

Transcript of Interview with Tammi Coles by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Tammi Coles

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 03/15/2021

Location (Interviewee): Berlin, Germany

Location (Interviewer):

Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we spoke about included:

For profit healthcare and predatory insurance. Different personal experiences of access to healthcare in the USA, Germany, and England. Being an American immigrant in Germany, financial precarity. Multilingual dating and making friends as an immigrant. Lockdown as a social butterfly. COVID denialism in the USA and Germany. Being asthmatic. First hearing about the pandemic through a podcast. [Tammi later confirmed that the podcast was "More or Less: Behind the Stats" podcast, episode "Coronavirus, emotions and guns." Tammi first listened to it 3 February 2020 on the recommendation of a friend. Personal correspondence 17 December 2021.] Early safety precautions and negotiating those with a less concerned partner: wearing gloves, isolating, staying away from strangers. Watching the events of USA in from Germany and Angela Merkel's handling of the pandemic. Black Lives Matter; How hard it was to have good, kind, well intentioned white people asking "How are you?"; how COVID actually acted as a social buffer from these conversations. The 6 January insurrection. Apps and other digital tools used in adapting to pandemic life. Pandemic hygiene. Excitement about the vaccine. Homophobia and biphobia in the family. Racism and resistance in the 1970s, familial experiences. Moving a book club online and changes in accessibility. The importance of the experiences of everyday people

Kit Heintzman 00:01

Hello.

Tammi Coles 00:03

Hello

Kit Heintzman 00:05

Would you please start by telling me your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Tammi Coles 00:11

My name is Tammy Lavelle Coles. The date is Monday, the 15th of March 2021. I am in Berlin, Germany.

Kit Heintzman 00:24

And do you consent

Tammi Coles 00:25

And the time, excuse me. And the time at least Berlin time is five minutes after eight o'clock.

Kit Heintzman 00:35

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license, attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Tammi Coles 00:45

I do?

Kit Heintzman 00:47

Would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who may find themselves listening to this? What might you want them to know about you and the position you're speaking for?

Tammi Coles 00:58

Like I said, my name is Tammy. I am a US citizen. And I have been living in Berlin, Germany, since 2006. I am an immigrant. And that definitely shapes my experience these days. I arrived at what when I was in my what? Early late night, late 30s. And early my 40s and 50s Excuse me, giving myself a discount.

Tammi Coles 01:29

And I'm African American. I am bisexual queer. I am polyamorous twice married, twice divorced. And living with my sis white, German partner, straight boy who I met here in Germany, I guess now it's been about four or five years. Anyway, that I'm living here with him. And I think that will also inform some of the things I have to say about my experience under COVID.

Kit Heintzman 02:18

I'd like to start by asking what the word pandemic means to you. And if you think we're in one

Tammi Coles 02:23

Interest interesting. I've never bothered to look up the term. The difference between an epidemic and Pandemic for me is one that is global. The difference between a local issue and a global one, but damn if I actually know that to be factually true or not. pandemic is the word I use when I'm like, the whole world is affected right now.

Kit Heintzman 02:54

I'm curious to the degree that you're comfortable sharing. What are some of your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure prior to the pandemic.

Tammi Coles 03:05

As I said, I lived in I'm an American citizen and lived in the US until I moved here. And my experience with healthcare systems prior to being here was from like, for many Americans was one that was precarious. And that is that was tied to my job and I was always quite worried about losing health care coverage. I from a family of diabetics, and asthmatics I have asthma I managed to avoid diabetes, but at least that as an issue, kind of haunted my What if I ever need and Oh, I'm so afraid to kind of situation. I've been working in a job of some kind or another since I was 16. And having access to health care, through work was something that was important to me. I moved to Germany in 2006. And while much can be said about having a really robust health care system, I am an immigrant and when I experienced financial insecurity, it wasn't tied to my job but it was still something that terrified me and was also very, very frightening when I took a financial loss. I was fired from a job for example and an immigrant and while I had the job portunity to work, I had to scramble to pay for the required health

insurance, of course to stay in the country. And I'm not gonna lie, I actually dodged bills. And the system is such that perhaps in a in a kind way, the amount that I owed was reduced. But it didn't disappear altogether. It's not a free system. And so it was something that was a debt that when I did have employment again, or income I had to pay. And so, again, because of my asthma, I have the kind of asthma that requires long term medication. And, yeah, health insurance, having access to health insurance is, you know, vital to my, my well being fundamentally. And in that period in the US are in that period in Germany, where I didn't have access, it was frightening, truly, truly frightening.

