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## Maria Aponte Interview

Mark Naison

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Oral Histories Bronx African American History Project

Spring 1-27-2023

Aponte, Maria

Mark Naison

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## Maria Aponte Interview Transcription

Interviewers: Carlos Rico

Interviewee: Maria Aponte

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Carlos Rico (CR): All right here we go! All right, welcome everyone to the Bronx COVID-19 oral history project. My name is Carlos Rico and I'm joined here by the lovely Miss Maria Aponte! Glad to have you here!

Maria Aponte (MA): Thank you! Thank you for inviting me!

CR: Thank you for being here. So, to begin, right? For her introduction, she is a poet, performance artist community arts activist, and educator right here local in the Bronx. She has a bunch of published books and has a lot of awards under her name, and I'll let her give her whole background herself, and we're just gonna start with... Tell us a little bit about yourself and your name and how you got to be in the Bronx.

MA: Okay, my name is Maria Aponte Gonzales. That's my full married name. I was born and raised in "El Barrio" in New York, in Manhattan, I grew up on 117th and 2nd Avenue... went to St. Paul's Catholic school, Cathedral High School, and when I moved to the Bronx in the late 70s and I've been a Bronx resident ever since. And I had my family was also in the Bronx from when I was, my father's side of the family was in the Bronx forever and ever so my grandmother lived on Simpson Street, she lived on Fox, Veil, and so my childhood was spent Saturday's getting on the 6 train switching at 140... or no 125th switch to the five or the four and getting off on Simpson Street and so the Bronx has been in my blood since I was born. And, my, and my pops was from the Bronx.

CR: And would you, and would you say that the Bronx sort of gave you an outlet to community activism or that came through your family or...

MA: The community activism came way later!

CR: Okay.

MA: In my early years as a teenager and a young adult in my 20s, I was in the theater and I did all my theater down in the Lower East Side. So, that's the other shout-out I have to give! [Intelligible] I started taking acting classes at Henry Street Settlement and got involved with Henry Street Settlement. At that time they actually had a Latino playwrights program and that, so my work was always in Manhattan with theater and the arts. So, I went from Henry Street to

the Puerto Rican traveling theatre. I had worked with an ensemble group and my work as an artist has always been about breaking down stereotypes in Latino theatre and stereotypes about women of color and Latino women. So, I've been doing that, I sort of like kind of came into activism later on in life because the poet's that I worked with who were my mentors who opened the doors for me were all activists. And that's how I got involved! So, the my people that I honor is Sandra Maria Esteves, Joseana Figueroa, Luis Reyes Rivera, Tato la Fiera Pedro Pietri, Magdalena Gomez... So, it was a very smaller community because everyone was starting out and you also have to understand that we did work when there was no social media.

CR: Mm-hmm.

MA: So, either you were good at what you were doing when you went up there and that was it! You didn't have time to repackage yourself on a screen. It was raw, it was real, if they liked your stuff they they would invite you back, if not they would tell you go keep, go keep learning so it was a very different world back then. And, it was always about the struggle it was always about trying to not claim our identities because we always know who we were but getting society to accept who we were. Um, kind of like what you're seeing right now with the protests and and everything that's going on with black lives matter and women's issues. So, this has always been there it's just that it was in a different era and a different time but those were my roots coming up.

CR: So, that's a great segue into the next question, right? Do you see that connection between your roots, right? And, especially what's fascinating to me, which I only know a little bit about the arts in in the Bronx and especially with you know the public schools systems and how lately the the city government has been trying to defund the arts and poetry and music in in classrooms, especially in in the Bronx and Harlem and that connection between community activism and the arts such as poetry and having that linkage is you know so strong and very interesting. So, with that with that being said you kind of touched upon it a little bit but you see a little bit of that in the protests and the movements that are occurring today?

MA: I do because the most powerful thing you have is the spoken word. And what I'm, what is not that these are happy times to be living in quite frankly my generation thought we were going to be the last ones that we're going to have to be doing civil unrest. Dealing with wirh with with societal racial issues and microaggression and behavior in the workplace and the schools because so many people have sacrificed so much. So, to see it still continuing 40, 50 years later just shows you how much has changed and hasn't. As an advocate for young people because I am in I love my elders but to me it's about the next generation because this is gonna be your world when you get to be our age... I find that sometimes the protesting when I'm looking at what they're writing on the on the play cards and on the posters... very profound and very poetic in in and there's a statement in each thing that's being written and what you have and what people tend to forget is by not looking at history and understanding the— how things have evolved... most folks are not gonna really understand why a 15-year-old and a young 20-

