

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of

Yonnette Fleming

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Yonnette Fleming conducted by Interviewer Sarah Dziedzic on January 26, 2022. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral history interviews.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The views expressed in this oral history interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the New York Preservation Archive Project.

Yonnette Fleming was born in Guyana with agricultural heritage on both sides of her family. She migrated to Brooklyn when she was sixteen and had a career on Wall Street until her witnessing of the collapse of the World Trade Center caused her to reorient her life “back to the ways of the land.” She began by studying plants, and then moved to a home that took her past the Hattie Carthan Community Garden on her daily commute. This garden was named after Ms. Hattie Carthan, the “Tree Lady,” who led a successful campaign in the 1970s to preserve a living landmark, the *Magnolia grandiflora*. Fleming soon became involved in developing programs that centered Hattie Carthan's legacy, meaningful connection to the earth, food justice, and plants.

Over the last twenty years, Fleming has more than quadrupled the land of the Hattie Carthan community food projects, which she expanded to include an Herban Farm and Community Market in addition to the original Community Garden. These additional ventures support youth entrepreneurship, ancestral healing practices, community earth stewardship, and beautification. In this interview, she talks about serving the Black community of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the meaning and value of agriculture to Black residents of New York City, the generations of skills held by Black people that inform her assets-based approach to fundraising, and how she extends Hattie Carthan's teaching and organizing to apply directly to the realities of living in a racialized society.

Transcriptionist: Sarah Dziejdzic

Session: 1

Interviewee: Yonnette Fleming

Location: video call

Interviewer: Sarah Dziejdzic

Date: January 26, 2022

Q: There's construction happening in the apartment below mine so I'll probably be muted when I'm not talking so that that doesn't get picked up in the recording, but if you hear some crazy sounds [laughs] that's what's going on.

Okay, today is January 26, 2022 and this is Sarah Dziejdzic interviewing Yonnette Fleming for the New York Preservation Archive Project and we're doing this interview remotely via video call. And because I don't have your signed release form yet, Yonnette, do you give your consent to record this interview today?

Fleming: Yes, I give my consent to record the interview.

Q: Okay, thank you. Can you start by giving yourself a brief introduction and saying your name?

Fleming: My name is Yonnette Fleming. I'm known in the worlds of food and farming as Farmer Yon. I see myself as a steward of the earth. My familial heritage is agriculture and this will be my twentieth season working at the Hattie Carthan community food projects.

Q: Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what that landscape was like?

Fleming: Okay. My birthplace was South America. I was born in a forested country called Guyana. The country is surrounded by Brazil, Venezuela, and Suriname. My grandparents migrated there from Dutch Guiana, or Suriname, but I grew up as a child in Guyana. Guyana is a very lush country where oil was just found. From the day I was born, I saw farms and people working in relationship to land. My father created a farmers' cooperative sixty years ago in Guyana and was instrumental in many agricultural ventures that took place in Guyana. I migrated here as a girl at sixteen years old. I arrived in the United States and I have been here ever since. I'm a global citizen that is not particularly patriotic to borders or countries. Anywhere on this earth that I find myself is where I call home. I find home in my body.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit more about your father's farmer cooperative that he started and how that was part of your growing up and your experience of him?

Fleming: It's my entire family that understood agriculture. It is my entire family on my matriarchal side as well as paternal sides—they were all involved in agriculture. My family are kind of like value-added people, so wherever they go they just add value to the experience and create meaning for groups and communities of people. If I am to say some of the influences, below my grandfather's house, we had a mill that I still remember like someone might remember a train running close to their house. I remember the mill because it shook the house. We did grind grains for farmers, so that's one of the memories that I really have. I have memories of going all over in what we call "the bush" with my father.

On Sundays, my mother would cater to religion as an Anglican, Sundays entailed going to Latin mass. And my father clearly understood that what his purpose was, was to be in service to the least of us. So basically, what my father imparted in me is that service to the least of us is a service to any kind of god, any living god. Service to that god would involve and include service to the least of us. And so, up until today, I open my farm on Sundays and I operate a market [Hattie Carthan Community Market] on Sundays.

Q: When you came here, to New York, how did those agricultural traditions translate?

Fleming: What I want to say to you is that people all around the world are engaged in the same dream. I want to tell you that no matter which country you come from, you would have learned that you needed to leave something out so that you could accept something, and that you needed to leave behind the ways of your ancestors so you could accept a more professional way of being.