Kit Heintzman 06:07

And still thinking about pre pandemic world would you say a little bit about what your day to day was like?

Tammi Coles 06:15

I'm a social butterfly. And my pre pandemic, life was about finding opportunities to get together with people. And that was that it's, it's in many respects, it has been so much a part of my identity. I organize a book group, I've been organizing a book group since 1997. And I managed to port it to Germany. And meeting with the book group was meeting once a month, around some members table with food to talk about a book, but it was us getting together. And I distinctly remember one occasion when someone wrote to me via via email, and asked if it was an online group. And I was like, No, we meet in person, we're not an online group, that was pre pandemic. Pre pandemic, I also would organize opportunities to get together with friends for movies, I had a weekly dinner party on Friday nights. And it kind of bounced around in the schedule. But that was a thing like we would organize. Or I would organize dinner parties. And our sort of social network was so organized, we had a Trello board, on which people could make suggestions, like, you know, hey, here's this movie coming up, or, Hey, there's this restaurant we want to go to, or hey, what about this art event, and then people would join onto the card with their avatars, if they were interested in participating. And I thought that board filled with things at the end of every year, like in December, I would look ahead and I would throw things in there. And people would sign up for like an event happening in November the next year. So imagine what it was like to reach a point in the calendar where you couldn't put things in the board because you couldn't be sure it wasn't going to be canceled. Or where there were things that were on the board that then did have to be cancelled and taken off and or bumped. I think there's still some concerts that some folks and had tickets for that have just been pushed and pushed and pushed. But pre pandemic it was, it was a really, it was a it was a vibrant social life of getting together with friends, organizing opportunities for us to get together. And everybody also seeing it as something they also participated in, we had this this life together. And we use tools, even modern tools to do it. That was pre pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 09:11

Would you say a little bit about the crowd that you're organizing? What kind of people you're bringing together?

Tammi Coles 09:17

Yeah, sure. Um, so part of it is a met when it first came here in 2006. I felt of course, very isolated. I hadn't planned on moving to Germany, it was rather spontaneous. I came here as a tourist. I fell in love with Berlin and I decided to stay and I really wanted to meet people because, again, social butterfly, but I also knew that it would be the difference between me believing I had a city worth living in, or not so having connections. So in that first year, especially, I was really aggressive about money. meeting people, I would go to some of the organized language exchange events, for example, to meet people, things that also don't exist right now because you know,

crowds of strangers. But, so go to events like that. And I would also, I did a lot of dating, which was also a way of meeting simpatico people. There are a number of folks in my group, I've actually been on blind dates with. And but group was also one of those things that factored into it, but groups or classes and so I was hanging out with folks who had similar interests to me or met through some of these channels. Those are also folks who I feel comfortable being me with, I wanted to hang out with people and I do hang out with people who are also queer, or who understand or are themselves poly identified. viously when I first maybe not, so obviously, when I first arrived in Germany, my language skills were pretty piss poor, I knew how to get to a toilet or to ask for one. Um, but that meant that I met a lot of bilingual people, you know, Germans who could speak English, my current partner included, and or people who were just themselves native English speakers. So this community of folks are most of them, all of them are bilinguals, some better than others, I have just a couple of folks that I met through dating, with whom I don't share our English language. And one of them by Colombia, we've known each other since we met in 2006, or 2007. So in the year I arrived, or the year right after, and my date with him was spent with my dictionary, like I was actually looking through. We were talking, you know, using my dictionary, and he's, I'm also part of that community. And, yeah, so the dates, the random meetings, because of language, the book group, but folks who also sort of share a sense of how to be in the world, we're all kind, decent, left wing, left wing, and progressive liberal types, some more liberal than progressive, but, you know, I hold that against no friends.

Kit Heintzman 12:46

What have the restrictions been like where you are? And how have you been feeling about them?

