to make a way out of no way.

**Tourmaline:** Mariame Kaba

**Mariame Kaba:** If you are steeped in Black history in the United States, we know that in the most repressive environments, mutual aid is essential for people's survival, it's survival work.

**Tourmaline:** And Robin D. G. Kelley

**Robin D. G. Kelley:** Liberation is not necessarily something that we sort of achieve by getting to the mountain top. But it's a constant process of cultivation.

**Tourmaline:** Pleasure gardens were real places in New York City in the 1820s. They had nature. They had fireworks. They had hot air balloons. There were

Black-owned pleasure gardens, places where Black people, when slavery was still legal in New York, would go and be able to be with each other in nature.

In this audio, you'll hear about Black residents in New York City who established places for self-actualization and dreaming; places where people could come together without the threat of violence, they could form community, and help one another, and even just be.

We've included a map and images so you're welcome to listen at the sites or wherever you are.

### **Boarding House for Black Sailors, 330 Pearl Street (Part 1)**

**T. Lax:** Who were the Black sailors who were coming and finding refuge?

**Tourmaline:** We're right on the East River, so Black sailors were working on these boats. And there was very few places to stay, but some of the people who were sailors were just people on the run.

We're at 330 Pearl Street in front of a 5-story building with a faded brick exterior and a grid of windows. This building was erected after there was a boarding house here for Black sailors. Here's Cynthia R. Copeland.

**Cynthia R. Copeland:** Being a mariner is typical for African-American males. It's one of the jobs that is easy for them to have. And it set up all kinds of networks for messages to get to and from places, so that people would know what was happening in the world and how to move people through—freedom seekers trying to make their way north, as far north as they possibly could.

And so the Lyons family are there—Albro Lyons and Mary Lyons—taking over this space of the Colored Sailors Home from about 1851 until about 1862, just before the Civil War. They offer shelter, education, food to the Mariners who are there.

It's also one of these spaces that is kind of used as an Underground Railroad. You know, you get this connection of people through this that you are able to know, oh, this is the conductor in such and such a space, so you want to go that way. Or we're going to set sail from the pier on the West side and head in such and such a direction. And so there is a lot of effort to move people around, clandestinely, through this space.

The Lyons family--they are a prominent Abolitionist-reformist, African American family. They are trying to get suffrage for black males and so that is happening again through these networks on the sea. So I think that the colored Mariners space

afforded them lots of ability to make a difference and to take care of Black folk in the city.

**Tourmaline:** Up until 1809, Black people couldn't inherit land in New York City. And in order to vote, having \$250 worth of property and living here for three years was a requirement for Black people in New York City. So there were all of these ways that anti-Black racism was built into the architecture of the city that came down to land ownership.

Not only were the Lyons family creating a greater sense of safety here, and a place of refuge and sanctuary. But also they were architecting the blueprint for our expansion north in a moment of pronounced violence here in lower Manhattan.

### **Boarding House for Black Sailors, 330 Pearl Street (Part 2)**

**T. Lax:** As you're describing the active life of this history and making it felt and present for all of us, there's this other piece that you're summoning, which is unknowable in history proper, with a capital H, but that you, nevertheless, make available. And here I'm thinking about the kind of freedom dreaming that might have happened between sailors who were finding succor and refuge with one another through practices of, we could call it non-normative sexuality, queerness, pleasure.

**Tourmaline:** I think that to me what feels most compelling is thinking about those moments of lightness and fun and pleasure in the gaps that surround a historical archive of Black life in New York City.

Thinking about all the delicious sex that was happening at the Boarding House between the Black sailors as an extension of the pleasure ground and pleasure gardens that were also happening. And so, I don't know—I think I'm also looking for the fun. I think so often when we talk about the past and Black life, it gets so quickly reduced to these moments of utter tragedy or deep heroics. And so these small, everyday moments of intimacy and pleasure feels, to me, like, where the life really is.

**Tourmaline:** My college professor, historian Robin D. G. Kelley coined the term “freedom dreaming” in his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*.

**Robin D. G. Kelley:** "Without new visions. We don't know what to build. Only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us."

We can't move forward if we're always fighting the demon in front of us. We've got to move beyond it and think about what we're trying to build.

All the stories of those moments of feeling free in spaces that were designed for confinement, designed as enclosure, designed not to be spaces of liberation, that we make our freedom in our actions sometimes. So when you're talking about the embrace of another in a world where that embrace is rendered illegal or immoral, you know, you're basically seizing freedom.