I was gifted for as long as I know it. I don't know if "gifted" holds any meaning—because we all are gifted—but I was extraordinarily gifted as a child. So it meant that what my parents wanted me to become was the first woman lawyer because we have a lot of magistrates, judges, and lawyers on our side. And so they saw that giftedness—I also play a number of musical instruments, and just Saturday, I was telling students that my parents raised me thinking that my form of success was that I was going to play classical piano at Carnegie Hall. And I was playing on Saturday for a group of forty-four students that were studying to be farmers, and we were talking about success and values that are passed on to us, and so we had a good memory of how

those same gifts could be used in your community for good.

So I had the same American dream, and now, I'm remembering, even in my grandmother's homesteading "facility," I could call it—in her yard—in the homesteader's paradise, she would really let me know that I needed to focus on my books and on my studies so that I would have a different kind of future than she did. That was clear.

So I pursued the corporate financial path. And that went on until 9/11. My stop was the World Trade Center and I was going to work at that time. And it's after the World Trade Center that I rearranged my life and went back to the ways of the land, and to things that were natural that I knew already, that were running through my veins and through my ancestry.

Q: Can you explain a little more about what it was about 9/11 that made you have that shift?

Fleming: Well, I was a really hard worker, so it meant that I would work twelve-hour days, and I would leave home and my children before the sun rose in the morning and I would come back late at night. And so that really is no way for a human to live. Those are like the ways of robots, and people that are divorced of soul. And I didn't even know about politics. I was just really into managing other people's money, caring about that.

Q: What were some of the first things that you did to shift that relationship that you had back towards the earth and the agricultural traditions?

Fleming: It was already deconstructed—I saw the planes fly into the building. It was already deconstructed. That will deconstruct any human's—whatever they've got going on for them. I saw the planes fly in and I had no idea. I mean, really, really clueless. Like, why would that even be happening? Zero. Just really, really in a clueless place around life, around real life. It was just some other sort of life that was about money and professionalism, an empty, soulless kind of life.

So one of the main things that I enjoy is the meaning that I get from the earth and the meaning that no one can take away from me, because I see them because the earth is honest. If you go there and you work and you do your stuff—it's others that have devised schemes and scams to trick us out of our life's work. But the earth itself just gives back exactly what you have given. Yeah.

Q: Can you talk about when you first became involved with the [Hattie Carthan] Community Garden?

Fleming: Well, after 9/11, first of all, I went to pursue more studies around plants, but I didn't want to hear about them as commodity—I wanted to hear about them as beyond commodities. I wanted to hear about healing and who the plants really are, and what the elements really are, and what earth is really about. I didn't want any false agendas. I just, really, was thirsty for earth knowledge. I didn't want anyone to be talking about nonsense to me and so I went out and I did a lot of intensive studies with the plants. I began moving out to healing retreats and I began doing a lot of teaching with women and around their power, and around the plants, and around the place, the space that is held there. I began thinking more on reclaiming. Began thinking of my

female body, what that really meant. Began really understanding life in a whole deeper way.

So, in my corporate iteration I was already dreaming about the garden. I was seeing it when I was at my job. And I had one spiritual friend, who was my boss, and that was the only person that it was okay to share spiritual things with. Everyone else might think of you as crazy or unprogressive or just “what are you here?” even. And I started seeing a garden—it was so large—and I started saying to her, “I don’t know what this is! It’s this whole forest that is appearing in my mind’s eye like a daydream while I’m doing my work.” And she would laugh and say, oh, maybe it’s going to be in your house, and I would get serious and say to her no, it’s actually not a house. It’s like a communal land setting that I’m seeing. And she would just laugh it off.

Then I move to Greene Avenue. I moved to Greene Avenue. There were three places that I was looking at but this one on Greene Avenue had two mama trees in the back and they were canopying. They were canopying trees and so they formed the canopy over the sky where you didn’t need a tent in the back. They just had you when you went to the back. So it was clear to me that it was these two trees—that was where I was going to live.

And there it is—I’m going to work and I see the garden I’ve been daydreaming about and my boss laughed at me when I told her. I actually see it and I take the number, which is like [NYC Parks] GreenThumb’s number. And they’re like, “Well, you sound interesting but there’s not a lot that goes on in this garden.” [Laughs] “I’m not sure. Nobody comes here.” You know, in Bed-Stuy at that time. I contacted Magnolia [Tree Earth Center] and they said, “Well, we’ve seen a lot of beautiful people like you come in to do things. We welcome you but just know that no



one's interested in the things you're interested in here.”