Tammi Coles 12:54

It's been wonderful to be in Germany. I loathed what I was seeing back in the US, and was terribly afraid for my friends and relatives, who are, of course, still there. And the numbers, just watching the figures rise, watching the response of the US government and comparing it to the response that was happening here in Germany. Yeah, it was really intense. That's not to say that there hasn't been resistance to the government government mechanisms here. But Germany has. I mean, she's a scientist, she, and the miracle government really stepped up in a way that was simply missing from all of the reports that I was seeing about and reading about in the US. The ways that the federal government here, I mean, it is also a land state based system and the regional state governments have a lot of say in how they rule their own regions. But there was a very early decision to collaborate to see this as all of us pitching in together. And it came off like that, in the the news reports and in the way folks organize things on the streets, and he saw a lot of neighbor to neighbor initiative as well, which was incredible. You know, folks recognizing that yeah, businesses are going to be hard hit. So let's support our local business. and assist with you know, buying in advance gift certificates or, or whatever. And there was there was talk about that, you know, people really seeing this coming together. And as time wore on, of course, it's it has been more more challenging. And I think in some respects the things coming out of the US in terms of COVID denier, the even the language and practices have crossed the pond to get to Germany. That's not to put it all on the US shoulders. But, you know, when there was one demonstration, and someone was waving an American flag next to some, I don't know, whatever, neo Nazi. That's another thing here in Germany. Nazis are actually illegal here. But every one of those folks tries to come around with other messaging and that there was an American flag amongst all of it. And I can't help but thinking that the US is in a poison, so much of this response globally. I'm glad to be here. And I've been really proud to kind of do what I do even as a non citizen, really enough to support it. And I'm impressed and happy. And I had enough worries about COVID I was truly frightened. But thankfully, I didn't have to add fear of a government, bad response or anything like that to the list of worries that I have.

Kit Heintzman 16:43

I'd be interested in hearing a bit about what you remember from first hearing about COVID-19.

Tammi Coles 16:51

I first heard about it through a podcast before it became a pandemic. And I turned to Andre as my partner one morning, and I said we need to start packing our cabinet. Pack the pantry. He thought it was crazy, actually. But I'm like, No, I heard about something. And I think it's coming. I think the way that the scientists in this podcast sounded, I can't remember which podcast it was. But it was super early. And they were super afraid. And I was like, I'm gonna get started. And I don't care what he thinks about whether or not I'm crazy about it. I'm going to go ahead and start and that was that was the beginning for me. After it arrived, I was terrified. I distinctly remember, yeah, all the gloves, I bought gloves. Got masks. I didn't want to go out at home. And I was so frightened that I was also controlling my partner like we would walk down the street and I would physically grabbed him to pull him closer to me and away from other people. Because I was just afraid. That was when we didn't know just how contagious it was. Whether or not you could touch a doorknob, there was a point where we had a deal where I had on my gloves. I would touch the doorknob. So if we needed to go out the door, you know, one of us had the glove, although we didn't all have to wear gloves, but one of us would have the touch authority and the other person did not. And same for going into the grocery store. I could open the cabinet, I could put my hand on one thing and pull it into my basket. There was no touching no putting back. No, you know, and yeah, it was a super frightening time. Part of it is the asthma. Some of that has been the time. my asthma was very much under control, but they didn't know how vulnerable someone with asthma was. And I thought I get I could remember the times when I have absolutely struggled for breath. Had to go to the hospital and be connected to just devices to keep me breathing Not even down my throat and how horrifying and frightening that is. And I was terrified of anything like that. And that really informed the beginning of my experience with COVID a lot more or less. Of course some of the science has made it clear. You know what I have to be aware of and where I have to be afraid but I didn't know that then. And I was super frightened.

Kit Heintzman 20:05

2020 was pretty notorious Lee a rough year in many respects, and 2021 has also had its roughness. I'm wondering what some of the big issues on your mind have been over this period of time.

Tammi Coles 20:22

Like I said, the beginning was very frightening. And as it were on some, in some ways, there was relief. 20 was a difficult year for me also, as a US citizen abroad. And I think that the combination of watching the data, thinking about my personal life, looking at the political drama of the US, and I had so much rage, especially that everything seems so huge. And COVID was just another part of that. I'll take I'll give an example where we had one of our, I've watched some relationships fall apart, in this period. And one of them was a neighbor, who they've been long term married. And they were locked in with each other, and the things that they probably use to kind of be in a relationship to give balance, the relationship was simply gone. They were still friends to each other, and they wanted to, to have, she was going to move back, she was also an immigrant. So she was going to move, and he was going to stay, and she got the place back in their home country, or her home country, and he got the place here. But there was a an event where we were going to be out in the park COVID opportunity, you know, at that time, you could meet in groups, but outside and, and have a going away already. So there were two things that were are the things that were coming together, though, was that. So it was the summer it was the height