something-year-old is protesting. But, we must remember that in my time we were just trying to get to... get to college. The history wasn't written yet. The professors... There were no PhD programs in you know in... Africa-African American Studies, Latino Studies, to the extent that it exists today and so the blessing is everyone that's marching now that's young more than 85% of them are in college. They're second-generation of college parents, they're readers and the most powerful thing we have is social media. The information is going out there quick! What if when George Floyd was killed, if that day, it was at night or in a place where there were no cameras? Would we have known? So, the history is very important and I think we must remember to empower our young people and give them that support so they understand that this is not... this just didn't start... But, we are in a different place because I like that it's so diversified it's not just one group fighting for civil rights, it's it's everybody.

CR: That's well said and I completely agree with you and I don't, I don't have any of the same shared experience of seeing what it was like back in the day. I can only read about it or hear about it but, from the people that I've talked to about this and discussed to about the movement it says that today right the the movement that is going on it's very diverse and it's featuring people from all different backgrounds, all different walks of life, all different communities and to me that's beautiful and just seeing that in the own protest that I went to in my community of Delray Beach right over here... I didn't even know, right, I've only lived here for a couple years but, I didn't even know that they have the longest standing African-American community in the entire United States. And yet, you know, I lived so close to it I was only a couple blocks away but if had I not gone and participated in that protest on last Wednesday, right, I-I wouldn't even known that or I would have even had like the same conversations with with different people that I had there. And, something very unique that they showed the exact same sentiment as you did it and that the struggle is now, it feels global, because it appears global now with social media. So yeah, I totally, I'm on board with that and I agree with you. So, with that being said right, um, do you have any pieces of advice for young people of this age who are struggling and grappling with the fact of these injustices that are seemingly continuing to plague our nation you know year after year after year right um and we see these senseless killings and we see all the despair and there... And, especially in today's times with COVID and the the pandemic there's already a feeling of despair and hopelessness and young people are feeling trapped inside and they want to do something about it and they're, we're working towards it, we're protesting, we're making all these movements but coming from your perspective do you have any pieces of advice for the younger generation, for the struggle of the movement.

MA: Yes. It's one word. Vote. Vote. You can protest, you can march, you can— don't ever let anyone take your power. There's no reason for any of you to feel powerless or helpless, you have been given an opportunity to change law. And this is where the history part comes in, if anyone really studies the civil rights movement when SNCC, which were college students decided to sit in and do the pacifist protests in Woolworths and in Atlanta they didn't just get up and say “Hey, we're gonna go Thursday and protest and never mind if they hit us over the head with billy clubs or”— no, this was very methodically planned. In the 1930s and the 20s there

was a school founded by a man by the name of Myles Horton, and he started the Highlander School and the Highlander School became a training ground for how to conduct protests and— for the scholars out there I am open, please correct me if I need an edit because I'm remembering something that I learned from a while when I was doing my Master's—but the point is the Highlander school became a training ground for major activists of the time and so when it came to the protests, everything was planned, it wasn't, it was very organized. And, what you had in that group, if you look it up, would be powerful people that were lawyers, powerful people in the communities you had your ministers, you had your lawyers, you had your teachers. And so, picture something like that, because in today's world, where there are lawyers for just about everything. We have associations. So, the most powerful thing that all of you can do right now is vote. Go to the polls! I don't care if the line is five hours long! Stay on the line! Vote! Look at who's in office in your district, in your area. Who are your Congress people? Who are your assembly people? Because this is the time, this is the one time that laws can be changed about police brutality, laws can be changed about awareness... I have always read African-American literature, some of my books right behind me, I didn't need a movement to learn... Aside from the fact that I like really amazing writers so you know Maya Angelou is up there, Toni Morrison is up there, James Baldwin is up there, all sorts of writers, even contemporary, because you have to be curious about what you're living in. So, what do you want to take out of this? That when you're thirty-forty years old you're gonna look back and you are gonna say I was part of that change. It's like, you know, if you like someone that's running for president you gotta go out and vote. The power is in the vote! I think, I believe I was the first generation that voted at eighteen.

CR: Really?