Q: What were some of the things you told them you wanted to bring?

Fleming: Well, it's all about the plants and the Earth—so Meditation so we could listen to the Earth, composting so we could learn about what is biodegradable or not. Herbs for disease cause many people are sick here, caring for the trees like they are the majestic beings and guardians of our planet. I just told you. I don't want to play games with anybody, I didn't want to spend time learning about nothing. It needed to be something substantial to me about the earth, like with meaning and connection. I was not gonna be part of—where people come and talk over the trees and act like the trees don't exist, and unzip their pants and piss on the trees. I was not gonna be part of it. Here I am, twenty years later.

Q: How did you first learn about Ms. Hattie Carthan?

Fleming: The name of the garden was Hattie Carthan Garden. But when you would ask the people, they wouldn't know much about her either. Their descriptions were less than desirable so I needed to learn, teach and create curriculum that can unearth this awareness about her and her work and her contributions to Brooklyn and Bedford-Stuyvesant. So I did that in my twenty years, which is just to give rotation to her name and her legacy. That's all I did. There is nothing that is named after me. They're all named after her and that's just so that there won't be erasures. For women of color, that's the area that I'm concerned about. And I'm concerned that if you did fifteen hundred trees and someone might erase you, they might definitely erase me. So I began to

bring rotation and acknowledgement for all of her things, and still do.

Q: Can you take some space in this interview to tell the story of her in the way that you teach it?

Fleming: First of all, Hattie is an icon, an elder, who was not afraid to do agency in our community. What I know about Hattie is that she faced some levels of opposition around the trees. Some people said the trees might not be a good thing because African Americans were hung on trees. So what she was doing, there were naysayers there too. But what I really admire about Hattie was that she just went for what she knew. To me, she was working for the futures. She had to have been. To me, it was the futures that were calling on her.

What I can say about Hattie is that whether she spoke clearly about race or not, her work directly provides a counterbalance to the phenomenon of food deserts and communities without trees. She spoke clearly about Southern and Caribbean people coming together. She found comradery with all people. She is a bridge, I am a bridge. So when we think about climate change—if we fast forward that out now to the future—and we think about the fact that when I open my market in July, it's 110 degrees [Fahrenheit], some parents are calling me to find out whether we're going to operate the market because they're afraid that their children might fall out from the heat. Well, what Hattie means is that without those fifteen hundred trees, it would be a whole lot hotter than 110 degrees here, Bedford-Stuyvesant. Hattie means protecting our people from scorching fire and brimstone. So even if we just think about the cooling of our communities as one thing, when we put it all together as a thought, it's just very impactful. If you just think about the fact that her organizing work resulted in us having a cooler community, as hot as it is now—

and with climate change, what we expect to see—it would have been even worse here. So we think about it that way.

I like to think of her where I know she is, which is with the environment and in the ecosystem. And so I've complemented her work by digging more abandoned lots in my time. When I went to the Hattie Carthan Garden, there was .724 acres of Parks & Recreation land. Now, as we speak, it is almost four acres of Parks & Recreation land. So it means that my body and my work brought into Hattie even more. It helped to amass the land that we needed. So when we think about the creation of ecosystems and you think about what happens in abandoned land and abandoned lots, and we're thinking about the compost that we keep—the nine tons of compost that we're averting from the landfills and turning back into the earth—and we think about the worms, all the wildlife, all the relations that we miss, usually, in agriculture because we're going straight to our animals and plants as commodities. But when we think of ecosystem work and what has happened through the fifteen hundred trees, plus all the other work that has happened since then, in terms of the impact on our ecosystem, that cannot be ignored.

We know that Hattie was about reinvestment because that's where my attraction is. I was a dividend reinvestment processor, so it means that my clients were those that wanted to get their dividends reinvested, and so they could have started a long time ago with a \$5,000 investment, and through this reinvestment, it was just this way of growing something. So we're talking about reinvesting into the community, so Hattie makes some speeches that can be found about not wanting to run. Not wanting to run out of the community, like escape out to the suburbs, but stay. And Hattie also talked about camaraderie and breaking barriers between Caribbean people and

Black Southern people. All of those, we're still working on them [laughs]. These are lifetimes of work.