of tensions in the US, these were white people. And I was being invited to sit with other white folks in a period where I just didn't want to be with people, or white people. And I was having difficulty explaining this to my white partner, because, you know, part of it was, you know, the, the response from them. It was the you know, for them from their perspective, the only thing that had to be organized or considered was, was, you know, being out in the park and COVID. And for me there was There's also additional negotiation or navigation around my feelings about being with white folks at that time and having to explain this to a white partner. And, and I cried, I, I can hold and held and just had to curl up in his lap and try to get out why I didn't want to fucking go. And eventually we compromised. Well, there wasn't any compromise, I said I would go, I wanted to, you know, be there for this these people that I had also known, but I said to him, he needed to run interference because someone white, innocent and kind, was going to ask me how I was doing. Because they wanted to know how I was feeling about things going on in the US. And I just didn't want to have the conversation. I didn't want to be in tears at somebody else's going away party. I didn't want to have to negotiate that. And I didn't, I just didn't. So I told my partner in advance, I know it's going to happen. And I'm just going to look at you, and you do it, you do the work. And it didn't happen. So when asked and I just turned to him, and he stepped in. And that was thankfully what I needed and all I needed to be able to get to Goddamnit neck and COVID So it was that in 2020 and I can tell you coming into 2021 with of course the post election but still very hostile things going on in the US I was in one part relieved, honestly believed because of the change in the leadership in the US administration. Um, you know, of course this was you know, my initial thoughts this was before the insurgents of January 6, Chapter Six my dates. Anyway, um, I had a friend who I haven't seen because of COVID. And actually, German, and she had sent me a note right after the change of 2021 saying, haha, you know, and basically saying, Yo, you were so negative before and see no big deal. And that was before the the insurgency happened. And then who add to right after that happened had to send me another mail and saying, Okay, I guess we will talk about this when we have a chance to see each other in a park during this COVID time we can talk. So it's been this, you know, so So part of it is, you know, interestingly enough, because of COVID, I can, perhaps I've been even protected from some of the harder experiences of having to talk about what's been going on in the States, I haven't had to interact with anybody as or not as many people as with my partner, I've been in home office. So even my, you know, relationships with some of my colleagues who were very lovely people, very nice white young people, but who occasionally are like, you know, what's going on in the States? You know, even the, the the questions that are kind of naive and generous, are, you know, are so much of a burden, and it's been kind of COVID relief, to be away from that in a bizarre, fucking bizarre, super bizarre way.

Tammi Coles 26:28

That yeah, COVID gave me some space to handle or to deal with it in a different way. 2020 2021

Kit Heintzman 26:43

Would you tell me what health means to

Tammi Coles 26:48

health means having, or one's age, perhaps and appropriate? Ability, again, speaking of ability, perhaps within the context of one's known ability, already established ability, my case, I don't have a different physical disability than asthma. And so far, in some respects, it's a place of privilege. I'm so having what I consider to be good health health means good health. I mean, actually, as I think about it, no, actually, health is a thing. It is sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes challenged, and good health means for me good and fewer challenges. And in this

context, the COVID context, it also means specifically either having survived COVID Or having had the good fortune to not yet have had COVID and not having had that struggle. So that's

Kit Heintzman 28:16

what does safety mean to you?

Tammi Coles 28:19

I'm sorry, the recording, the audio jumped?

Kit Heintzman 28:23

What does What does safety mean to you?

Tammi Coles 28:28

Um, that's a lot, because I think of safety and security being something very close together. So in some respects, being able to move about in the world, unmolested, enjoying the what should be the privileges of human life. That's a big old can of worms right there. That's a matter of safety. I think also of economic safety, and economic security, not having to wonder about my next meal. Whether I have access to clean water, running water, it's a matter of safety and security. For me. I'm and having shelter, also a place of safety and security for me. I feel in many respects, I feel my privilege. There are plenty of places in the world where those are not available. And while there is some measure of safety and even those spaces, I don't have to think As much it's not as precarious, although I am an immigrant. And I think about that. And I think, actually, it triggered something in me because I had someone recently asked me, if I'd attended any BLM Black Lives Matter demonstrations here. I'm an old activist, I used to work exclusively in the advocacy sector, I've run a peace and justice organization myself, I've been involved in lots of community things in the past, I haven't been as involved in those things here. And part of the safety security thing is, I don't want to risk my visa, I'm afraid of being swept up in a police thing and losing my home, my chosen home in this case. And so some part of safety is the security of not being discarded by a government system. If it's so random. Again, let's look back at what was happening in the states and where people with even green card opportunities, were finding that that didn't provide them any safety. Yeah, it is on my mind. And part of my reason for moving towards citizenship here, I do want to stay and could provide me some safety to the citizen.

