Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

Antonio Cosme

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

March 2, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Antonio Cosme was born and raised in Southwest Detroit. He graduated from Catholic Central High School and then got a B.A. in Economics and Political Science from Eastern Michigan University. He was involved in Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management and the People's Water Board. He is a graffiti artist and was one of the founders of Raiz Up, a hip hop and art collective. He is currently part of Southwest Grows, an urban farming group in Detroit. He works for the National Wildlife Federation as an education coordinator.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

Abstract

Antonio Cosme describes his neighborhood in Southwest Detroit, his family background, how going to school with mostly upper-class suburban kids shaped his political consciousness, and how his parents losing their house in the 2008 financial crisis caused him to become an economics major. He talks about the influences on his economic thinking and parallels he sees between the economic situations in Detroit and Puerto Rico. A major topic is emergency management, its impacts on Detroit, how Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management (DREM) formed, its coalition structure, the actions they took, and lessons that he learned from it. He talks about the role of art in social movements, his own graffiti work, the foundation of the hip hop collective Raiz Up, and their role in DREM and in ending Columbus Day in the City of Detroit. He discusses how the Graffiti Task Force and broken windows policing in general ruined people's lives, how it aided gentrification, and his own court case for graffiti. Finally, he talks about how his activism has shifted to community ecological organizing and urban farming, the threat of climate change. He shares his vision for the future of Detroit and his memories of Mama Lila Cabbil.

Keywords

Art; Climate change; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit, Michigan; Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management; Economics; Emergency management; Foreclosure crisis; Gentrification; Graffiti; Neoliberalism; Raiz Up; Urban farming

Restrictions

None

Original Format

.mp4 file

Transcript

Transcribed by Laura Kennedy on August 3-5, 2019.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Antonio Cosme, interviewed by Peter Blackmer and Oriana Yilma, March 2, 2019, transcript, *Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Collection*, Detroit Equity Action Lab, Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights, Wayne State University Law School.

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Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights
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Transcript of interview conducted March 2, 2019 with:

Antonio Cosme [AC]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Oriana Yilma [OY]

AC: My name Antonio Cosme. I live in Southwest Detroit [Michigan], in the McGraw-Lonyo neighborhood of Southwest. I've been a part of a lot of different organizations. As it relates to resisting the emergency manager, I was part of the Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. I was also part of a hip hop and art collective called the Raiz Up, and we were also a board member with the People's Water Board for a number of years. But now, I'm part of an organization called Southwest Grows which is an urban farm and arts and ecology sort of nascent organization.

[0:00:45]

PB: Could you describe for us your neighborhood when you were growing up?

AC: Yeah, it's one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Detroit. It has become increasingly Yemeni, but there's Romanians, Polish, hillbilly--I guess Appalachian would be the correct term--Puerto Rican, Dominican. It's like incredibly diverse. There's a Venezuelan restaurant down the street. There's a Yemeni restaurant. I mean, so yeah, it's a really cool place. Working class. It's definitely one of the more impoverished areas of Detroit. I think the average income of my neighborhood is below 20,000 dollars, and the average income of the city is like 30[000]--20...20, upper 20[000]s, low 30[000]s.

So yeah, we're pretty like low-income area, but people are pretty tight. Like Hamtramck or other parts of Detroit, the houses are pretty close to one another. It's relatively densely populated. The area just east of my neighborhood is a lot less dense, but our area's a hot spot particularly for the Yemeni community now. But, yeah, it's a really lovely, lovely area. I can see, like, the flame of US Steel at the end of my block. I live three miles north of Zug Island, and I can see a flame from Zug Island at the end of my block. I'm right on--I'm generally close to [I] 94 freeway.

[0:02:29]

PB: Could you tell us a little bit about--if there's a story associated with it--how you first got active in struggles for racial equities and social transformation?

AC: Yeah. I mean, it's not... It's an evolution that happens slowly over time. Both of my parents grew up in Detroit. My dad came to the city when he was five. My mom was born and raised. Both of them went to Detroit Public Schools. So, they didn't want to send us to Detroit Public Schools, but I always think about it like we were like the richest of the poor people. Like, we were upper-lower class or something, and they're like a lower-middle or something. I don't know. I always felt like we--and I had two parents, really solid, good people. But, they basically lived above their means to send us to Catholic school. They couldn't afford to send us to Catholic school. So, I spent a lot of time in--the Catholic schools were closing as I grew up, kind of as the public school system was closing as well.

So, recognizing the differences in communities was one thing that was really apparent to me growing up, and I often thought about it and wondered why it was that Dearborn Heights [Michigan] was nicer than that. Then, I went to a Catholic school called Detroit Catholic Central. It's not in Detroit. It was in Redford [Michigan] at the time, and that was like--and I often wondered why is it that these people have so much more resources. I'd go home with my friends on the weekends from that school and look at the differences and the aesthetics of their community versus my own. So, that was a...kind of an opening.

And then, just facing normal prejudice and racism from fellow students in those sort of more white spaces. I think there's an upper-class nature to private school automatically and inherently, so they tend to be like whiter, and the further I was going away from my neighborhood was quite a bit more European in the ancestry in the schools. I would just face more and more racism as the further I got from the city. You know, a lot in my high school, and those kids were, you know, pretty upper-class young people. So, yeah, I just faced a lot of like prejudice around the city and around, you know, a lot of anti-Blackness in the narratives that they would have about the city, like the welfare queen and all those sort of like individualist sort of analysis.

But, it wasn't--so, that was a piece. And then, I think another big jolting moment for me was in 2009 when my parents' house was foreclosed upon. So, essentially my parents had took out a lot of debt to pay off our high school education. Our high school was pretty expensive. It was an all guys private Catholic high school. And, like I said, they were kind of like living above their means to send us there. So, yeah, I mean, I started working at the age of like 13 doing brick paving to help support the family and help pay the bills and to give myself a little extra spending cash. So, I kind of knew that we were struggling a bit, but I was in college at the time, and my mom called me, "Hurry up. You gotta come home quick. The house is on fire." So, me and my brother were up at Eastern Michigan University. It was like the final periods. We called a friend. He came and picked us up. We got a ride back down to Detroit. And by the time we got there, the front window of the house was broken. There was smoke kind of like billowing out of it, and there were guys who were loading up all of our possessions and throwing them in a dumpster. I mean, I remember digging through the dumpster and picking up yearbooks and family photos and, you know, all of those personal mementos that, you know, your family kind of keeps, little family treasures over the years. It almost broke my parents' relationship. It was really hard.

My father was an ironworker, and he just really could not afford to send us to Catholic school. My parents had gotten a loan that originated from what was then--was it? It's not Quicken, the company before. It's Dan Gilbert's company, but it was still based in Novi [Michigan]. Then it went to Countrywide [Financial], and I think, you know, 200,000 plus other Detroiters, you know, we lost our home, and we're dispossessed of that, you know. So, that was a big pivotal moment for me.

At the time, I had been studying chemistry, and I switched my major to economics because I really wanted to understand these systems better. And as I studied economics, I came to see the way the United States--I focused a bit on Latin America, so I came to see neoliberal economic policies as something the United States had been pushing since the 1970s in the overthrow of the Chilean government. And, I went to El Salvador and Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico and spent time with Indigenous organizers and studied the history of those places. I had really awesome mentors in college that allowed me to explore that quite a bit more and, yeah, coming to see the way the U.S. was pushing those policies on Latin America, you know, coming to see myself in those Latin American people, and then coming back to Detroit.

I graduated in 2012 just as Detroit was going into bankruptcy, and I started working for an immigrant justice organization, and they were kind of like merging with another social justice organization at the time, and they were kind of having us do this voter outreach, so like, agitate and get people to vote. I thought it was such a poor prescription for people to deal with what was happening. You know, they weren't so much organizing around foreclosures, and they weren't even talking about emergency management, which I thought was, like, horrifying. Like, the most substantive economic policy to hit the city, and the social justice organization wasn't focused on it at all. So, I quit that organization and, yeah, I started seeking out spaces that were discussing and engaging with this issue, and Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management became that space.

[0:09:04]

PB: I want to come back to that in just a moment. One thing that I'm struck by that I'm curious to know more about is you mentioned that you switched your major to economics, and you started studying Latin America and global financial policies. Can you give us an idea about who you were reading, who you were talking to, like give us an idea about how you're developing this consciousness? What are some of your influences?

AC: Yeah. So, I had a lot of influences when it came to helping me understand economics. The economics department at Eastern Michigan University is trash.

Terrible, terrible. So much--like most economics, they teach you neoclassical economics, and it's really basic. It's kind of like post-Keynesian, which is like spending government--it's kind of like the New Deal stuff that Bernie Sanders talks about is the classic Keynesian economic model, which is you drive GDP [Gross Domestic Product] growth by doing government spending. It's kind of the opposite of what [Barack] Obama did because the government was so locked down. There's two ways that you can do it: fiscal and monetary spending, and monetary spending is kind of what Obama did with quantitative easing which increased the money supply by buying back bonds, essentially flooding the market with money, flooding corporations and large banking institutions with money, which has not worked at all. So, it was like that--quantitative easing was happening as--and there was no fiscal expenditures happening, you know. Obama didn't get a chance to do a New Deal sort of legislation, although he wanted to, but the general racism of the legislature refused to accept anything that he wanted to do.