About beauty and beautification. When we think about beauty, I think sometimes we get it wrong. Beauty is a spiritual path. So when we talk about beautification, sometimes, if we study structural racism, we can look down on beauty and the role of beauty, because we think of things as going to the root cause—not just putting on beauty in some messed up circumstances. But I want to offer a different idea of beauty here, and that is, when you begin to improve, and what we call “beautify” things, it sets a kind of impetus for transformation. I've seen it happen over and over again. Where the farm is, that was a Brownfield with oil—the city dumped oil there. And we went in and cleared that farm, cleared the oil all the way down. We dug the farm all the way down to the surface line—if we'd have dug any deeper, we would be going on to the water tables. So when we revitalized our farm, people had been all around—homeowners and stuff—for thirty years, this place has been rats running around and oil. All of a sudden, once we did that work, it was like it sent a message, an invisible message straight to the brains of these people that you've got to do something now because look at what's happening in front of us.

Beauty sets the tone for improvement—the way that we've distorted beauty, we don't realize it now in its full potent form, but beauty and beautification is really a call for improvement. A call for improvement of things. It's a certain level of dissatisfaction that causes a person to want to come and do something else. And so that's often overlooked: beautification and what beauty stands for, and its impact on humans. Even when you see a beatifical women, it's like that spin-around thing—it just has the power to command your attention and, to me, even shift your genes

and your thoughts. I recognize beauty as that and that's where I come in with beauty also. Undeniable! Undeniable. There's nothing else for you to do but to stand here on this land and say thank you because it's so beautiful here now. So Hattie was a beautification queen. And so I have to find meaning for beauty and to give her credit there because beauty is unstoppable and unshakeable too—and not like cosmetic beauty—but real beauty, meaning changing, changing, changing things.

There's so much to be talked about about Hattie. But for her age—in other words, I am not Hattie's age when she started, and I have twenty years in the game. So this makes me respect it even more.

Q: I just wanted to add to, when you're talking about beauty, it's the kind of beauty that you feel in your body—it changes your body.

Fleming: Yes, it's that game-changing kind of beauty. It's undeniable [laughs].

Q: What do you know about the process of her trying to get the Magnolia grandiflora a landmark?

Fleming: Well, I know about that process because my office is in there [Magnolia Tree Earth Center]. I go there to work. I sit at the desk where Hattie knows I'm at. So I still work there and her name is on my papers—on the letterhead—when I'm applying for support. There is a large photographic exhibit there that chronicles her work of acquiring the brownstones. It's a miracle. I

like miracles that people work for.

Well, we have to talk about business and her ability to maneuver—and not just maneuver but negotiate—awesome. And then when I think of Hattie, to make it really simple, I kind of think of where we would have been without Hattie. It's one thing to say she did this, she did that, she did that, but it's another thing to say, let's look at it this way: what would we have had without her? And that, too, is impactful.

But what struck me was that I read in a magazine—Hattie had done an interview with a feminist magazine—and someone had come along and said, you need to know this about Hattie, and shared the articles. And there she was, talking about the fact that for the ten years that she'd been working, she had just gotten—she's talking about it exactly like this—she said, “All I was able to do in these ten years was just [laughs] get these three buildings and do the trees.” She's talking about it like it's not—like “all I was able to do was just that and I don't know how much more I'm going to be able to do.” It is amazing how much she was able to do but it's also amazing how much is still left to be done with that legacy.

So where are we now? We are now where there is the big garden that's fifty [years old], the herb farm [Hattie Carthan Herban Farm] that's now ten that has apothecaries and meditation rooms—the healing piece there. And in that herb farm, there was a maple tree that the developers tried to kill, and I restored it and created a treehouse there. So we have a treehouse that is a meditation room on the herb farm. So the tree is Hattie. And we have the two markets there now, and then the youths—filling up that gap with the youths. And what we know in this society that's called

ageism, so now, instead of just focusing on the seniors that were in the garden, I did a kind of detour, when I was much younger, to create the Urban Agriculture [Youth Corps] program. So now we have a program that educates youth farmers and chefs, and now, herbalists working on the land with us.

So I'm saying that, as much as Hattie did—and in the back of the office there's a whole wall that has all of her accomplishments, all of her plaques, etc.—as much as Hattie did during her life is as much that is still yet to be done. Hattie's legacy involved communities of people. It's really, really big. And it will take a lot of human energy and economic energy to fuel Hattie's legacy for Bedford- Stuyvesant. She left a really tall order.

Q: You mentioned the fifteen hundred trees. Can you talk about the Neighborhood Tree Corps and the Green Guerillas and her involvement in those?