MA: Yeah and I didn't have a clue! All I knew was that I was gonna vote cuz I was so, we were so proud we were like, “Ooh I could vote now,” It was like now that you're legal, go vote! And I did, I voted for Jimmy Carter, okay! I'm giving away my age now, but I don't, this point, it's easy, it's fine. I could see some of my folks in my generation went, “Right, yeah oh and it's okay.” So, that's what I say to everyone. Vote! Don't-don't just take it to the level where—think, every hour that you're out there protesting every every moment that you're not staying home binge watching something on cable and you and you feel this move to be out there, put your life on the line because protesting can be dangerous physically... Then, what what do you want out of that you don't want to sit down and say here back in back in March I did you know... No, what's the end result? Because if we don't vote, we're gonna be right back in the same place again. And then you're gonna say what was this for? And that's when you're gonna feel helpless and wondering, “What's going on?” So, you have the power. Empower yourself and vote!

CR: Alright!

MA: That was my commercial pitch!

CR: There you go! I wanna vote for you now after hearing that! It's awesome. Yeah, I totally agree with you. I'm totally agreeing with everything you're saying so far. But, voting is very important and as the last election proved that, last um, whether it be midterm or the 2016 election we can't take anything for granted. And, because things can change in an instant. And, it's interesting to hear you talk about the law because (at least this is me personally speaking and you said there are lawyers for everything) among the conversations that I've been a part of the law hasn't really been brought up in terms of it just as a concept, it's mostly been discussions about systems and the the way the systemic part of how the laws are integrated with one another are set up versus using the law as an agent for change. Which is something that's pretty interesting to me, for me to hear. Um, I don't know if you want to touch more upon that or we can move on to the next, the next segment.

MA: Only thing I'll say on that and then we can move on to the next segment is the law, there are laws there, you just gotta know how to read them. Um... you have to then this is why you need to have like you need lawyers and you need researchers that are in that field... You want to look at criminal law, you want to look at... You know, you want to look at civil rights, justice lawyers because organization is sitting down, figuring out, well what is it that we need, let's make that list because when it comes to law... You don't want to go in there with a protest. You want to go in there with knowledge, you want to go in there professional, you wanna have... You want to conduct yourself professionally, you want to be heard professionally, because that's what you're gonna earn the respect because basically... I'm trying not to go into the potty mouth mode because basically you need to learn your own "shh-".

CR: Yeah.

MA: Learn your shh- and you're gonna be alright. It's okay to be— anger, resentment, yes, hurt, pain, but how do you turn this around to make it positive? Because, at the end of the day we need to learn to be more positive, more respectful, more accepting of differences and you know the bad word ooh, "imperfections." Oh wow you mean I don't have to be perfect? No. But, if you're making an effort to get it fair and you make the mistakes and you fall down a few times and you get a few bruises, those are the lessons that you'll remember because some day, around there, you're gonna have a little scar, you're gonna have a bump on the head and you're gonna say "Oh, I remember when I got that." It's all how you build character and strength for life... because it's about endurance, understanding... And, talk to your elders! Sit down and ask them how they figured- how did they figure it out? There's a wealth of knowledge with with with the older generations that-that... Sit down and buy them coffee get them cafe con leche [intelligible] pan. And say "Mida, Pops! So, how did you do this?" And you'd be surprised how many of them would be willing to tell you how they solved something. And that's how we learn from each other and the elders need to be open and willing to tell their stories. Not you know "I don't want to talk about that" because you know, you'll have people that'll do that also. But-but if we don't start meeting in the middle... nothing's gonna change! It will just be a lot of (makes hand motions to mimic people talking about unimportant things). This.

CR: [unintelligible] Just talking. Got it. Most definitely. All right. So, thank you for that. And moving on to COVID-19. Right. How has it affected you, living in the Bronx, as a Puerto Rican woman, living there in your community? Right, um, you take public transit every day to and from work and you walk on the street— so, how has-how have you seen it affect your community and how has it personally affected you? Up until this point, how has it shifted, how has it changed?