So, analyzing quantitative easing as it was failing to happen was another big, really big, sort of thing, like wake-up moment to me, that neoclassical economics wasn't very sound or very, you know, accurate in its ability to actually describe what was happening in the marketplace. So, I often sought out other economists, other thinkers. Early on, Paulo Freire was a really important--you know, people don't think of him as an economist, but he's an educator, and he understands and talks about oppression. So, that was a, like, really prescient analysis and thought frame for me. I'm also--I mean, Paul Krugman kind of like in the liberal sort of sector is kind of like pushing towards Keynesianism, but what really, you know, got me thinking was when I started listening to Noam Chomsky, and he was like analyzing neoliberal economic policies.

And then, let's see. I read the *Open Veins of Latin America*. That was a really big wake-up call because when they describe--so like, neoclassical economics tries to rationalize foreign exchange by describing it as comparative advantage, you know, like you produce what you comparatively can do, which is just like enforcing imperialism, and there was a really amazing writer who talks about this. His name's--he's Korean. Oh my gosh, I'm having a brain fart. He wrote *Kicking Away the Ladder*, which is a really, really prominent text, and it looks at the way this comparative advantage theory fails to look at all of the major industrial economies expanded and grew through infant industry protection and subsidies and stealing

technology. So, he’s--Ha-Joon Chang. He’s a huge intellectual hero. He advocates that we don’t just study one type of economics. We study Marxism, we study supply side, we study, you know, everything, and then you can like pull little strands from each because they’re all really relevant and they’re all good at describing aspects of the modern economy. So, getting outside of neoclassical was super, super important to me. Another really prominent theorist that really impressed me a lot was David Harvey, and he’s kind of like the go-to guy for understanding and looking at neoliberalism. He wrote a book on the history of neoliberalism, which is a really great text. That’s all that’s popped into my mind now, but I’m sure there’s--Amartya Sen is another one, an Indian economist. Yeah, then there’s, like, more like sociologist and people who kind of analyze that way.

And then, just thinking about a lot of the base ideas in economics are so flawed, you know. Like, the models are built on silly ideas like if you only had all your money to spend on two items, you know, like what would you buy or, you know, if people are like perfectly rational thinkers. So like, the behavioral school of economics I think is really a powerful school for helping understand people like behavioral psychology. So, there’s a lot of different influences, those I came across, and all of it was just like frustration with economics. I mean, I think of modern neoclassical economics as a philosophy that is like calculus and capitalism, you know? It’s like a calculus rationalization of capitalism that doesn’t accurately describe the markets, doesn’t accurately describe history, doesn’t describe context, you know, doesn’t kind of get into like some of things that postmodernist theorists put out, which is like you have to analyze power between the individual nations in history.

I mean, so if the United States is overthrowing Latin American governments, and the IMF [International Monetary Fund} and World Bank are providing huge loans to those countries that they can’t pay back, and then they’re forcing neoliberal economic policies, I mean, that’s a really, really important thing if you want to understand like the power dynamics of foreign exchange and the role the United States has played in the world since World War II. So, yeah, all those things are super, super, really compelling to me.

And, I think Detroit--you know, bringing it back home--Detroit’s on... Detroit’s peak as a country, or as a city, came when the United States was at its peak in the

1930s and [19]40s and [19]50s after World War II when Europe had essentially eliminated its industrial base and we were providing something like 70 or 80 percent of the world industrial GDP. So, I came to understand and see my life as growing up in the very bottom of that depressive period of Detroit after that peak when the city was around 2 million people in the 1930s and [19]40s. So, that was super important for me, like, to see myself in economic history and have an understanding of Detroit.

And, that's one of the most disgusting things about--I mean, I had a really great private school education, and the common social analysis is highly individualistic. I mean, you could--there's one thing that Americans will agree upon, and it's individualism. You can go into a room and everybody could hate each other and disagree on everything, but if you say, "Well, everyone's an individual." Everyone's like, "Oh!" [claps hands] "That's exactly right." I mean, it's just a dumb, simplistic thing that all Americans completely buy into 110 percent all the time, and that's kind of like with people's analysis of structural inequality.

People--and I think like growing up in Detroit when you are in a culture that's highly individualist, and you see that your community's deeply impoverished, you look around and you see broken homes, broken families, deep poverty, bottom of the recession, everyone's losing their homes, and you look at your community from an individualist perspective, and you see I live in a Black and brown community, I go to a white neighborhood, nice, quality high school education, quality aesthetics, what is the major difference that I see on an individual level between their community and mine? My community's Black and brown. Their community is white. White is better, white is right, and the narrative, the public narrative around poverty, around inequality, around--it's about people's individual decisions, you know. The obsession is with choice. The obsession is with the individual welfare queen, drug-dealing guy who's on welfare, and we think it's--our society thinks it's their decision that they're not rich or their decision that they're not wealthy.

And, if you grow up in Detroit not understanding economic history--and they don't teach that in school, you know. They don't teach you, you know, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*--that was another huge book for me. Like, why is it that we don't learn that in school? Why is it that you grow up in an impoverished, segregated

metropolitan area, and you have no idea how that happened, and there's no analysis as to, you know, what made that come about or, you know, how your community, you know, how that happened to your community and with your community too? So it's like, you know, I'm not saying we're like fully victims in anything, but there's trends to this, you know. There's systems that have to be described and analyzed, and I think thinking systemically is something that I really came out of economics, particularly studying Latin America with that analysis.

[0:18:49]

PB: I that brings us up to... I think that's a useful segue to talking about emergency management here. So, with this background in economics, with this knowledge of neoliberal politics globally and how they impact predominately Black and brown nations, why was Detroit placed under emergency management?

AC: Yeah. In a grand sense, a lot of it has to do with the concentration... So, Detroit was put into emergency management by the state largely in part because of the individual analysis is the public narrative around it. So, that's like the rationalization is that Detroit Black leadership is incompetent, they're failures, they made decisions as a liberal government that structurally...that bankrupted them. So, that's the narrative. Detroit is--the city council is inept, the institutions are failures, Black people couldn't vote their way out of a box, it is their fault that they're in bankruptcy and their fault that they're poor.

So, that's obviously super wrong, but the larger context that I would...that my estimation and my analysis would be is we live in another gilded age of capitalism like before the 1930s and the Great Depression era. We have some of the highest concentrations of wealth. Thomas Piketty wrote a--he's another person who was super impactful for me--Thomas Piketty wrote a book about--essentially the definitive book--that, like, legacy wealth is what makes people right. You know, it's a really, really important book. Barely anybody reads the book because it's so dense. It's like a--but everybody--like, the analysis was super powerful when it came out I think in like 2012 or [20]10 or something like that, but it was largely ignored in the mainstream media and press. So like, with this concentration of wealth, wealth is perpetually looking for places where it can expand upon itself,

and so we're always looking for new markets that have a higher return on investment.

So after the United States is pushing these policies and bankrupting countries all over the world, I think about this time as a late stage in capitalism where we're kind of consuming out own cities as well because wealth is constantly looking for new pockets. After 30 or 40, maybe 60, years of structural divestment from the City of Detroit, it was ripe for the picking. The values of the homes were super low. The value of the buildings were super low. And also, one of the key characteristics of neoliberal economic policies is that the institutions that cause the failure are benefitting it and falling forward into their failure and getting bigger and stronger. So, a company like Quicken Loans, which, you know, something like a third or two-thirds of their mortgages that originated in Detroit ended up in bankruptcy or ended up being foreclosed upon on the backend of a crisis that they helped cause by flooding the market with predatory loans, they're the ones buying up all the property.

So, that's kind of like a philosophical understanding but a mechanistic understanding of what happened was the 2008 financial crisis. I mean, that's got to be, like, the singular more important event for Detroit's situation. A majority of cities earned most of their income, something like 70 to 80 percent, I think on average, from income and housing taxes. So, when a city...the property value on houses radically declines, the city's income radically goes down too. So, Detroit had already been tightening its belt for the last 50 or 60 years. I mean, Coleman A. Young was instituting austerity before that became a popularized term, I mean, in the 1970s and [19]80s. So, Detroit had already been, you know, tightening its belt, but when the 2008--Detroit had a small economic crisis in 2001 because the auto industry kind of took a dook in 2001, so we had already, you know, had a lot of foreclosures then, but in 2008 that kind of like swept...we were kind of like stumbled and swept our legs from under us and took away so many more homes, and you radically reduce the tax base. Then, the city has to take on debt to pay that tax base, and then the vultures kind of come in, start to swarm, then negotiate really bad agreements about the debt. There's all sorts of, like, financial interest swap agreements that are like super dumb that Kwame Kilpatrick had signed.

Yeah, so there's like a--the structural mechanism is the housing crisis, and that came from--so, the...the demand for adjustable rate mortgages was higher than the actual supply of them. So, in order to increase the supply of loans--so like, they had to like begun doing derivative products by chopping up these loans into a million pieces and selling them--selling assets--that were really low grade to--as high grade--to banks all over the world. And when that happened, they had these toxic financial products everywhere, and then peoples--you know, after another big piece of this--[laughs] there's so many stands--but another big piece of this is, like, the way globalization has impacted Detroit and industrial communities and the switch to a service economy and the reliance upon individual consumer debt and mortgage debt as a way to prop up the actual economy and the consumption of the United States is super, super relevant. So if you look at, like, consumer debt, it kind of grows in the time when Detroit's kind of going into its peak. So, the mortgage crisis ended up being--so, people ended up... Like, the logic is the value of your home will always increase, so you can take out a mortgage to, you know, maintain your lifestyle despite an economy paying less, wages that are stagnating, and general savings and wealth that's in decline.