Fleming: I can talk a little bit about them. Hattie had the Tree Corps and that Tree Corps operated around here in the '70s, right? [Laughs] I've got this picture right here—I'm just going to zoom out and show it to you because I just have to [shows black and white photo of Hattie standing alongside kids working a garden]. So we're talking about an elder and very young children doing agriculture. And we see there is some help there [indicating a teenager also standing] of someone that could bridge the gap with the children. So this is a picture of Hattie doing a planting on Monroe Street with children in a garden. That's a good picture.

Q: Yeah, that is so great. I hadn't seen a picture of her hands-on.

Fleming: This picture is in my home office. I always like to keep it around.

Then I've got another really old picture here [shows tattered black and white photo of Hattie looking up at the tree canopy alongside two children in front of a brownstone stoop]. So if we were to think about programs today, I'm not sure that we would see that gap—that age gap—there. We could all imagine how that felt to be that age with the children. I mean, in that picture we saw some younger people, but I can only imagine what it must be to sixty-something or seventy years old and operating a children's program in the neighborhood that has to do with trees. I can only imagine.

So the Tree Corps went on, and based on what we know, Hattie and Liz Christy were all involved in this tree work, like ecofeminism kind of work. There was a lot that was written around mothering communities and how feminists do their work around nature and trees, etc. So Hattie and Liz Christy's work—and Liz Christy is the founder of Green Guerillas—their work was erupting around the same time but in different boroughs.

What we know is that Hattie also worked for Model Cities, and Model Cities was a program that existed in communities around the time of urban renewal. Model Cities was an attempt by the government to involve and include—involve and include would have to be the words that I have to use—involve and include community in community development plans. That work led to the beautification efforts.



Hattie was also very instrumental in the block associations and the creation of block associations. Her motto was, “Block by block, we take our community back.” That was Hattie Carthan’s motto. So when I study that motto, “Block by block, we take our community back,” there’s nothing being said there about the city planning department. “Block by block, we take our community back.” So the block parties and the creation of those.

And then we have Hattie inviting the mayor. And that’s something I still do. I still do not shun away from politicians or the political process because of Hattie Carthan’s associations with that. As a matter of fact, I brought the United Nations—and busloads of people from all around the world—to the garden and fed them in a very grassroots manner. We know that Hattie Carthan raised money using grassroots methods like pig roasts. That still goes on. We have culinary festivals that attract up to six hundred people in the garden on one given day around the Summer Solstice. And they’re on the grass and they’re doing their festivals and we’re raising money organically to take care of the garden that way. We’re still using all those grassroots methods of organizing. As a matter of fact, when I started the market, I did some pig roasts where I just made a coleslaw and a carrot slaw and half a suckling, and we roasted it slow like the old Southern way, and we offered them in containers and we were able to raise the money for me to buy the canopies and the commercial scales and tables. That started the Hattie Carthan Community Market. We’re still employing all those methods and means of taking care of ourselves.

We do not have a Tree Corps but we have an Urban Agriculture Corps, and the idea there is farming. What we know is this: food deserts were created by a history of events; food deserts did

not just pop up by themselves. We know that redlining, which would be that predatory lending, then we know that white flight happened, where there was flight from these parts into suburbia. Then we know that there was urban renewal, where there was burnings. And we know that what is called the Hattie Carthan Community Garden used to be the St. Augustine's Church and School, and those were burned. We do realize that all of this history has led up to the creation of food deserts and what we see here today, which would be the absence of fresh food or places where you can access fresh food and health and well-being. We see all of these as related to Hattie's work.

We see the environment and the compost that we keep as being related. We see, when we come together to work beyond our differences for the greater good of the community, we see that as Hattie work. We see the taking care of hundreds of trees that are on the landscape with pruning, etc.—we have to do all of that work—the diseases. Taking care of the trees, we do that now as stewards of the trees. We see all of that now as related to Hattie's work. And then, when we go onto our farm and we go into meditation, we are gaining awareness that we have trees inside of us—that these are trees on the inside of us that have to do with our trauma, and that when we talk about trauma, what we are really talking about are the roots of particular systems that are within us, the same way that roots would girdle in the exterior garden and the trees. That's where we are now. And in my times, now, with Hattie, it's really for translation of how healing trauma is done—healing those inner trees. Hattie and the symbol of the tree is profound. It's not just all literal. There's a lot of metaphors that we face in our life as stewards, and in trying to understand how her work continues and how we connect the dots to where she began—or to what she began as beautification perhaps.