MA: At first, I was shocked that we live in a country that has so much... We live in a country that has probably one of the best information and the sciences to really have vaccines to help to protect people. The hurt-the hurt came when every time I would speak to a friend they would tell me someone died. And, then it really devastated me when they started breaking down the groups that were devastated the most which was the low-income, African-American, Latino community and... It's almost like a whole history of people just got wiped out. I myself have dealt with loss from a very young age so I have a built-in processor but I also feel for my friends who lose family. It was a point where every time I went on my Facebook page it was, "Please my- can you please pray for so-and-so," and all I was posting was my condolences my prayers and doing the little hand and-and praying for people. And, my husband and I live... lived near Montefiore hospital... And, the first early weeks it was-it was the nonstop ambulance, sirens, it was like every few minutes, you were hearing, you were hearing the-the sirens and that for me was a trigger because I was a kid during the riots in the 60s and I watched Harlem burn with my mother and it was that kind of thing. It just took me back to that time when I was 9 and 10 and 11 years old and you know, it's-it's you know, I know what it is to see buildings burn all around you. And so, not that building's burned around us now but it brought back those kind of memories and... I just feel like-like us we worked really hard to get to a certain place with technology, education, and then and then this came and it and its really wiped out a lot of what we had and now we have to learn to live a new life. I-we don't live in, we live in a low-income neighborhood, so when I come out of my building I see you know the guys from the homeless building that's three blocks away from us... [I] go to the supermarket and-and... So, I live in my community. I don't-I don't work one place and-and-and then go home somewhere else. So, for me this is, this-this to me is my extended family. So, it-it's, it's very devastating and the scary part is we don't know when it's gonna end. We don't know when there's gonna be a vaccine and my fear in back of my mind is, "Who else am I gonna lose?" And, I'm in that age where I'm supposed to be careful too, you know. So, if you want anything to remind you about your age it's this! You know, it's sort of like, especially in the beginning, was like, "If you're of a certain age and you have a compromised immune system..." And, I'm like "Oh really?" And then "It's only the older people!" And, all of a sudden I said, I knew, I said "This is not just one this is gonna go across everybody. And, then it started hitting younger people and and now there's one, the younger the middle school kids the children are getting like an offshoot of it, so this is very, this is this is huge. This is really huge. So, we have to be careful and even more so, an appreciation of life, of care, of working together. You know, that's where I, where I'm at and there's a lot of things going on around the Bronx, a lot of the nonprofit organizations, there's food pantries going out; I get a lot of emails from different



organizations, there's constant updates from the congressman's office, from the assembly office. So, we are well informed of what is going on around us, so that's where I get my strength, knowing that we're not helpless. You know, it is-it is devastating but there's-there are resources there... All the arts programs are offering everything online so if you want to take a bomba class, Casita Maria is offering it or the Bronx Museum has it, or the Bronx heritage cent- music Heritage Center, there's always something that-to keep us going. So, the seniors, there's, I'm gonna be participating in a Zoom poetry reading June 22nd with the Poe-cultural center and we're doing it online and it's literally for the seniors that are in-in a home, they're gonna be logged in to zoom and we're gonna do poetry stuff with them. So, everybody's finding their way. 'Cause we are survivors. Bronxites, we're survivors.

CR: Most definitely, yeah. And, do you think that the news/government/people living in your community, like, are they doing a good job about conveying that? Those resources, those different avenues of approach? Or, is it something that's not as well shared? Or, what is-what is your perception of that?

MA: It's well-it's well shared. I don't-I mean people just have to decide if they want to be involved or not. One thing that we have in the Bronx is a lot of community efforts, so it's only up to the individual if they don't want to participate but it's not like there aren't services that people can-can have access to.

CR: Excellent and so, going forward, right, we're in June right now. June, it's June 6th. And, we don't, we don't have any idea of a vaccine in sight and we are slowly seeing a decline I think New York City just had its day of zero COVID deaths in the entire city. And, Governor Cuomo said that the city is planning to open up phase one on June 8th throughout the entire city. So, what do you... What do you see about-what-what are your thoughts on that? Is what I'll put it bluntly.

MA: I have no idea what this is going to look like. Businesses are being asked to follow the CDC guidelines when they open so there's gonna be a there's gonna be so many moving parts to make something that was natural for us to do. "Preventive measures" so people don't get sick. I think this is for me, it's wait and see. Let's-let's see what it looks like, how it rolls out right now you know we have everybody protesting and there's no there's no six foot distance spacing, so that's a whole other thing that needs to be looked at hopefully people are not getting-getting any... getting contaminated from-from being in those close quarters. If you ask me how can I picture 125th Street in the train station, people trying to go to work, having 6 feet apart. I can't, I can't picture it, so it's really up to how people behave and how are they gonna, how are they gonna carry themselves when they're out there. That's with the buses, are the buses gonna have a limited amount of people that can get on a bus? Right now, the buses are closed in the front, and they're-they're-they're covered with a partition, student-uh, customers have to go in through the back. They can't,- so there's so many things, we just, we need to see, this is like a big experiment, that's my own personal opinion. You gotta see what, we we won't know until it

takes effect, it's happening and then they start doing-doing some numbers to see what it looks like.