So, all of those things are huge for Detroit and huge for signaling the crisis, and, I mean, it's greed, it's capitalism, it's, you know, these predatory lending that was happening. It's everything. So, these are structural things. So if you're going to, like, come to an individual analysis about Detroit and how it's Detroiters' fault for this crisis, it's absolutely inaccurate because there's absolutely nothing that legislature in Detroit could have done to stop auto industries from leaving to China, to reduce deindustrialization, to reduce the loss of industrial jobs, and to increase the wages of service sector jobs, which is, like, mostly what Americans are living off of these days. So, that's like a big picture with like three different trends. So, it's a big narrative, which is like the individualism, then there's like the mechanisms, which is the economic crisis and the failures in predatory lending by financial institutions, and then there's the kind of like narrative that's being put in the media of incompetent failed Black leadership, which is inaccurate.

[0:26:14]

PB: So, when--you mentioned it...Detroit is unique. Do you see a connection between what happened in Detroit with emergency management and bankruptcy and the period thereafter with post-hurricane Puerto Rico?

AC: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I mean, I see a connection with everything, the whole financial game. So, man, such deep connections. It's the same financial institutions that are buying up the debt of Puerto Rico and Detroit and so many other countries. So, I mean, I see--more broadly, I see connections between the forced austerity that happens to Detroit with what's happening in Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Venezuela, all these countries. I mean, they're going to go after Venezuela right now because they got rid of their IMF and World Bank debt. If you actually look at a map of the world, a majority of the third-world countries are people who have taken--you know, third world--are people who have taken by IMF and World Bank loans. So, those IMF and World Bank loans come with structural adjustment agreements if you cannot pay off your debt.

So, I think the classic example is, like, El Salvador. So, the United States funds a shitty leader to start a civil war. In that civil war, a lot of stuff gets destroyed. Then, you have to take out a ton of loans from the IMF and the World Bank to help rebuild your society. The loans are structured in a way that there's really high interest rates and you can't afford to pay them back. When you can't afford to pay them back, the IMF and the World Bank say you start cutting education, you start cutting healthcare, start cutting subsidies to energy. That even foments more revolution in your government as well, in your populace as well. It was like when energy prices begin to increase, people really begin to get pissed off. So, it's like this, like--and this kind of comes from neoclassical understanding of economics, if you just cut government spending that you can somehow grow the economy. Like, austerity in times of bankruptcy--oh, Mark Blyth is another huge economist that I really love. He wrote a book called *Politics of a Dangerous Idea* [*Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*] or something like that. But, it's super brilliant analysis on austerity. But, yeah. So, IMF and the World Bank are pushing neoliberal economic policies.

So, just the same way the State of Michigan because it has this, like, population which is in control of its own budget, it's in control of its own institutions, and,

thus, you have to negotiate with Detroiters and Black people to do things. And essentially, we're not gonna get, like, cheated. We're not gonna be like giving things away. So, 2008 financial crisis is an opportunity, and Naomi Klein's book *Disaster Capitalism* [*The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*] really helps us understand and orient the way that capitalists or wealthy people or rich financial institutions or predators like Dan Gilbert look at this distressful period as an opportunity. You know, even though they might have helped cause that distressful period, but they look at it as an opportunity to push these sort of austerity-like policies.

So, I connect it more globally with that, and then Puerto Rico is exactly right. You know, right next. And for me, both touch home so deeply. You know, my--I have family in Puerto Rico, you know. I went to Puerto Rico, like, three or four times now. And for me, like, I graduate. My city's being put through bankruptcy. Right after my city gets through bankruptcy, like, my ancestral homelands are getting the same thing, you know. I think like a classic example for me--perhaps an even powerful moment I can talk about later--but Judge [Steven] Rhodes, who was the bankruptcy judge for Detroit's situation, retired and flew to Puerto Rico and started making millions of dollars consulting with the Puerto Rican government at a time when they're bankrupt, they're shutting down schools, shutting down hospitals, the population's fleeing the island like crazy. And if you look at Puerto Rico's situation, it's kind of like Detroit in that it's the United States' larger structures that restrict the economy of Puerto Rico, that don't it allow to grow.

So, like, one thing is there's like the Jones Act. They have to get all of their imports from the United States. Literally, governments from all over the world were trying to send Puerto Rico aid directly after Hurricane Maria, and nobody could do it because you have to send it to Miami first and then send it to Puerto Rico. So, Puerto Rico's really handicapped in their ability not to choose their...and chart out their own economic destiny, which is a sad thing. I mean, Puerto Rico--I mean, I think--I see a lot of parallels between Puerto Rico and Detroit. The structural way... So like, Puerto Rican wealthy people leaving the island is kind of like Black wealthy people leaving Detroit for the suburbs. You know, like, I also see how--yeah, there's so many parallels. I mean, yeah, I mean if you just look at the financial institutions who buy the debt of the two places, they're directly tied together. Jones Day's in both places, you know? And, they're making millions of dollars consulting on all these bankruptcy processes all over the world.

[0:31:36]

PB: How about I ask kind of a two-parter--that you would be willing to, like, answer kind of in order just for the sake of the video production? Both related to emergency management. So, on the one hand, I'd like to hear you talk a little bit about how the City of Detroit was impacted by emergency management. So, like, what that looks like in the city so that folks can have a clear understanding...

AC: Yeah.

PB: ...as well as your own community, how it's impacted by emergency management. And then afterwards, I want to get into talking about, like, community opposition to...

AC: Okay.

PB: What your experience would be to that. But, if you could start with how Detroit was impacted.

AC: Yeah, so you can--it's not just emergency management. You have to analyze it with... Perhaps in the short, you could say Detroit was impacted by emergency management and the 2008 financial crisis because Detroit had an incredibly strong case. Even Judge Rhodes said this himself, that Detroit had among cities one of the strongest cases to sue the financial institutions who were responsible for the 2008 financial crisis. So, it's not holding those financial institutions accountable that's like one of the main essential crimes of the emergency management law. It's holding the city individually responsible for the systemic failures in the structural economic changes in the country.

So, that's like the short of it, but on an individual basis in terms of what it impacts people, there's a spike in CPS [Child Protective Services] cases, kids getting taken

from their parents. There's a spike in, obviously, poverty, people losing their homes, families getting divorces, people fighting over money. A lot of times--so, a big part of the emergency management policies have been to take away people's pensions globally. That's kind of one of the--so, again, it's like capital is looking for places it can rob from. Education community, that's public money that private capital wants to get access to. Pensions, public pools of money that are meant for the greater good that private--the private system wants to get its teeth into. So, like in Detroit's situation, you have a grandmother who is on the block in the hood, holding it down for an entire family. She gets her pension taken away. She, who was a cornerstone of, you know, perhaps like, you know, the grandkids live with her. So many people are impacted by grandma losing her pension.

So, the human impacts of it are seen--there's like a *World Socialist* newspaper article that came out describing the human impacts of emergency management. It's the only article I'd seen of its kind, you know. Every other article is just, like, not looking at the structure of things. But, yeah, there's so many like increased incidences of, you know, like child welfare or--it looks like, you know, kids going to school dirty because they can't...their water's shut off. It looks like, you know, the dispersal of communities because of public...because of the... So, there's an emergency management of the city, and there's an emergency management of the education system. So, it looks like a school closing down in a neighborhood, and those kids being scattered all about everywhere. It looks like, you know, kids who grow...who went to a majority people of color school then going to the suburbs and then having insecurity about being Black or brown or not liking their skin or not liking their hair or not liking their eye color.

And, these are all really small things that there aren't studies to understand the...the deep emotional traumatic impact that people have felt because of these crises. Very, very few studies. But like, you can see some of the, you know, some of the actual numbers like by DHS [Department of Human Services] cases and those sorts of things. But, it's just stress, pain, trauma to people, families, communities, and physically it looks like houses getting torn down, getting burnt down, neighborhoods looking like shit, to the deterioration of the social fabric of a community. It's essentially the privatization of the public sphere all around. I mean, that's like the shortest way to describe it. Human misery would be the answer to that question though.

[0:36:07]

PB: So, you mentioned that you were involved in DREM [Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management]. Can you tell a little bit about... Like, walk us through the emergence of DREM, your involvement. I really want to, like, get an insight into that organization. So, like, where it's coming from and what's some of, like, the guiding like philosophies, ideologies of the organization are.

AC: Yeah, so it was really like pretty reactionary initially. When the bankruptcy was happening, we actually had the firefighters and police unions on board with us initially. It was a really, really powerful little coalition for a little while, but it's hard to decide an action with so many people in the space. That's one little reflection point. But, DREM kind of formed in response to the emergency management kind of being...coming out and the city giving away essentially the control of the city to Jones Day. I mean, Jones Day essentially became the government of Detroit for a number of years. So, as soon as the bankruptcy process was happening, we kind of came together. Some of our first actions were the Motown Slowdown, and that was where we essentially shut down the freeways.