Liberation is not necessarily something that we achieve by getting to the mountaintop. But it's a constant process of cultivation.

### **African Society for Mutual Relief, 42 Baxter Street (Part 1)**

**Tourmaline:** We're in the park across from 42 Baxter, which was formerly the site of the African Society for Mutual Relief.

**T. Lax:** And so here we are in Columbus Park.

**Tourmaline:** Oh my God. Here we are in Columbus Park.

**T. Lax:** And what a park it is. It's really, we're—we have like white runners, a lot of Chinese folks playing Mahjong. And then in the former site of freedom that we decided to—you brought us to—

**Tourmaline:** Look how quickly the blame game happens.

**T. Lax:** Thank you for bringing us to this prison, Tourmaline.

**Tourmaline:** In the former site of that we—actually you

**T. Lax:** You brought us to a prison. Tell us about that.

**Tourmaline:** Tell us about your decision. Oh my God. So live from under the bus that T. threw me, I'm going to talk a little bit about *MY* decision.

So the African Society for Mutual Relief was a place where people could donate and put money into in order to have a kind of safety net when Black people were excluded from schooling and life insurance and buying property. So this was a way that people would come together and have a sense of security and stability with one another that was really necessary.

It's now a prison. So, to me, nothing is more clarifying about the world that I want to live in than a prison. When I am so up close to a place that is so about limiting

freedom, it's so clarifying how much freedom we want. And how much ease we want, with being able to move around with pleasure and softness and receptivity.

Mariame Kaba is an activist and a writer. I invited her to tell you more about the African Society for Mutual Relief.

**Mariame Kaba:** What they wanted to do was to establish an independent autonomous Black organization in New York City that would unite to combat racism and oppression and to provide mutual aid and support for each other.

People have to understand what it was like to be a Black person who either was enslaved or had been emancipated at that period of time. It's not like there were social services around that people could go and access. It's not like the jobs they had provided significant financial ways to take care of themselves and their families.

Part of the mutual aid that people were engaged in at the African Society for Mutual Relief was having a whole floor that was dedicated to the underground railroad as a site for people to come and hide, when they were escaping enslavement or when they were running from slave catchers.

They really focused on trying to meet the most basic human needs. And one of those basic human needs was burial. In 1794, the city decided to close down the African burial ground and make it really difficult for Black people to then be able to bury their loved ones. And in a city like New York, at that time, where Black people died young and in large numbers, burial was super important to folks. Respecting Black people in death, if they couldn't be respected in life, made a huge, huge difference. And so they petitioned the common council at the time, in order to be able to have the city provide burial grounds for Black people. And they were successful in doing that.

Mutual aid was political survival and economic survival and cultural survival for Black people, particularly in the 18th and 19th century. This was the only way that Black people could actually make sure that they could take care of themselves and each other.

### **African Society for Mutual Relief, 42 Baxter Street (Part 2)**

**Mariame Kaba:** My name is Mariame Kaba. I am the founder and director of an organization called Project Nia, which is a prison industrial complex abolitionist organization with a long-term vision to end youth incarceration.

A lot of current prison-industrial complex abolitionists look back to the work of previous generations of abolitionists to continue to undo the afterlife of slavery in its multiple incarnations and iterations.

The current site of the African Society of Mutual Relief, there is no trace at all of what stood there before. It's gone. And it's gone on purpose. And it's not lost on me that the criminal court is sitting there on that same land where an autonomous organization built by Black people, who had themselves been enslaved people and also some of whom were still enslaved when they were members, that the criminal court sits there, that racist death-making institution that exists today to disappear so many Black people. It's not, you know, it's not lost on me, that, that irony.

**Tourmaline:** It was here that people like Marsha P. Johnson in the 1970s had big freedom dreams filled with desires for care and support for other trans people facing incarceration.

Marsha was a poet. She was a singer. She was a performer. She was the original founder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries—STAR. She was in the forefront of what was then called the gay liberation movement. She was one of the people to fight back in 1969 during the Stonewall Rebellion that every year is celebrated in what we now know as Pride.

In this place, in 1973 or '72, Marsha P Johnson was frequently having court cases. There was a Black judge, Bruce Wright, who frequently was at odds with the state around bail, which was something that was used to keep people of color, Black people, poor people in captivity. And Marsha appeared in front of him and he asked, "What's, what's the P in Marsha P Johnson?" And she said, "It stands for 'pay it no mind.'" And, and the judge responded, "Well, that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to pay it no mind." And let her go.