CR: Except the [unitelligible] I agree with you. So, what else is going on in your life right now? Is there anything, any projects you have coming up? Anything you would like to share with the project and community?

MA: Well, I have a nonprofit organization called Latina 50 Plus, which I founded in 2014, and it's honoring Latino women over 50 in different career fields in art, education, law, health care, literature, and I always leave one out, and medicine. And every year, we select honorees, normally I've been able to host the event in June, at Fordham, in McGinley Center, but everything is closed. So, at first with my advisory board and I were thinking of postponing it and then we decided we're gonna have the zoom ceremony because we have the honorees that already been selected and so we're having that June 28th on Zoom. And so, that's a big thing that I'm getting ready for now, and then I have a couple of writing workshops coming up under my program called Cafe fuerte, Mujere fuerte, I have two amazing authors that are gonna be doing the workshops for me June 20th and the 28th. And, I'm happy to say I've got sponsorship from poets and writers, so-so the facilitators you know and let's see what else. On a personal side, that's-that's my nonprofit writing, I'll be doing some writing when I, in the summer, when I have some time off from work because even though we're remote, Fordham's working. So, right now we're in the middle of wrapping up the annual report for the academic year so when I can take my time off in July, I have some-I have some writing projects there that I'm working on... And just taking it easy and and trying not to have stress because it could-it can really be a, you know, can really cause a lot of problems. So, I'm very grateful to be, to feel that I can be home. Is, a lot of-a lot of my friends are not. They're, they're there in hospitals, they're nurses, they're doctors, they're in the EMT, they're MTA and and I always pray for them every day because it's funny the jobs that people didn't want because those were not nice jobs to have, have become the most important jobs in the country.

CR: Funny how that works right.

MA: Oh yeah, yeah! "What? Education? I'm not gonna be a teacher! I wanna make money!" Really? "Oh please, take my child, I can't have them in the house anymore!" You know, "Nursing! No! They don't make a lot of money!" Like, "please can you can you check my blood?" It's crazy how things come full circle in in different ways. So, I think that's that's that's it with the with that for now.

CR: Awesome! So, I-I don't want to take too much more of your time. I know-I know things have been busy, things been working. But, thank you very much for being a part of this project for...

MA: I do you have something for you!

CR: Oh, okay!

MA: I'm a read you a piece about the South Bronx from my book.

CR: Okay.

MA: And it's short.

CR: Let's hear it.

MA: You ready?

CR: I'm ready. Estoy listo.

MA: I wrote this and I dedicated it to an, to an exhibit that was in 2013 at the Bronx documentary center. It's a famous exhibit called [unintelligible]. And the photographers were David Gonzalez, Edwin Pagan, Ricky Flores, these are all well-known photographers who documented the Bronx going way back to the 1960s. And so, this is *South Bronx in Black and White*. Time and place, in gritty black-and-white photographs of South Bronx that no longer present. Rubble, burning buildings, broken hydrants, water spilling into hot tar, blood running into baked streets. Abuela's blessing the [unintelligible], hookers turning tricks to live, survive, children being children running around with plastic water gun. Good cop, bad cop, generational dancing still grinding, sashaying hips to the hot beat step of [unintelligible]. Salsa in the middle of the streets as long as the speaker's work and records didn't get stuck, teenagers claiming their uniqueness on beat up cardboard boxes that would bloom like a flower as breakdancing was born and disco sounds became abbreviated scratches on records that, back in the day were the hits of the tech music in the clubs like the garage, the loft, and the tunnel. A beat, a rhythm, hip-hop, windows covered with graffiti on trains into the city where cooling off the stations became the duty of the passenger near the door. Life went on, families were raised, children went to school, everyone not knowing that one day that would become a part of history that folks who weren't there would look back with nostalgia asking those that were there, what was it like?

CR: I have to clap! I'm sorry that was so good.

MA: Hey! If you're gonna do the Bronx, we gotta do the Bronx!

CR: And you're right! Absolutely right! Anything-anything else you want to add?

MA: Love, peace, hope, care, and trust that we will get through this! 'Cause if you don't, it's easy to go the other way and we don't need to go the other way. For every one person we've lost, there's one person that's still here and that's how we honor our loss by still being here and taking care of each other. That's all I gotta say.

CR: I love it. Amen to that! Thank you so much.

MA: I love your guitars.

CR: Oh, thank you so much!