Let me back up a little bit actually. So, who was in DREM? So, there was like police and fire unions, there was folks who were losing their pensions, there were people from social justice organizations like NAN [National Action Network], you know, Michigan Welfare Rights [Organization], and we were--so, the Raiz Up Collective, hip hop and art collective that I was a part of, we were just like a hip hop group, you know. We met in 2012 kind of when all these things were unfolding, and as like the little radical economist in our group or whatever I was like, "Yo, we need to get that...we need to get involved with this. We need to throw down with this. We need to, like, you know, supply some art, and we need to like push this, push this conversation in our community and push the analysis and push that messaging to, you know, to the grassroots, to the neighborhoods, to the communities, to the people." So, that's kind of the role that Raiz Up was playing in that space was helping, you know, organize around the arts side of these things.

But, we...yeah. So, there was a bunch of actions we took. The Motown Slowdown was one of them, and that was essentially we all got in our cars--so, if you...a majority of people who work in the city live in the suburbs, and the suburb and the city is designed in a way that the freeways are sunken in--they're concave--so you can drive through, in and out of Detroit every day, and have no idea the material, like, impact of emergency management on people's lives. You can't see it because you're in these little sunken freeways. So, we were like, "How do we make this hurt for all those suburban people who the social economic power comes from?"--which is, like, you know, white Michigan, especially west Michigan, DeVos country--"They should hurt too if we're hurting." So, our idea was on the people's way to work, we'll shut down the freeway and make people late. So, that's what we did. We organized like six cars deep, and we all went onto the freeway on the same time and all drove one or two miles an hour and caused a big traffic jam. And in order so that people knew that we were protesting emergency management, we hung banners on the freeway--along the freeway--and I painted a bunch of those banners, and I drove in the Motown Slowdown. So, that was one of our actions.

Another action was--so, there was a time when the city government actually didn't have any power, but they were formally accepting...giving Jones Day control of the government. So, we interrupted that meeting. Like, we tried to shut down that meeting, and we just, like, did a civil disobedience there at that actual meeting, and that's where I met my beekeeping buddy, Luke [Mattson]. So, we ended up starting a beekeeping co-op later, but, yeah. So, that was an action.

A lot of education. So, the Raiz Up, kind of our role was more...we had helped organize community events by bringing people together with music and art and asking them what their experience in tackling one aspect of the crisis, you know. So, we did an emergency management. We did a Raiz Up on housing, we did a Raiz Up on...a Raiz Up event on immigration, we did a Raiz Up event on education, you know, so people could come and share their stories and share their things and hear some of the structural systemic side of it a bit, a little bit of education. But, really, it's like popular education. That's kind of the style that we were kind of going for quite a bit more because--I think this is something I firmly, firmly believe is that the oppressed and the marginal and people who come from impoverished have a much deeper and realer understanding of the United States on a fundamental level, whereas if you grow up on the suburbs with the American

dream, you tend to center your own experiences and, thus, you think that everything is like that. So, like, when you grow up in the margins, you actually have a real, true fundamental understanding about the nature of the beast in the United States. So, that was kind of our idea, and popular education was a way to help shed light on people's...was to help look at people's lived experiences and connect it with bigger systems. So, that...I think that was a big thrust of our work.

We organized a big--with ill [ill Weaver] and a bunch of other folks--but it was like getting the young generation on board with emergency management because that was like one of the big issues we found was the people who were most aware and engaged on this issue were elder, people whose pensions were at threat, peoples' homes were at threat. Young folks, millennials, if you don't have shit, [laughter] so we don't have much skin in the game. So, we also aren't, like, thinking about these bigger structures either. You know, like, we're hoping that things get better after the bankruptcy, you know. It's like... So, we organized a big event that was like a forum at the Northwest Activities Center where we centered art and, you know, community and music as a way to get young people to start thinking about these issues.

Another project I was involved with was working with Beehive Collective--the Beehive Design Collective--using some of their maps as a way to analyze Detroit, and we had begun to like try and do a Beehive map project on Detroit, but they ended up losing funding. So, that was another like little project I was very engaged in. Yeah, there's a lot of...a lot of stuff. And, we were trying to use art, you know, that was kind of our--my specialty. It was just like coming with creative ways to engage on these issues.

[0:43:13]

PB: How would you describe the structure of DREM as...

AC: Yeah. So, the structure of DREM was a coalition, you know. It was a coalition organization, so. That was also one of the difficult things of it because you'd have one or two representatives from an organization there, and they were making

decisions with a larger body, and everybody's, like, self-interest didn't quite align and match up, so. That was definitely one of the bigger stressors and difficulties organizing as a coalition. Essentially, it's like People's Water Board's coalition organization. It wasn't like a formal structure, no non-profit status, no anything. It was people who were trying to fight emergency management so they came together, shared common analysis, shared common ideas, and shared some organizing tactics together, but, you know, not necessarily all of it.

[0:44:02]

OY: Can I ask something?

PB: Yeah, please.

OY: You mentioned earlier that, like, basically initially you were in DREM--sorry--you were like organizing with police and fire departments and stuff like that. Do you think that that caused any issues with people being comfort--or feeling comfortable with organizing? 'Cause I know you were saying there were some disagreements that...especially considering like the history behind that.

AC: Yeah, they were only at the table for a short while, and at that point I don't think it made too many people like that uncomfortable, you know, because it was more like potentially a tool of, like, good organizing. It could have been, you know, if we had, like, mobilized them better. There was kind of like a...like a class solidarity among everybody, and I'm somebody who would be afraid of that because, like, I was doing graffiti. That was another side of, like, my work is like the contributions with graffiti. I can talk about that in a second, but, I mean, all the things that I do are illegal. I mean, like [laughs] I also like spent a lot of time selling weed, I mean, growing up. Like, that's like I've been in the medical marijuana field since before it was medical marijuana. So, like, as somebody who's like--and my passion art was, like, graffiti, so like the two things that were all of me are as illegal as fuck, so like [laughs], yeah.

If anybody should've been uncomfortable, it should have been me, but I was not uncomfortable because I saw, like, they were coming there not as cops, not as police, not as, you know, people who manage law. They're coming there as people who are getting fucked over the same way everybody else is. So, yeah, I don't--and then also, I think people who had the analysis weren't at the table that that much. You know, so groups like BYP [Black Youth Project] hadn't really formed just yet. A lot of those folks were still in college I think. So, yeah, I mean I can see how that could be a thing, but, like they were--and also, they were only at the table for maybe a month, and they kind of began negotiating with the emergency manager and, thus, were less inclined to participate in a meaningful way, even though they were getting screwed over as the pensioners were. Yeah, so, yeah. But, I want to touch on the graffiti piece of it.

[0:46:17]

PB: Yeah, I want to come back to that if that's okay.

AC: Yeah, yeah, that's fine.

PB: I'm hoping we can talk more broadly about the role of art in social...

AC: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

PB: But, I want to wrap up the talk of emergency management just with asking about some lessons you learned or some of the successes and shortcomings...

AC: Yeah.

PB: ...that you would take away from the organizing against...with DREM?

AC: Yeah. I like the bird dogging tactic. I don't think we implemented it well enough or systemically enough. And there was also a lot of players to--who to go after, but I think, like, making these white people who were taking over Detroit uncomfortable in their own homes and communities was really important. Man, like, it was so difficult to get out the city's narrative because of this, like, anti-Black understanding of the structural nature of Detroit's crisis or the individualist nature of Detroit's crisis was so deep, that people just were...had it in their mind that the city council was incompetent and it was Detroiters' fault. So, I think combating that narrative was super, super, super important, but it's really difficult to explain everything that I've discussed already about economics to the general public, much less a racist suburb who have a fixed idea about Detroit in their mind. So, that narrative piece is really, really vital.

I don't think that we necessarily mobilized with suburban allies, but I didn't see that many suburban allies. You know, like, I think one tendency of folks in the city is to, like, think about the city, but, like, the city is a metropolitan area that's like five million people deep. So, it's like we were really trying to mobilize Detroiters more than engaging with suburban potential partners or allies. Detroit has that big... So, man, meetings would always end up being places where people would vent because there aren't spaces for people to vent. You know, so that's like one of things, I think, like, is...is...is a deep, deep need is to separate organizing and social movement spaces from venting, complaining--which is valid. I think people... Like, it's very valid. People like understand and come to a collective analysis on the problems by talking about them, but so many times the actual movement space would get hijacked by people talking about that.

I gotta believe there was some sort of, like, FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] activity happening in there as well. I gotta believe there was some sort of, like, disruptive sort of activity because, like, there were certainly times where the meetings would get extremely derailed by, you know, a random person saying X, Y, and Z, or a random person coming in and, like, jacking funding and public spotlight on things. Like, one example is that during the water fights this guy, Justin Wedes, who was like kind of like someone who came from the Occupy [movement] but like had big problems with Occupy. He came and started raising a ton of money around the water shutoffs. You know, totally unaccountable--he was using it. So, there was a lot of the crisis, you know, people banking on the crisis too, so we... Detroit's social movement community is really loose. Like, when there's a shitty

problematic actor in the community, we give them way too much room and way too much space in the city, and we don't, like, get rid of them quick enough or deal with them quick enough.