Here's historian Robin D. G. Kelley:

**Robin D. G. Kelley:** So much of our oppressions begin at the level of the body. Think about the bodies of women and femmes and trans people, you're talking about bodies that have experienced probably the oldest war of all, bodies that are policed, are subject to violence, to silencing. So imagine freeing the body from the constraints of all the imposed normativities of gender and sexuality. So queer liberation—liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer-gender, trans, two-spirit people—we can't have any liberation without liberating our bodies and our sexualities.

**Tourmaline:** There was an early '70s interview with Marsha P Johnson, and she was talking about how Black trans people are frequently going into this specific institution, literally right here, and being held largely because people couldn't

afford to pay bail, right? So, she said, what we're going to do is start a bail fund for incarcerated members of our community.

That launching of a freedom dream of mutual relief and mutual aid, Marsha was then being the realizer of that dream, even in a place that exists as limiting freedom. Marsha was so able to tune into freedom dreams that came before from the African Society for Mutual Relief that she said, "Aha, I know what to do. I'm going to tune my tuner to that frequency of freedom by starting a bail fund."

### **David Ruggles's Home, 36 Lispenard Street**

**Tourmaline:** We're at 36 Lispenard Street at the corner of Church Street. It's now a 5-story brick building, but in the 1830s and 40s, there was a three-story building at this site that was home to David Ruggles. His home was a stop on the Underground Railroad and he helped more than 600 people fleeing slavery. Ruggles was the founder and owner of the country's first African American book store.

Mariame Kaba is an activist who has been inspired by David Ruggles.

**Mariame Kaba:** Well, he's my favorite. He's extraordinary in multiple ways, ahead of his time, by far, somebody who is unknown today by most people. And that's a deep, deep shame. I think about it, particularly, for young Black people. There's so much that he made possible, in terms of the way that he lived his life, for them in this current moment.

He was one of the key people who created what he called the Committee of Vigilance, which was this group of overwhelmingly Black people who were New York anti-slavery activists and he helped create it here in Manhattan in 1835. And the goal of the committee was to protect defenseless, endangered persons of color by securing their rights as far as practicable. It is those vigilance committees that basically become the institutionalized form of what we understand the Underground Railroad to be.

He was the person who took in Frederick Douglass when Frederick Douglass was scared and alone in New York City, after he had finally successfully escaped from Maryland, the Eastern shore. He had him stay at his house for several days until Anna Marie, his fiancée, could come. And they married in his house on Lispenard Street.

**Tourmaline:** I grew up in Roxbury, which is a historically black part of Boston, where people like Audre Lorde and Malcolm X lived and created. And I grew up

next to Ruggles Square. And so It was really powerful to think about his life and his movement and the many places that he created from.

**Mariame Kaba:** David Ruggles coined this term “practical abolition,” which meant that Black and white abolitionists had to confront slave owners and their allies, even in the streets. And that you had to fight them in the streets. It didn’t matter. He and his colleagues believed that you had to bring about change through direct action.

He founded the first Black magazine in the U.S., called the *Mirror of Liberty*. He used his magazine and his writing to alert the Black community when members of who he termed the "kidnapping club" in New York, when they were on the loose and the prowl, he would write up articles and he would alert people about what was going on.

He would board ships in the harbor to go find people who he'd been told were being taken back down to the South. People who may have not actually ever have been enslaved in the first place, Black folks walking down the street who got grabbed and snatched by slave traders and slave catchers. And he literally would take out a gun and he would go over and he would de-arrest people and take them back into the community.

He talked about "whatever necessity requires, let that remedy be applied." Right? "Come what may, anything is better than slavery."

He died when he was 39 years old in 1849, but he was still fighting till the very end against slavery and against racial discrimination and for justice and liberation for his people.

## **Seneca Village, Central Park between West 82nd and West 89th Streets (Part 1)**

**Cynthia R. Copeland:** My name is Cynthia Copeland and I am an educator and a public historian. I am the president of the Institute for the Study of the Exploration of Seneca Village, which was a 19th century African-American community. And it stood on the site of what is today Central Park.

**Tourmaline:** I asked Cynthia to tell us about Seneca Village and her role in uncovering and preserving its history.

**Cynthia R. Copeland:** We raised the question, “Wouldn't it be great if we could do an archeological excavation in Central Park?”