Kit Heintzman 31:38

What are some of the things that you think would need to change in order for more people to have access to the kinds of health and safety you just described?

Tammi Coles 31:56

The basic system is you can have it if you have the money. Just sick, fundamentally sick, that you can't trust to even have shelter. As a human, you can't trust other humans to provide and care for, and believe it's important that you have shelter. That's sick. It's fucking sick. That in the US, even especially that people have to choose between getting care or paying their rent. That's sick. And it's real, plenty of stories, even in this period, where people are so fucking afraid of the cost of an ambulance to the hospital that they would call a fucking Uber. To get them they're putting the Uber driver at risk because they couldn't afford the bill of a fucking ambulance when they are desperately time to breathe. And let me go back to that desperate breathing. So fucking fundamental. And yeah, what would have to change as people's wholesale attitudes? A bow writes about the privilege of our human

existence and about how important it is to protect that and the basics of water, of shelter of health. I don't even understand why we're still having this fucking conversation. Honestly, I just cannot. And and this for me is like, yeah, this attitude shift has to change. And also, of course, the people responsible. The insurance industry is predatory. Absolutely predatory, that we are reliant on a system that is a gamble. We're gambling on you not needing us. We want your money regularly, but we need to know that you're okay and Well, young enough so that you don't need us. And if you do need us expect trouble. Expect that we're going to argue over what you need that your doctor tells you. That test that extra medicine. We these people who aren't your doctors are going to decide whether you can get any of that that's a bullshit fucking system and it needs to be fucking destroyed. I have I'm really I mean, I just yeah, that um, it's a shame that most people don't understand that most people believe this is normal. I you live in a different system you recognize like I mean, I remember the first time actually I had to go I was in London, and I am I get a very bizarre everybody else gets a little cold sores on their lips. Herbies break out on their lips, I get into my eye on my eyelid. It is horrible. And, yeah, the very first time that that happened, I was in London. And I could just walk into a place, and they would see me as an American traveling abroad, and I could go to some place, explain that what was happening and be seen, what. And some versions of that, you know, like this, this this thing where I mean, a few years back, I was having a lot of health trouble. Turns out, he was very related to my diet and pending diabetes. But that's a whole nother story.

Tammi Coles 35:43

But I could use the system here to get seen by various doctors, my doctor, my own personal physician was very much a you know, we're not sure. So we'll send you here, we'll send you there, we'll send you to another place. And I didn't have to worry that some huge whopping Bill was going to come down on me, I was cared for in this system, that was part of the deal. I had it come out of my paycheck. And you know, not the the like the the base amount that is paid for by my employer and whatever part but I didn't have to worry about some extra, there was no deductible. I paid five euros for a prescription, but not a single payment for any of the specialists that my doctor sent me to not a single payment required. Additionally, for the additional work of being at that time, more sick or unhealthy than usual. Thankfully, that's changed. But yeah. And yeah, that should be the typical story. People shouldn't have to worry about getting access to care, and particularly in that place when you're in pain. And you don't know what the fuck is happening to you. And you're super vulnerable, and you want to cry at every other moment. Yeah, that shouldn't be then that point where the insurance company vultures come in and say we're gonna get you and your house and your family's assets to your book if you have it, if you even have that. So, yeah, sorry, rant. This is a person who needs you know, around the clock medical care, and it's like ahh.

Kit Heintzman 37:30

There is no need to apologize. I am here to learn from you. And anyone listening to you is here for that. And the rants are a part of this moment. I did want to quickly follow up with given the changes that have happened in England health care over the last little while, if you could just give us scope of what year ish that experience was

Tammi Coles 37:52

That was 1996 I remember it distinctly because I so loved the books that I read on that trip, that it is the reason I formed a group in 1997. Thank you London.