I'm trying to think of other takeaway lessons. I mean, expediency was like something I think we missed quite a bit. And, it's...it's...it's... With emergency management, it's so hard to find, like, where exactly are the levers of power. You know, where exactly do you go and shut shit down? So, that was, like, a really difficult...it was like the diffuse nature of which...of which that was happening and the privatized nature in which these pivotal conversations around the city were happening, and it happened so fucking fast. I mean, it was incredibly fast. Like, we were fighting the Hantz land grabs. We were fighting, you know, Mike Ilitch's stuff. We were fighting--so, because the emergency manage--so, it's like every capitalist with any idea was getting their project done by negotiating directly with the emergency manager, which is, like, really the benefit of emergency management at the end of the day, is, like, if you have an idea, you can negotiate with the city council and be forced to pay community benefits, be forced to pay high, you know, actual value of buildings. You'd be forced to, you know, actually negotiate with people who are getting...who are selling you this thing. But with this emergency management process, you could negotiate directly with a dictator who had very, very little interest in actually working with the city.

And, there was, like, a fundamental issue with the fact that... So, if on an individual basis, if I'm going into bankruptcy, my bankruptcy lawyer negotiates for me with my lenders. With the emergency management situation, Jones Day represents both the lenders--the creditors--and the city, and the creditors are the people who are paying Jones Day way the hell more than the city is, so obviously Jones Day was looking out for the interest of the creditors more than they were looking out for the interest of the city. So, I think, like, connecting Detroit's situation more with like Occupy Wall Street, with like the anti-financial sentiment that was very strong at the time because of the Obama bailout, I think that would've been a really powerful tactic that I don't think we necessarily took advantage of. But, again, that's like very abstract, you know. It's not like we're like in New York where that's happening, you know.

One thing that I thought was really cool that I think was a super risking tactic--[laughs] so, I grew up in...I went to Detroit Catholic Central. Of my three best friends at Catholic Central--this is, like, incidental, not like intentional--one of him, his dad was a retired DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] agent who busted George Jung and was, like, he was the chief of police in Plymouth [Michigan]. Another one, his dad was on the FBI entry squad for Dearborn [Michigan] Police. Another one, John Cox, his dad [Sean Cox] was the judge who took over the water case. He took over for Judge [John] Feikens, and his uncle was attorney general [Mike Cox]. Mike Duggan's son was in my homeroom in high school. So, I have a personal relationship with all of these, like, the children of the elite, you know. And Detroit being like an immigrant city, a lot of like Irish and being Catholic. So, Detroit Catholic Central is a place where these immigrant children are. [Laughs]

One time, when we were--during the emergency...during the water--so like, the emergency management kind of struggle, a lot of the energy got moved into the water shutoffs, and, like, the water became a proxy for engaging in the emergency management conversation. So, [laughs] we like--I don't know if this should be on tape, but we actually like--so, I know where Judge Cox lives, you know. So, like, we went to his house and chalked up in front of his house, like, "Stop the shutoffs," and, like, we were... Like, the idea was like shaming him to his community, you know. Yeah, so. My friend called me, and he's like--they made the connection. Their family made the connection. He called me, and he's like, "Did you go to my parents' house and chalk in front of their house because"--and he's like, "Yeah, because the federal police were involved." Like the ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives]--no, not that ATF, what was it? Who are those agents who are like the federal police? But, they were involved, and I'm like, "Oh, my God." [Laughs] I was like, "Damn. Did I fuck up with that one?" I denied it all day, but like, yeah, we did that for sure. We chalked in front of Judge Cox's house.

I mean, I would spend the night there, you know. Like, I knew these people, and to know that, like, somebody that I had this, like, opportunity to humanize was responsible for shutting off families' water was really, really trippy for me, you know. Like, really, really trippy because I could see the human impact of people getting a water shutoff. It was crazy. So, yeah, I felt the need to make it personal there because I had a personal relationship, and I'm like, "Why not?" [Laughs] You

know, like why not? But, that might've been a risky tactic on the radical side of things.

[0:54:31]

PB: I think that's a good segue to take us into talking about art.

AC: Yeah.

PB: Do you have anything that you wanted to ask from that?

OY: No.

PB: So, I do want to come back to water, but since we're here, could you kind of just lay out for us how you...like, what you envision or what your analysis of the role and the importance of art within social movements?

AC: Yeah.

PB: And then, maybe, like, segue that into a discussion of, like, some of the work that you've done in those things.

AC: Yeah. I'm more broadly--in regard to art and social movement and the role of it in community organizing, it's like a glue, you know. Culture is something that cannot be controlled. You know, there's attempts at it, but people generally can recognize when culture vultures are there faking the funk, you know. So, art is culture, you know. It's an expression of aesthetics and beauty and sound and all of the things that are rich and meaningful in life. You know, art like is the color to the coloring book, you know, where organizing might be the lines, but art is like the crayons, it's like the paint, it's the...it's what gives things energy, life, vitality. And,

again, it’s something that we are in charge and we control because we produce, we make, we--I mean, we’re brilliant. I mean, Detroit is famous for the creative expression that comes from this place, you know, like, people like Jessica Care Moore, Motown. I mean, it’s just like legendary.

And for me, graffiti was my...my venue, you know. So, I was a part of a hip hop and art collective, and graffiti was my hip hop. There’s five elements to hip hop. It’s knowledge--and I was kind of on the knowledge side too--knowledge, break dancing, graffiti, emceeing, and DJ. Those are the five elements of hip hop, and Detroit’s also a famous hip hop community too. I think that would have been another thing that we...we had talked about engaging more, but we never really came around to it. We really wanted to create an actual, like, soundtrack for--against the emergency management resisting work, and we tried to begin organizing it, but like, again, we were chasing so many different areas it just didn’t get prioritized enough. And, I don’t make music, you know, so I just like organize people.

So, my role with graffiti is I would just like tag stuff all over the city. I mean, I love climbing. I’m kind of like a thrill seeker in a lot of ways. Like, so like there’s a lot of abandoned buildings. Like, I painted the entire face of the Douglass-Brewster project. That was like a 16 story building. I painted the Park Hotel which was here in Midtown. I painted “Zombieland” on the top of that building. And for me, that was kind of like abstract a little bit, but like for me Zombieland was a calling out of the Ilitch family because the Ilitches intentionally slummed out the southern part of the Cass Corridor generationally, like over a 30 or 40 year period. And the Illitches are a perfect example of, like, the way capitalists took advantage of emergency management to push through things that they couldn’t push through with a proper city council that would say, “No, motherfucker, you’re gonna pay us for this stuff.” So, the Ilitches were essentially slumming that area out to devalue the prices so they could continue to buy more, enough that they could build that stupid stadium. So, there’s this, like, graffiti artist named Loaf, who’s now dead, who told me that the people around there are like zombies. And I’m like, “Damn, that’s fucked up and dehumanizing.” But, that’s intentional. That’s structural. That’s created by the Illitches, maintained by, you know, even non-profit institutions that are doing homeless work down there.

And then, again, like, the decentralization and privatization of the mental health care industry is a whole other separate story that, you know, starts at a federal level, kind of gets pushed by Governor [John] Engler, and, yeah, that's a big, big, big, big one. I'm actually writing a paper on that. But, so the end of that is, like, there's a lot of homeless people in that area. So, I wrote "Zombieland" on the top of that building to, like, to highlight the juxtaposition of that southern part of the Cass Corridor where it's like all parking lots for the stadiums and shit like that...like where zombies are walking around versus, like, the wealthy elites or like the Fox Theater, Tiger Stadium. All this development is happening right on the other side of the freeway, but on the other side is like slummed-out houses, slummed-out buildings, and that was intentional because they were using shell companies to buy out buildings and slum them out. So, that was one piece that I did that like had a big, big social--and people didn't really get it because zombies were really popular at the time, and like I think people were just like, "Oh, Zombieland. That's like really cool."

Other big pieces that I did, there's a bunch of buildings downtown where I tagged like "Decolonize" on the top of the buildings. I tagged "Decolonize'' on the top of a lot of water towers too, and that for me was a message against emergency management as well because the way I look at emergency management is it's neocolonialism. I mean, so after World War I and II when the...everything was in decline, the United States was saying, "Hey, England, get the fuck out of all your colonial possessions." Like, it was like the decolonial movement was happening in Africa and all over the world in the 1950s and [19]60s and that period. So, the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank were neocolonialism because it was the way that the United States was introducing new colonial activities through financial means. So, I look at what was happening in Detroit as neocolonialism and neoliberalism. It's like both, you know, in the same place. So, I would tag "Decolonize" on buildings as a way to, like, put the finger in the man's, you know, eyeball. And, again, this is like narratives. We had a lot of difficulty getting out our narratives, so I was tagging "Decolonize" at a time when Detroit was going into bankruptcy because that is a counter-narrative to what's happening in the city.

[1:00:29]

And, I mean, like...reductionist with colonialism sometimes, but I just see a lot of parallels. I mean, I think it's no...it's not incidental that people don't know the Indigenous name to this land, which is Waawiyaataanong. It's not incidental that people don't know the Anishinaabe peoples' name. So, when I do education work, I bring that into the analysis because it's super, super important. Like, if we forget why and how these things happened, we're, you know, gonna repeat those same issues. So, art for me, like, has to reflect the times. It has to reflect the...what's happening at that moment. And for me, it was like a way to sort of like oppose things, you know. Another example is the culture's... We ended Columbus Day in the city, and the year before we actually got the resolution to end Columbus Day, I put an ax in Columbus's head downtown, and I put, like, tempera paint all over it so it was like a bloody ax in the middle of the Columbus statue. Again, like, we don't have to celebrate Columbus Day in the city of Detroit. We have a choice to decide what our culture looks like. We may not choose if the foreclosures are happening, we may not be able to choose if the emergency manager is going down, but we damn sure can choose, you know, the sort of art and the sort of culture and the things we celebrate and the things we uplift in our community.