Q: That is a really beautiful metaphor. And I think you were getting at this idea a little bit, but I wondered if you could talk about the assets-forward approach that you have—which sounds like it comes from Hattie too—as opposed to needs-forward approach.

Fleming: Well, the asset-based approaches I began to utilize in my community organizing work when I got to a point where I realized that we were writing about our community in deficit and we were telling the wrong kind of stories to be able to get funding for our work. When I began realizing that Bedford-Stuyvesant is not a poor community—because why would all the people want to move here? When I began realizing that our parents were schlepping their children out to programs in different boroughs because they had been led astray to see themselves in deficit to a white logic standard. So I don't know that I took any of those from Hattie because I know that was mostly needs-based in terms of how to acquire money. I think that I made a general departure from that style, which is like a color-blind style of organizing in a racialized society. I think that here's where our styles go in different directions.

I needed to change the narrative. I needed to change the way that the gardeners were being talked about, although they were doing so much of the work. I needed to change the mentality that white logic is the only way forward for communities. And that, I did. So I began really speaking very clearly, and also offering racial equity trainings in 2002 in Bedford-Stuyvesant—2002 and nobody wanted to talk about it. In understanding that, and in understanding racialized societies, I knew that there was a whole different way to talk about our work if we needed to be taken seriously and if we wanted to—we wanted to stop the phenomenon of being used and

infantilized for small amounts of money. We wanted to clearly be able to speak about food and race and land and trees in a way that demonstrated that we, as a people, had relationship to them for thousands of years. And that the first time was not when we arrived here that we seen them, but that agriculture, and all the things that we know about it, began thousands of years ago. And now we have amassed those skills and those abilities to live in harmony with land, and that, coming from that place, we could find abundance, well-being, businesses, young people—we could find all possibilities and hope for life.

And that was the way I came in, knowing that there was a sterile conversation going on and that I didn't want to be a part of that sterile conversation. I did not want that to continue. That was the beginning of workshops that I'm calling with gardeners, with need-based community planning versus asset-based planning. I also began talking circles, which would be like how organizations do a needs assessment. I did one thousand stories, and when I had talked to—I had called one thousand circles—I was ready to analyze the problem and to begin building, and then—we could talk, but I was no longer in a place where we would just sit around have juice and just continue to describe the problems in our community. We would talk, and continue—I had heard all sorts of stories. One woman's story of losing eight of her sons right in this neighborhood to police violence. Horror stories, hunger, starvation, seniors eating cat food, apathy, sharecropping stories, chain gang stories, broken hoe stories, outlaw/gangster stories, trauma stories right alongside this beautiful story of Hattie and trees and community assets, over and over and over again. And saying, okay, we've told enough of these stories. It was more than time to take a Stand for Land. I wrote a poem called "Stand for the Land" that describes what took place. And reshaped our narrative by converting those stories into what you actually see here now.

I don't know that I took that style from anybody besides transformation—I know that is clearly a liberation style approach—what they used to call radical, which is now normal because everybody is doing it. That was a radical style, and I was mostly worried that I might be too radical for Hattie's legacy because Hattie had a legacy of the Sierra Club and wearing pearls at meetings—this is her legacy. And then I also needed to create curriculum for my farm students that helps them navigate this realm. So legacy versus heritage. What is your heritage and what is the legacy that you're being asked to carry? So that we are not walking in any form of shame, or feeling like we are betraying our people or any of these things. The way that I do that work—they used to call it radical—I asked the funders to stop calling me radical because they were turning me into kind of a target. You know what happens when you call people radical or you say they are extreme. And what you're really talking about is a level that you aspire to yourself but don't know how to quite get there. So I asked our supporters to stop talking about me as radical. I made teach-ins with them where they would stop labeling and targeting leaders of color, and making us radical when we're really not, when we're really just saying what it really is. It's a real catch-22 when divestment happens. We certainly know that the reason people are hungry in a country that offers food aid to the world is an issue of justice and equity.

I have an open-door approach to leadership, so everyone is able to come and talk to me about anything. So it's not a flat hierarchy. I also explain that in nature, there is hierarchy [laughs]—there is, whether folks are ready to hear me or not. In nature, there is a hierarchy of things. When you don't comply, she will shut you down. But not building the organization with the same sort of structure, like a disconnected structure. Not that way but—I wouldn't even say collective,

Sarah. My style is connective. I think that collectively misses some things. My style is connective leadership, where you are connected to yourself, to the others, and the earth. It's three-prong. You're connected to your inner self—you understand that all of this is valid, and then, how it's appearing as an illusion is separate. And then you're understand that all of us are connected to the larger earth. So these three points of connection. My style is connective leadership. And that's probably a little futuristic too. Probably in another twenty years they will all be saying this word.