Kit Heintzman 38:13

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Tammi Coles 38:19

Ben better than I was the last four years. Nice to not wake up with dread about whether or not World War is about to start. And I'm still fairly negative about what's happening in the US I see this as a temporary relief. Not I see the country going down. So you know two years until the Republican surge and we're back on that train to help um so immediate future I feel enjoy that relief. There's plenty to do. But, yeah, regarding COVID The variants of course were scary to read about I'm super, super excited about every time I read somebody's vaccine friend got a jab. Mother sent me a text you know, I'm, I'm you know, we humans can be as we destroy the planet we can be also resilient in some ways and and we're grateful for what medical science has made possible what human ingenuity is made possible. And despite the resistance of the naysayers, I think there's enough folks who, maybe even because of their fear But they're getting themselves vaccinated. And I, at least hope for us in this round of the battle with a virus in tent on spreading its own joy, and killing us in the meantime, in two big numbers. And, yeah, I'm glad to see some of that happening in a political context of the US that makes it possible for more people to get vaccinated. It's good for the world. If we all get vaccinated if we can get mauled, otherwise causes on

Kit Heintzman 40:46

What might be some of your other hopes for the longer term future?

Tammi Coles 40:58

There's a lot of negativity around around race and ethnicity in particular. And I think some folks see a lot that hasn't changed. But I was having a discussion recently with my family, that was one of the relatively nice things to come out or to happen, struggling with my family, queer identity issues or something that really, they don't get my Southern Baptists Christian family. But my mother was describing a situation that had happened back when she was young. She had gotten a job at Hewlett Packard, HP before they just went with hp. And she was one of the few blacks and woman no less working there. And a white man said to her, very straight up, that if he could make sure she wasn't there he would. And he said that to her in front of witnesses, because that was a time you could or rather, it was a time where he thought you could, but the times have changed. And my mother, my mother, who has snatched wigs from other people's heads and defended herself against racists. She chased him around, she did not let that go. And the two of them got pulled into a meeting with higher ups. And he this man did not feel like he had to cage anything about what he said. But he didn't understand that the time it shifted, that that was a time 70s When there had been another reckoning around race, where there were more opportunities being created for blacks because of what was happening and what had happened in the 60s. And as the assassination of King happened in the year of my birth 1968. He had reckoned with white protection, and he lost his job, because they didn't want a story. This is another one of those moments, another leap. And the things where for example, when Aunt Jemima pancake syrup, has to think about their name, and change their name, but out that they're going to change where the team formerly known as the Washington Redskins, becomes the team formerly, formerly known as that. Where a lot of businesses, even if it's performative, have to do the performance, that those things happen because of revolution and turmoil because of violent times, and people throwing up their hands and saying, fuck this shit no more. And we may say all we do about how little has changed but I have job opportunities that my mother didn't have. I can be in rooms with people that my mother couldn't have been in rooms with. There are discussions that are happening now that would have been absolutely laughable. It wasn't that long ago that the ribs 14 formerly known as whatever the fuck they were called absolutely rejected the idea that they should this campaign to get them to change their name has been going on for decades, absolute decades. And now is that time so I have hope for a future where there will be more of this where another generation looks

back and lives Like, how did they, like I look back at some of my, what my parents and my grandparents went through? Oh, how could they even? Um, and yeah, there will be generations after us that look back on this and think off, they shake their head, they will put their head in their hands. And they'd be like, how how, how did I do that? And I yeah, I look forward to being the sad story of a different history. I look forward to us being where we got it wrong, because some other generations have gotten it right. And I hope that keeps going. I'm looking forward to that I know it's coming. doesn't always look great. A lot of button has to be shared. People have to have their necks compressed by other people's bodies. But it's, it's coming and I have faith. I habe fucking faith so it's just

Kit Heintzman 45:57

I wanted to check in because this is really emotional right now. Do you want to take a break? Do you want to stop?

Tammi Coles 46:05

Ive been crying up and down these past years What's a little bit of crying over hope. Its ok to cry. Please continue.

Kit Heintzman 46:21

Self Care has been a really big conversation of our moment. And I'm wondering what the term means to you and to whatever extent how you've been practicing it if it's available.