And, again, with the graffiti, it's like we're forced to look at advertisement all the fucking time that are so meaningless, and if you ask a kid, you know, kids know the jingles to corporations more than they know trees and plants and anything, more than they probably know their grandparents' or great-grandparents' names. I mean, so we're inundated with this bullshit all the time. And for me, like, if I...if I'm gonna put a message up, I don't want it to just be my name. I want it to be something meaningful that might, like, put an impression in people's mind. So, that was really important for me.

But, even the graffiti space becomes an interesting space in which we can look at the neoliberalism. The... So, we were--me and Lucka, William Lucka--were arrested for painting "Free the Water" on a water tower at Davison [Freeway] and [I] 75, and that was like in 2014 I think, November 2014. And at that same time, Mike Duggan had started this thing called the Graffiti Task Force, and the Graffiti Task Force was a...was a bunch of prosecutors that were trying to go after graffiti artists. So, they charged us with like a 70,000 dollars fine. We had like 14 felonies, most of which were Lucka's because, like, Lucka was a prolific graffiti artist, and there were like...two or three of those were mine. And, yeah, we tagged that on that water tower, and we got busted climbing down. Like, the sunset was coming

up, and it was so beautiful, and we, like, hung around just a little bit too long on the water tower, like, tagging it up and painting things. So then, we got busted on the way down, got arrested and put into Highland Park's [Michigan] jail.

But with the Graffiti Task Force, like, that thing was like ruining people's lives. I mean, when I mentioned Loaf earlier, he was arrested by the Graffiti Task Force. He didn't have a good lawyer like we did, so when he got arrested, he went to jail and spent like a year and a half in jail. And when he came out, he overdosed like two weeks later. And, I look at like Lucka as another example of somebody who was like deeply impacted by the Graffiti Task Force. He--without putting too much of his business out here--he grew up in a single mother home with someone who had deep addiction. So, he was like a super--what do they call it? Like, child on the edge? There's a word that they use. But, he was a high-risk kid or whatever. During our case, he started using...started using drugs, and that was really hard to me to watch someone that I was, like, mentoring and was like a good close friend begin to use drugs, and I think that was related to the stress of his case, but more broadly related to, you know, his whole lifelong experience with addiction being so intimate and close to him to kind of follow that pathway of his mom and his family. He's...he's actually in the hospital right now, actually. He's been homeless [sighs; pause]. So, he had ARDS [Acute respiratory distress syndrome], which is like he had bad pneumonia, and he has a lot of other issues. Like, being a kid who grew up living off like corner store food, he's had a lot of, like, stomach issues, and part of his drug use is, like, treating some of his pain, and he went in to talk about his stomach, but it ended up being that his lungs were filling with fluid. He almost died. He's been in the ICU.

But, yeah, there's a lot of people who were impacted by the Graffiti Task Force and, I mean, like, during the emergency management period, the city--the police department was consulting with the Manhattan Group which is...who designed the stop-and-frisk policies in New York. And, it's kind of like within this like broken windows policing. [sighs]

[1:06:43; jump cut]

PB: So, we were talking about Lucka.

AC: Yeah, but the... So, the city was consulting with the Manhattan Group, which is...they're the people who came up with New York's stop-and-frisk policy. So, their idea is like broken windows policing. The idea is like if you can change the aesthetics of a community, you can somehow actually end and change the crime levels of a community. So, when [Mike] Duggan took over, the city kind of was like a graffiti mecca. Like, it was like because of the divestment and the police forces being concentrated downtown, it was a free-for-all on the walls in the city. So, Detroit became super-graffitied out in like a matter of like six or seven years, and the Graffiti Task Force came about to essentially punish everybody that was involved in that activity and to, yeah, to end that graffiti, you know, sort of lifestyle.

And, that was very much modelled off of what happened in New York and the way New York tackled graffiti as well. You know, there's like very, very little graffiti in the city of New York except for the impoverished areas, and it's the same thing in Detroit now. I mean, you can go into Delray and the industrial areas and there's plenty of graff. You can go into some broke, poor neighborhoods on the East Side, and there's still a lot of graff, but there's graff everywhere in the city for a while. And, it's--I'm not saying it's fully uncommendable because some graff artists are really unethical with their graffiti and are just tagging, you know, bullshit things or just their names in different places, which is fine, you know. I think... I don't like to throw shade at it, but yeah.

So, the Graffiti Task Force came for a lot of people, and Lucka and Loaf are two people who you could definitely say were, you know, negatively impacted by the Graffiti Task Force in a deep way. Yeah, so, our case. We got so much community support for our case. You know, we had a lawyer paid off. We had, like, you know, tons of people sign petitions and, you know, come to pack the courtrooms for our case, and we ended up with a really, really pliant, amenable, cool-ass judge who handled our case. He actually passed away too, which is unfortunate, but yeah. So, we came out in a good position. We only had to take--and the city actually, they tried to negotiate with us to narc out other graffiti artists. So, they provided us with like a bunch of names of graff artists, and they said, "Will you tell us who they are? Will you give us the actual, like, human name to the tag name?" And, we refused, refused, refused. They tried to offer us deals like a year in jail and

some fine, and we took it all the way to trial, and the trial--just the day of the trial--it's really difficult to actually prove that people did X, Y, and Z graffiti and because my graffiti, I didn't tag my name over and over again. I tagged a huge variety of things. They didn't connect 90 percent of my graffiti to me, but Lucka was tagging--what was it--Astro everywhere. So, like, when we tagged the water tower, he had tagged Astro on the back of the water tower, and they connected his name with, you know, with his identity. So, they had a ton of felonies out for him. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

He's definitely--and I hope it's a wake-up call for him going through this, like, near-death experience with ARDS and being in the hospital. You know, there's so many people really want to see him do better, but it's really hard to overcome an entire lifetime of neural pathways that teach you how to live on the street and teach you that, like, handling your pain is substances, you know.

[1:10:35]

PB: Do you see a connection--speak like--I wanted to talk a little bit about the Graffiti Task Force and like some of the other topics we've been talking about. Do you see a connection between the Graffiti Task Force and this broader process of gentrification that's been happening over the past decade or more?

AC: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, all of it's deeply connected. I mean, when people talk about gentrification... So, the Graffiti Task Force is definitely, like, an extension of gentrification, and Mike Duggan himself is a gentrifying mayor. You know, like, there's been...there hasn't been a mayor that's more powerful than him. Like, he was able to... He helped choose the emergency manager himself. Like, he was part of making that decision-making process. So, Mike Duggan is, like, super, super... Like, he's like... I'd say he's the suburbs' mayor, you know. He's like Livonia's [Michigan] mayor. Like, he represents their interests in the City of Detroit. So, he... All of that's part of gentrification.

Gentrification, people often reduce it to just the presence of white people in impoverished communities pushing people out, but you have to connect it with

the schools shutting down, shutting down schools. You have to connect it with people getting their houses foreclosed upon because all of those institutions and systems play into the ability of--well, of our communities, literally between 2000--like, I think, 2001 and 2000...I think [20]16?--50 percent of all Black wealth in the entire country disappeared. I mean, so if you're not including that in the equation, you have to include race. It's all...all of these things are part of gentrification, and the Graffiti Task Force is making white people feel safe, you know, by changing the aesthetics of the community. That's what broken windows policing is all about too. I mean, it's about it looks shitty with graff on it, and people are not comfortable to invest, live, grow, do whatever in a space that looks like this.

So, who is it for? Like, you let it decline. You let graff proliferate. You concentrate resources in downtown away from the city, police resources. And, I'll be honest, most graff artists are white boys from the suburbs. Most of them, 90 percent of them. Maybe not 90. 60 at least. At least 60, maybe more. Yeah, so, I don't... The Graffiti Task Force was like, yeah, it was just a public way. I mean, Mike Duggan ended up playing with the graffiti narrative the entire time. During his...on the way up to his election, allegedly somebody painted pro-Duggan graffiti, which is the dumbest shit in the world. There's probably like his son or some toy--toy is a derogatory term for a shitty graff artist--because it was like really crappy graff and, like, there was an article that came out showing him painting it over, and this is like where him...he's getting ready to announce this, like, new policy in the Graffiti Task Force and things like that.

So, even at the onset of his campaign, like, graffiti was one of the things he wanted to tackle in the city. And, I mean, in terms of like even Detroit folks, like older folks, respectability is sort of...is like a deep thing within like...sort of like within the old sort of like religious culture in Detroit. So, if you can radically change the way this community looks, that like makes a difference to people. And, I think some people actually really like that, you know. I think there's...that you'd probably find a lot of people who would like that because, you know, I mean, some graff definitely is violating, you know. Some graff is, you know, on buildings in places that are like active, and it's really difficult to wash and clean it off, but the way Mike Duggan did it was also like super fucked up because he started enforcing these codes that essentially placed the onus for cleaning up the graffiti on the individual building owners who were penalized with blight tickets.