Q: Well, I'll be sure to put your name in rotation when that term comes up. With regard to that, can you talk about why it's important for women of color and people of color to be leading and caring for these spaces that are named after Hattie Carthan?

Fleming: First of all, I want to make a general disclosure and to let you know that race is an illusion. I want you to know that. I want to say that publicly. But we live in a society that buys into the illusion of race. So I want to let you know that. But I want to tell you that when I am dealing with the living earth—the sentient being, the living earth—the living earth points out to me that race is an illusion that we all are a part of the same organism that came in when humans came into the earth and appeared here. And here we are now. So I want to tell you that. We're going to moving between those two dynamics. So my understanding is that I know that race is an illusion but the society that we live in buys in and has structured itself based on that sort of caste system. So when we're talking about that illusion, if I enter into that frame, then, what happens is that the illusions have ignored the contributions, the wisdom, the beingness [laughs] of all people that fall within the lower caste. Alright.

So it basically means that for the time that we've been around—and it's a few hundred years—we've been telling these stories that exclude the contributions, the bodies—right? Because we're talking here about the three-fifths theory that denied us our human existence. So if you deny that we are human, I'm not so sure what they agree that we are. Were we animals or were we fungi? I'm not so sure on what that classification was. I think it was absolutely nothing at all because even if we were classified as fungi, we would have a real role in the healing of this world and nation right now, even if they had done that to us. So it means that if we are looking to build equity in this society at this time, first of all, we've got to do a little bit of work to include. And this inclusion is not like a quota. It doesn't mean you should at least have two Black people on your staff, it doesn't mean that. It means legitimate allowing of representation. When I studied diversity in nature, diversity is not the sprinkling of two or three exotic plants in your field. That's not what we understand to be diversity. Diversity would be the allowing of things to come forth that are naturally there, and that's what we're saying here. What we're asking for here is not that you fix us and make every environmental organization have one or two Hatties. That's not what we're looking for. We're asking for organic, legitimate inclusion as organisms that are a part of the plants that are here. That's all we're asking for.

We're not asking that you somehow announce that we're human. I think we know that. We're not asking that you give us our humanness. We're not asking that you feel so sorry about our sorry condition that you give us some funds. We're not asking that you feel so sorry for us that you come and buy some food at our events. We're not asking for that. We're asking for legitimate inclusion as organisms and as people of this earth to be included in all systems, in all

aspects of this society, yes. And in places where you've excluded us for 400-500 years, we're asking that you make an investment there, or that you make a commitment to improvement there. So that's the way I do the work.

We're Black-led, we're woman-led, intergenerational, we're all ages, and we're all groups. Who am I to do the same thing that was done to us? It's called prejudice. That's nonsense. Who am I to repeat what was done over and over again, as I'm wishing it will all go away? So we're here for all people. We're here for all people. We gather together as all people. The Hattie Carthan Community food projects is not a Black supremacy project; it really isn't. It is all people that can build relationship for something that's greater than all of us. The work bridges the gaps of our society. And that's how we see that work and that's how we talk it.

Q: Thank you for outlining that. I fully agree with everything you shared. I had this question in the email I sent you about preservation because that's what this archive is about. It's the word that we use, so I wanted to ask how that word functions for you?

Fleming: Well, how the word functions for me is how it will function for all of humanity. We are in an era where we are looking to—I don't know if it's displace or replace the human. I don't know which one of those two or both—displace or replace the human and its function in society. So if the preservation of my words results in more people like me learning about the contributions of people like themselves, then I am honored to be a part of it.

Q: Some of the people that I've interviewed over the last year have said, "I'm not a



preservationist; that's not what I do." But a lot of it kind of falls into the category of when specific places have been protected and they can continue on, and that's so powerful, whether it's a little building or a church that somebody's grandmother went to. Or the land itself, like you said. This particular ecosystem that you are able to reinvest in, that has been reinvested in as a natural space. So I think you've been answering that question of what having that space has meant throughout this whole interview, so I don't know if I have to ask that question to you specifically, but if you want to add anything else, feel free.