We start with maps, with newspaper accounts, family papers, whatever we can find. And in this instance, we relied on church records, finding out who was baptized, who got married, who was buried in these spaces. Those documents gave us an idea of the types of structures that existed on the landscape.

Once upon a time, the people who lived in Seneca Village and in the pre-park expanse were considered tramps, squatters, and thieves that didn't have a right to the land. There was this smear campaign in the newspapers to say that these people lived in shanties and shacks.

And all the research that we uncovered told a different story. It showed that the people actually did own the land. They did have rights to be there. We found indication that they were two- and three story-framed houses. Some had barns, some had basements, some had sheds.

We found a slate pencil to suggest that education was really important, that people were literate. We found the handle of a bone toothbrush, which suggests hygiene is very important because not everybody was brushing their teeth back then. We found the sole of a shoe—it's likely the shoe of a young woman or a child—which was so moving. A couple of the students who worked with us, tears just came out of nowhere because it was just so exciting to be able to see that.

Seneca Village was a self-determining community, with loving families and loving relationships. It was a response and a reaction to living life in isolation, living life as de-humanized, living life as, you're just not supposed to be here. Well, these people found a way to be here and these people found a way to make a way out of no way.

You had this great expanse. You could build and you could grow. And it was like a utopia. And so you get that sense that they were free to live the lives that they wanted. It's about freedom.

## **Seneca Village, Central Park between West 82nd and West 89th Streets (Part 2)**

**T. Lax:** Where are we within Seneca Village?

**Tourmaline:** So we are in Summit Rock. This is one of my favorite places in the park because it's very high up and, at different moments, you can feel completely surrounded by the tree life. And then also you can turn your head and there's a high-key juxtaposition with the big buildings right there.

This used to be marshland and farms. There used to be churches and cemeteries and schools. There was prosperity, not necessarily in the capitalist sense, but just in feeling the abundance of what is possible.

**T. Lax:** When did you first start coming to Seneca Village?

**Tourmaline:** In about 2002. When I first started coming here, I felt really angry and upset. I was really focused on the tragedy, which was—this was a place that was destroyed to make Central Park. And then, I started to widen out and what became more pronounced was the real power of people coming together to feel each other's pleasure, to feel a sense of freedom, to little by little release outdated beliefs that you couldn't buy land if you were Black, or that you couldn't vote if you were Black.

In a moment when, in lower Manhattan, in the 1800s, there was a lot of fires being set to Black-owned churches and establishments. Slavery was still legal. People were regularly kidnapped from New York and sold south. So it was a really intense kind of contrast between what was happening in the city at large and what was happening here in Seneca Village. There was a sense of autonomy and self determination that moved through here.

**T. Lax:** And who would you say are the caretakers for that history?

**Tourmaline:** It's any of us who are speaking it who or are feeling it, who are here having fun. It's like the birds, it's the trees. It's the bee that just flew by. I think it's the people who are unruly to the times that the parks close, or, you know, what you can and can't do in a park. It's the people who are still very angry about what happened. So it's an ever-expanding group of caretakers.

To me, it feels like a living memorial. When people gather here, high on the spirit of what came before, but are present in the what's happening now, what are we doing with this space, now? That to me feels like a really vibrant monument to the spirit of Seneca Village.

### **Pleasure Gardening for Today and Tomorrow**

**Tourmaline:** In this moment of Juneteenth and Pride, I think about how important it is to make sure that we know that these are inextricably linked—the self-determination and self-actualization and the power of trans people, and queer people, and gender non-conforming people who are Black is so necessary and urgent. So we can't pretend that we're talking about freedom, unless we're talking about the freedom of Black, trans and gender nonconforming and non-binary people.

**T. Lax:** Thank you so much for joining us on Tourmaline's Pleasure Gardening Audio Tour. It's our hope that as you pass by these places today or in the future, you might remember those who came before and those who cared for each other against all odds, perhaps like them, you might find ways to stay close to love and freedom in unfree spaces, to build your own pleasure gardens.

We're so grateful to everyone who lent their voice to this tour, including Cynthia R. Copeland, President of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca village; Mariame Kaba, Director of Project NIA; Robin D. G. Kelley, Distinguished Professor and Gary B. Nash Endowed Chair in US history at the University of California, Los Angeles; and of course, Tourmaline, my friend and creative partner.

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