And, the sad part of that is so much old graffiti like mural history was erased because the owner of the building was threatened with a blight ticket. So like, there was some legal sanctioned, acceptable art and graff that was erased because of these blight tickets that went out everywhere, which I think is super fucked up. I mean, like...like one example is called the heat wall in Southwest Detroit. It was a wall over by Nuevo Leon taqueria--or tamaleria. It's over there like right by the train station, and, you know, they had like this wall that was like legendary, had all these old Southwest Detroit graff artists. You know, just really beautiful old pieces. Some of them weren't, like, you know, the best looking at this point in time, but that entire wall got whitewashed because the owner of the building got charged with a blight ticket. So, yeah, it's super messed up.

There was a lot of beautiful art that was actually erased in that time period. Even with, like, the graff stuff, like, I often connect it with the fact that they've been, like, divesting from art. I mean, like art and music have been taken away in this like austere moment that Detroit's in, which is, you know, again, like sharing of resources. Detroit's one of the richest metropolitan areas in the country, and for them, for this metropolitan area, to allow Detroit to go into bankruptcy is just deeply anti-Black in and of itself. Yeah, so, I mean, the Graffiti Task Force is definitely just like a...it's deeply connected with gentrification, which is connected with everything else. You can't remove, you know, all of those other systems from gentrification.

[1:15:58]

PB: So, keeping with this vein, could you tell us a little bit about the foundation and about the Raiz Up?

AC: Yeah.

PB: And also, I think it might be impactful in this medium if you could share an example or two of some ways in which you see the artist and cultural work that you're doing inspired by political consciousness because that's what I'm hearing

from a lot of what you're saying is that's the goal. If you could share an example or two of where you saw that come into fruition, I think that would be really powerful.

AC: Yeah. So, the Raiz Up came together in 2012. [Sacramento] Knoxx and Eddi [Gonzales] and another founder, Vicente, this hip hop named Subverso. He's like a Chilean hip hop artist. They were doing a workshop at the Allied Media Conference about hip hop, socially engaged hip hop, and Eddi and Knoxx--Sacramento Knoxx--were part of a group called Dirty Politics. So, that was kind of a forebearer of the Raiz Up in a lot of ways, and a lot of those folks came out of Detroit's Hispanic Development Corporation, so that's kind of like the lineage of the Raiz Up quite a bit. A lot of those folks were involved in DHDC, and then there was like they evolved and were involved in Dirty Politics. And then, myself, Candace [Curtis-Cavazos], who's a U of M [University of Michigan] student from Southwest Detroit, and Vicente kind of all came in as people who were not part of scene, and we together--me, Candace, Knoxx, Vicente, and Eddie and Amelia [Duran]--eventually formed the core of the Raiz Up. It was like five or six of us.

And then, we had, like, a broader core of like maybe eight to 10 people who were like loosely involved with the collective, and a lot of it also was born out of this radical feminist Chicana house that was like happening. There were a lot of them who were, like, graduates from Michigan State University. My friend Gabrielle Salucasad (??), Jasmine (??), this girl Sara Voltelle (??). So, we'd all meet there, hang out, smoke, chill, talk about things that were happening in the city, like, a group of millennials. You know, all young people, all like, you know, often in non-profit world doing youth work, doing X, Y, Z, making music, making art. And, we just came together around the idea of doing art in a public way and taking up public space, and I think that's something that's really important in...in...in that area where we were organizing and doing our work in Southwest Detroit is the Clark Park, Mexicantown area is really contested territories.

I mean, it's...the gentrification happens in places where there's really good housing stock. White people know how to buy the right houses, and they like, you know, fix them up and whatever. So, that area, there's a community there called Hubbard Farms named after Bela Hubbard, who's kind of a shitty person, but

that's beside the point. Yeah, like, so the Raiz Up kind of...in our ways, we were, like, fighting gentrification. One thing... People weren't talking about gentrification in Southwest Detroit very much in 2012 and 2013. It just like hadn't broken into the public discourse very much.

So, some of our members--there was a mural that was painted by the Hygienic Dress League, which is, like, these suburban white folks who they're all over the country, but I think they kind of have a social justice mission. But like, I can't stand the aesthetics of their art, and I think it's insulting. They paint, like, white people holding...wearing gas masks that are gold or different weird colors, holding like pigeons, and it's like...it's just very strange art. And in Southwest Detroit, we have a lot of art that's very cultural and relevant to our community. So when that mural came up on the wall, we were like--and then, the guys who owned it were kind of like some gentrifiers who were trying to rename a part of Southwest Detroit as, like, Corktown Shores. So, they were trying to like rebrand the neighborhood. They were a kind of...we perceived that group to be a gentrifying force. They were opening up a new restaurant in Southwest, in Mexicantown. They painted a mural that we thought was ugly there. So, we tagged up that mural. Like, really folks in the Raiz Up tagged it up, and they painted, like, "Stop Gentrification, No More Homogenization of Our Community," blah, blah, blah, blah. Like, you know, these messages.

And, that ignited a shit storm of media around that conversation. I have like little clippings of some of the comments. If you want to see the most depraved part of humanity, read the comments section in the article. Just the deep anti-Blackness. People are like, "There's no way that somebody from Detroit would've understand the word 'homogenization.' It's too big of a word for them to use." Somebody said--and I'd have to read it, but I'm paraphrasing--somebody in an article wrote, "You can't have it both ways. If you want control of your community,"--he's almost saying it to Black people--"we'll take our resources elsewhere and let Detroit go into squalor and poverty and fight each other and, like, maintain third-world status," or whatever. It was just like deep, deeply anti-Black. Like, basically like, gentrification is automatic, and if you are pushing back against that, we'll take our white money and go elsewhere. I mean, that was like that person's post. It's terrible. So, us tagging this build...this...tagging up this mural really ignited this conversation around gentrification in Southwest Detroit that really was...it was happening among like some...some places. It was like bubbling up, but tagging

that really elevated the level of dialog around that in the community and became a big prominent issue for a number of years. And, yeah, that's a way you can attack art and take away from art and still speak really loudly about a lot of issues.

Another way we kind of adjust gentrification with art was--and this was kind of more of a DREM thing, but Raiz Up, a number of us were involved in this project--Dan Gilbert has this like Opportunity Detroit sort of thing. That's his branding everywhere, kind of like very shitty, shitty neoliberal messaging. But, we tagged over his... Instead of Opportunity Detroit, we put like Gentrify Detroit. So, we tagged the black over it, and then we put a stencil that said "Gentrify," and we did to a bunch of his banners downtown at the new Hudson's, the new Hudson's site, and they took down his banners. I mean, that was like a little thing. This is like a poke in the face of Dan Gilbert.

But, yeah, one of the things I'm most proud about the Raiz Up is seeing the young folks who, you know, we created a space for them to, like, practice their art. Seeing them, like, flourish and go on to make art and just be generally like good, conscious, aware people, you know. I mean, that's... I'm super proud of that, but it's like it's hard to measure the impact of elevating people's analysis and awareness, you know. So, yeah, it's like I can only see it in the people I continue to maintain contact with. I mean, that... In a materials-like sense, Columbus Day was the last thing the Raiz Up did before we kind of like dissolved quite a bit. Like, we're all like--I mean, not all of us. We're not all friends anymore, but most of us are still in pretty good communication and good repertoire, but we just like all have moved to other things.

But, yeah, the Columbus Day in 2017 was the last thing we did together as a group and that was, like, I think to me that was like a really impactful thing in terms of switching up a narrative, and I think one legacy thing that I'm still organizing around is this decolonial solidarity feast where we're trying to get...bring together the Black and the Indigenous community on the day before Columbus Day to have just a big gathering. I mean, I think there's like Michigan's Indigenous community...it's something...there's something deeply decolonial about Indigenous and African solidarity because I think it's fundamental to the...to the outset of this nation. Like, if you had to like--I often use this equation as like red lands plus Black labor equals white gold. And, like, without that equation, if you're

trying to understand race in America, you're doing it from a colorblind perspective, which I think is, like, really poor, poor analysis. This is a big debate around post-modernism these days, but yeah.

[1:24:40]

PB: So, that kind of segues--we're starting to run short on time, but there are like a couple things I want to make sure that we touch on.

AC: Yeah.

PB: I think that that last point you made kind of segues into asking about your feelings about more recent organization with Southwest Grows. So, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about Southwest Grows, but also in the frame of like how your understanding and the importance of our relationship with lands...

AC: Yeah.

PB: **...**and what...and how that's involved with your identities and what that means for liberation circles in Detroit.

AC: Yeah. So, land, identity, ancestry, all of these things are deeply connected, and for Black and brown people in the United States, we have a lot of trauma with land, and we have a lot of trauma with agriculture. My grandpa was a sugar cane worker in Puerto Rico, and when Puerto Rico was colonized by the United States in 1900 during the Spanish American War--after the Spanish American War--they enforced a sugar regime. You know, they pushed out peoples from their land, dispossessed people of their land, dispossessed a local agrarian economy, and brought in these sugar encomiendas, these sugar plantations, and that's like slave work. Slavery is illegal, but that's... I mean, people, my grandparents, they lived on the farm they worked in. My grandpa--in really shitty conditions, you know. So,

and I look at my grandma's house. Like, her family had a farm at that same time, so they were a little bit wealthier, but that farm was mostly bought out and pushed out by banana plantations. So when I went back to Puerto Rico, I saw a lot of banana plantations around my family's little chunk of land that we have left. And then, like, you know, I think about my parents losing their home.