Fleming: I could talk about erasures. That's what's coming up for me—erasures and the way women are erased, and their voices and their work has been erased. But I feel like I've given enough in terms of—preservation is a word that would, under normal circumstances, annoy me. Preservation and conservation, those two words, rights? When it comes to what we do. But if this preservation means, like you said, if it gives us more life or more memory, or serves as a motivation to someone that's young and coming up right now, like a young girl, perhaps, that's thinking deeply about being a farmer, or being an urban farmer, even, and wondering whether it even makes sense to do this work. At least they would encounter us and our stories and our motivations. I'm wishing you would ask me what are my motivations for the work because that, I would like to do.

Q: Please do!

Fleming: So when asked about motivations for doing environmental stewardship work in Brooklyn, I must share that there was a gap that I feel like I encountered in the environment

where there was not a lot of preservation or documenting of contributions of people of color, and particularly, in the commons—on public land. And so in me observing that, too, I also invested thousands of hours doing oral histories with our gardeners for that same reason because I just saw that it would be a kind of gap without our voices. And then many of these gardeners have died already, and are becoming elderly and are aging out. So what I saw there was a danger for land people—people who work land—not to have been acknowledged and have their stories recorded. I saw a real danger too, and that’s one of the reasons I said yes to you. Because I get a whole lot of emails [laughs] all day with people who are wanting this story, and I must choose who I will talk to and who I may not. I also want to say thank you for your work, for all your patience coming back to me like six months later when I’m in my downtime to find me. That was great.

Q: I’m so grateful. And want to geek out with you over herbalism sometime when the garden is open! In closing, I guess I would say, is there other work that’s happening—other people that are doing this work that you think fit into this tradition of ecological activism and futurism with regard to stewarding the earth in Brooklyn, in New York City, in this way?

Fleming: Well, there’s Karen Washington. But she was from the Bronx. Karen Washington has done quite a lot. East New York Farms might have some people that survived erasure that are still alive that might be willing to share some things about East New York Farms because that’s really old. I know that the Wyckoff [House Museum] farms in Brooklyn, actually had slaves on that farm—in Brooklyn! And so that feels like—Wyckoff must have some kind of stories. And then there’s Weeksville [Heritage Center] there, but they’re involved in doing a lot of their work

with the Smithsonian or whatever, so there's that. I'm trying to think about people who have a longstanding history like this. Brook Park, Ray [Figueroa, Jr.]. But again, he's in the Bronx.

Q: I wanted to ask you, not every oral history has to have the goal of being public, but I wondered if the interviews that you conducted—if you have that archive collected?

Fleming: I do! It's on my website. You should take a look at [hattiecarthangarden.org](http://hattiecarthangarden.org). It was fifteen hundred hours of interviewing and editing. How many hours did you do with this project that you're working here? How many hours was this?

Q: This was much less!

Fleming: I did fifteen hundred, including the editing of that. We hold events in the garden where interviewees attend where we cook our traditional foods, hold anti-racism workshops happening, and a talking council all in the garden while projecting their oral histories on the big screen.

Q: I'm sorry I missed that.

Fleming: We still celebrate our longstanding members with a Friends and Family Day event. And then after that got out then everyone was like, "Holy crow!" Because gardeners are dying. All of a sudden it was like, "Holy crow! Why didn't we think about that?!" [Laughs] But this sounds good. I'm thinking, you've got the East New York Farms, they've got some people there with forty, fifty years of knowledge there.

Q: That sounds amazing. Sorry—the construction noises have gotten louder in my apartment.

Fleming: That's fine. We should be almost done, right?

Q: Yes, I was just going to say, if you have any final thoughts that you want to share, feel free.

But that's the end of my questions.

Fleming: Might be a message to the futures. [Pauses]

It's important that our futures know how much they're related to our past. It is important that our futures understand that we have been thinking about you all along. Hattie and the entities that embraced her were setting the template for what we see today. Thank you, Hattie. Please accept our gratitude.

That's all that's coming.

Q: Thank you. I trust your vision. Thank you again, Yonnette. You'll hear from me soon with the transcript. And I can help give you some instructions and support you through that however I can. Hopefully it will be a quick process because we are wrapping up the project pretty soon. I hate pressuring people, but I'll try to give you at least two weeks to look through the transcript.

Fleming: Alight. Thank you for including me. Thank you for including Hattie.

Q: I appreciate it. Thank you, Yonnette. Enjoy your day.

Fleming: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]