Tammi Coles 46:40

Yes, definitely been practicing. At the beginning of the pandemic, like many people, were seduced by all of those little things that were going around, you know, eight o'clock, you walk nine o'clock, you do this 10 o'clock, you do that 12 o'clock all very organized, was very attractive to imagine that went out the window. When I first imagined that I could do that, to give myself some structure, and save myself from too much lounging around in my pajamas. Well, I'm happy to say that at some point, I did lounge around in my pajamas, and watch fucking Netflix and distract my sad, sad soul with comedy, television horror movies, every Friday, did that still do that now. And and that helped quite a bit. Once I realized that it was also, you know, very much of a funk. It was difficult even to like, you know, shower. Thankfully, having a partner at least reminded me, you know, part of the deal to, you know, care for their noses and what they have to smell anyway. Um, I did come around to not necessarily anything regimented, but I did seek out some things that helped quite a bit. I signed up with Politico, which I totally recommend, which is a habit tracker. And I would add little things like, you know, make sure you drink your water. And the great thing about Habitica is, it's a role playing game. And so you have a little avatar, and based on how you do you, you know, you get prizes, you know, you get swords, you get costumes, new battle gear, and hats, shields, and bizarrely, keeping my little avatar in gear. And leveling up in this game really helped. It was bizarre to find that something like that, it just like, there were those those little little creatures will pets that people had back in the day. Tamagotchis or something, I think that's what it's called, where you have to keep those alive. It's like that, but with habits so you've put in your habits. And so, reading a book every day became a habit, some 10 pages, practicing German for five minutes became a habit. Going for a walk became a habit. And you know, based on how I would do I would you know, click the little thing either I was, you know, it was damage, or I was leveling up. And honestly, thank you, if you're listening a better gun developers really grateful for this little added tool in my life, which I continue to use. And, yeah, that that helped quite a bit. It also made me realize that yeah, that you know, using an opportunity like this to be indoors. The by having other social responsibilities, you know giving myself time then to focus on myself. I've stepped up my journaling. I've been

journaling since I was a teen. And I am one of those teens whose mother read their journal. Story. We're another time but that did not stop me from keeping a journal. I've been keeping a journal since Yes, teenager. And these days I journal every day. And it doesn't have to be big. I just say whatever the fuck is on my mind, if it's about, you know, some dish I baked or a TV show or, you know, weight gain, weight loss, new Habitica thing I'm trying book I'm reading whatever. Yeah, yeah, I journal about that. And it is self care and seeing how I was feeling and having even space to, to talk about some of these issues that I was already talking about before about missing friends, and missing my social life and what it means to adjust to that, and also trying out these new things. Yeah, I also found value in online community. And book group moved online, we made the transition to Zoo, we still meet on once a Sunday per month, and get good attendance. It's as like this actually works. And interestingly, it works for people for whom getting together with people maybe wasn't such a fun thing. Like they want to be able to just sit in their home in their jammies with a cup of coffee and talk about the book without necessarily making the trek across town and making a dish for it. Yeah, who knew? Yay, little bit. And I also found a community called Focus, mate, another habit forming thing. And that one is where you just meet a stranger online to do work together. Don't talk, you don't have to talk. It is incredible. Game Changing. You turn on your mic, you say what you're going to do in your session. And the other person tells you what they're going to do. And then you sit with each other, they have their screen on, you have your screen on, you can see each other and you work on your thing, whatever that thing is, you decide for yourself. And, and then at the end, you check in to do what you do. How was it? And like a bit ago, I found that body doubling this technique. Wow. Wow, I get shit done. And yeah, and I've used that session for cleaning my desk for writing an essay, or editing other people's work for work, or journaling. For I think that I use one session for reading. I mean, I'm up at this point, I think I'm above like 75 sessions. Um, there are people who've done many, many more, but I Yes, so shout out to Habitica and shout out to focus mate, you rock. Thank you very much. So yeah, I do those things. And it's helped me take care of myself in ways that I would have never done. Were COVID not a player in this story. I just would not have happened. So who know? learn some new things every day.

Kit Heintzman 53:42

I'm at the penultimate question. We kind of know that we're in this wave of biomedical and scientific research right now. And I'm wondering what kind of work you think people in the humanities and social sciences could be doing to help us better understand this moment.

Tammi Coles 54:02

I, because of actually because of focus, mate, I'm having a lot of opportunities to talk with people, even in these brief ways about their work. Focus mate also happens to have a Facebook community and the struggle is real. For people who are at home and feeling disconnected from their colleagues and floundering and people who have diagnosed ADHD, for example, or people who are just trying to sort of get it together to put their clothes on. I've been there. I know. And I think that there's going to be so much that we get out of this moment about how people cared for each other. Beyond the physical is the Met. And thankfully, there is a lot of discussion about how this affects us emotionally. But part of it too is how it affects us emotionally, when the things that we used to rely on to help us are gone by being able to go out to a movie theater, or go to a concert. I, a friend of mine, was talking about concerts, and not being able to go on her regular concert subscription was real hard. Yeah. And say what you will about arts and humanities, but fucking we need it. We need it. And we use it every day. And it's important. And there, there's what we say of this moment is Yeah, how did how did we do when that was missing? How did we do when we had to come up with alternative ways of bringing us the same? You know, whether that was folks, you know, doing their online sharing of music choirs meaning online? or what have you,

you know, choirs, especially when breathing allowed, and with force became a threat. Oh, this time, I'm out. How did we cope, when many of the things that we used for coping one gone from us, there's going to be plenty for us to sift through to imagine how we did it and how valuable it is, and maybe come to a different appreciation for how important it is. Um, I work at a business school in the communications department. And one of the things that while the school, a lot of them do business research, and the conversation I had with one of my colleagues, I was interviewing him. And he actually focuses on democratizing work. And one of the things that we talked about was about something so simple as the phase transition, if you will, from going from a workplace to or from a home place to a workplace, or vice versa back. And what that time spent, does to how you handle or process your day, he doesn't believe in work being completely separate, you know, sees all of this tightly integrated, but that part, you know, it's discussing, like, you know, what it means to put on your clothes, get your work bad should go to a place and go through the transit system to get to that place, that, you know, even those moments are so fundamental to how we process the world, even ourselves. And there's going to be a lot of material for the researchers to deal with, to figure out, you know, even in some respects, how we figured out the value of something because it wasn't there, including something like that. Now, it wasn't there.

Tammi Coles 58:34

And now all of a sudden, we get it. Maybe we need to pay attention to that, um, some fascinating stuff, I look forward to being on the other side of the COVID experience so that we, you can't look back. But I see all of that. And all of these the strengths that we bring to it just being in the world as being valuable beyond just the medical story of this moment. Definitely.

Kit Heintzman 59:16

And this is my last question. So this is an oral history interview. And that means, as a historian, I carry some assumptions with me. And I carry traditions with me. One of those traditions for historians at our moment, is to deeply value what our historical actors valued to pay a lot of attention to what mattered to the people living through this. So I want to ask, and the and the other assumption is that rebuilding context of a time we are far away from is incredibly difficult. holding all of the variables of this moment is hard for us now. It's going to be a lot 100 years from now, and I'd like to ask you what you would like that person to not forget about this moment? What is a part of COVID history that might slip someone's mind? And what kinds of stories do you want to be sure don't get forgotten.

Tammi Coles 1:00:19

I'm going to step back into a different history story. Gettysburg. And this was a significant battle and American history, US American history. And one of the things that informs the telling of that history is the writings of the soldiers. I'm talking about what was just happening in their lives. Now not having good enough socks for the weather, it was fucking cold, or food rationing conditions in a war, and just them being off also, you know, loving and missing some family member or whatever. Um, I remember hearing about that, and thinking about my own journal, and thinking, maybe it'll never be read by anyone else. But maybe it will. Maybe it will be part of this greater story of our humanity. I'm not famous. I'm not a movie star, nor a political leader. And nevertheless, I do believe my story and every story that is this is our collective shared human history. Not to mention the other beings on the planet who have other ways of communicating, but here we are. And, yeah, I want that. All of us better. I mean, that sounds like a hashtag. And I don't mean it like that. But, um, that this way that I struggled, or my partner struggled, or some random person I passed on the street when I was pulling my partner to me to get them away, who probably has their story to tell about that time when that psycho stories of this time and valuable

for shedding some little light on it, this thing we went through. And that's why also, I was happy to share my story in this interview, I think people, little people like me, need to have their stories of this moment as part of the treasure trove of material that some historian in the future goes through and figures out from so yeah, being part of that and having someone recognize all of the parts of that builders to me.

Kit Heintzman 1:03:28

I want to thank you so much for everything that you shared today. And at this point, I just want to invite you if there's anything you'd like to say that my questions haven't given you the space to say, here's sort of space for that.

Tammi Coles 1:03:43

I'm astounded that there was so much in my head um, and and there probably is still so much but I mean, that was a lot it felt like the lived experiences um, so I don't have a I think that was planning. I'm sure. There's something I didn't cover but I'm fine with what I shared.

Kit Heintzman 1:04:25

Thank you so very much.