I think about, like, my Mexican grandpa in Texas. Like, he left Texas, his family and community because he couldn't, like, find work. You know, he was, like, economically displaced. So, I think, like, our connection to place, our connection to land, our connection to, you know, obviously the diaspora conversations around slavery, our connection to places is traumatized, and, you know, it's almost like left us...like left the South fleeing violence in the post-Reconstruction era and went North for jobs, you know. It's like get economic displacement, economic migration.

So, like, even like young youth who volunteer at, like, D-Town Farms are like, "All y'all are enslaving us?" You know what I'm saying? Like, we have a notion that working with the land is peasant work, it's low work, it's not important. But for me, like when I was doing emergency management organizing, like, the shit was stressful, and like when you're trying to fight systems and oppose neoliberalism, like, you don't have tangible wits. I mean, that system is everywhere. It is like the modus operandi. It's rolling back Latin American governments in Venezuela and Honduras and all this shit as we speak. I mean, neoliberalism is still on the rise despite so much evidence that it's a failed set of economic policies, and I think Mark Blythe is a great person who illustrates that probably the best.

But for me, it was really important to reconnect with land, reconnect with soil as a way to heal myself. So, I started farming and gardening in 2012 or [20]13. I joined Keep Growing Detroit and started, like, gardening in my backyard, you know, and it was just super healing to me to get my hands in the soil, to, you know, just be outside in the sun, and there was five lots behind my house, and I... Throughout my entire life... So, I grew up... So, my parents lost their house. My grandpa had owned the house next door. He died, so my parents moved into that house. So, right behind that house is these five abandoned lots, and I had watched them become abandoned throughout my entire life, you know. I watched them slowly get bought up by the banks, get scrapped out by scrappers, get burned down. So,

if I can't stop people from getting foreclosed upon, at least I can, like, help change the aesthetics of my community and not in a, like, broken-windows-assed way.

So, I have a bad relationship with the mayor, but I have a good relationship with the guy he chose to be the manager of our area, Rico Razo, at the time. Rico Razo... So, I was able to advocate with him to get the houses torn down, and essentially we started a community garden in that space, and it's really beautiful in the summertime. I mean, it just... I think a lot... If you're not organizing in your neighborhood, if you're not organizing your community, to me, like, your organizing is, like, if you don't have a relationship with your neighbors and you're trying to do community organizing, like, I mean, like, no. Like, you're not part of this community. You know, like, if you're not like deeply connected, if you can't... You can't impact the broader public if you can't impact the people around you, if you can't impact your neighbors and the people you see every day.

So, engaging them in that space has been really rich for me. Working with some of the youth in that neighborhood and watching them grow up, you know. You know, one of the kids in my neighborhood told me that, like, he respects, likes, and supports the work that I do because I... He's like, "You have an idea. You have an idea for this community, and you made it happen." And, like, that sense of agency is I think something that, like, people need to feel, people need to experience, and, you know, picking up garbage on the block is something we spend a lot of time doing. I mobilize volunteers from a lot of different institutions to, like, come clean the neighborhood, to come pick up trash, to come do whatever. So, like, it's been a whole-ass entire community organizing effort and, you know, like, my whole 'hood knows me. Like, almost two or three blocks around there, like, everybody, like, we all, like, work together. Like, I have a good relationship with most of the neighbors. Like, I would knock doors to make sure I got community consent. Like, technically, it's the city-owned land. Like, we're occupying that farm, you know, but it's like a squat in a sense, but it's like sanctioned because the city council person knows about it. The manager knows about it, so.

[1:30:52]

It's just been a really rich place for me to come and heal myself and heal my neighborhood and, you know, change the aesthetics of it and do some radical funky experimentation with, like, mushrooms, and, like, we have a lot of wine cap mushrooms growing throughout our farm. And to me, like, I've really transitioned a lot of my work from our community organizing, resistance sort of stuff to ecology and taking people...taking young people outdoors to nature. Hunting, getting...reconnecting with the land, fishing, and building that sort of stuff with Indigenous communities. I think, like, building relationship with land, with space, with the seasons--like right now, we're tapping maple trees in Dearborn. Next week, I'm going to be building birch bark canoes in Saugeen [Canada] in this Indigenous reservation on the other side of Lake Huron.

And, like, I want to...I want to use ecology and environment... I mean, climate change is the big universal, overarching threat to all human life, to future generations, to, like, my future kids, my friends' kids. So, I think a lot of my energy, you know... I kind of got, like, woke by the water stuff that was happening in the city, became aware of the threat to water. Again, there's neoliberalism involved in that too. Like, George Bush's family is buying up all the water inside Latin America. I mean, like, all these things are like real systems and things that are happening in the world, and our communities that are the most impacted by environmental racism tend to have not a relationship with nature because of historical trauma, because of living in a city, because of, like, the racist suburbs, because associating land-based knowledge and life with, like, white world, redneck [Donald] Trump people. And also, just like the poor working class people who exist there. Like, if we're not in those spaces, we're not building relationships, you know. Some of those people don't know what Black and brown people live and what they think and feel and how they experience the world. They can't connect with our material reality. So, I want to look at engaging these structures and these ideas with young people of color in, you know, these spaces.

So, I feel like my new work is like greening the 'hood and taking young people from the 'hood to green spaces. So, that's been... I mean, it's been beautiful work. We're going to be planting, like, a bunch of trees this spring. Last year--we're part of this coalition called Black to the Land, and it's like seven or eight organizations that are, like, outdoor-oriented POC [people of color], mostly Black organizations, and we're collaborating on like a year's worth of outdoor activities and for, like, mushroom foraging to hunting to so many things. I mean, like camping, hiking,

that sort of thing. And, I mean, it's just really rich, fertile grounds for organizing for work and engaging people, and I want to, like... So, I'll take kids--like, my dream right now is like--and I just got a job, actually, to do this with a great...with the National Wildlife Federation. I just got this job on Friday where I'll be paid to be doing that work. I'll be in like three high schools taking kids out to the countryside to, like, you know, do these things. And then also, like, doing sustainability projects in schools, you know, that are addressing climate change and addressing the needs of the community.

So, yeah, I mean, like this land-based, like, organizing from the home... Like, the personal is political, and if you can, like, begin to meet people within their needs in the community, if you can begin to, like, exemplify transformative solutions, if you can begin to connect these big systems with the climate, with, you know, emergency management, with neoliberal policies, with ideologies such as individualism, I know it's--I found art to be limiting. I think, like, you know, I applied for the Kresge [Foundation] grant a bunch of times. Never got in. Like, Chase--like, artists are left to live off of capitalists. Like, if you're an artist--like, all artists throughout the history of time. Leonardo Da Vinci was like working for the kings and shit like that. The Mayan artists who drew up the calendars and painted the walls were working for the empire. Like, artists have always had this problem being captured by the elite, and that was like a big issue for me. It's like, I don't want work for fucking Duggan. I don't want to work for Mike Ilitch. I don't want to work for Gilbert, you know. I don't want to take their money. Even some of these nonprofits are like total trash.

So, for me, like, the...a lot of my creative energies have gone into land-based work and building relationships with Indigenous people. And as those relationships with Indigenous people grow, I want to build relationships with Indigenous and Black people, and I think, like, talking about hard questions in those communities is really important too. All those conversations about race and class and privilege and opportunity and structural shit and segregation, all those conversations need to be had in all those spaces too, and it's...it's just richer when you're not having those conversations among, like, leftist community organizers who are all on the same ideological framework, you know. So, if you're having those conversations in a real place, in the countryside, in, you know, Indigenous country, I think it's just like a much richer, more fertile place to be organizing and moving and operating.

So, that’s kind of like the direction I’m headed in. I still love art. I still want to make art and still want to do stuff in the city, but, yeah, I’m really interested in bridging those gaps and expanding those relationships between people and land and… You’re not going to fight to protect land and to... One of the big issues with climate change organizing is it’s so white and disconnected from the material experience of, like, Black and brown folks in urban spaces, and when we’re worried about being gentrified, when we’re worried about, like, our wealth being so depleted in the last like 15 to 20 years, thinking about climate change is really fucking difficult.

And then, like, if most of us are like we come to know trees because some lot is abandoned and a bunch of trees grew up in it and there might be some rapist in there. I mean, like, there’s a homeless person in there, some... Those places are dangerous to us, so we fear forests, we fear water. You know, Jaws fucked me up. I’m still afraid of sharks. Yeah, you’re not going to get people to advocate--the people who are most impacted by climate change--you’re not going to get them to advocate for it and take leadership roles in it if they’re afraid of those spaces and if they don’t have a relationship with those spaces. And, yeah, I mean, building relationships with land is just powerful.

[1:37:27]

PB: So, I want to ask just two last questions, I don’t want to keep folks past--I want to be respectful of peoples’ time. But, I can also sit and listen to you talk all night. [Antonio laughs] First, we’re asking everybody to give--this sounds like a canned question because it is and we want to get, like, a diverse array of perspectives--is what’s your definition of an equitable society in Detroit? And then, also, I want to ask you for your reflections on Mama Lila...

AC: Yeah.

PB: Just to conclude with.

AC: An equitable society in Detroit is going... At some point, Detroit will be prosperous enough that we can really begin to think about, like, sharing, you know. It's gonna have to be a regional conversation ultimately because regional transit needs to be a thing, you know. There's so many pieces that have to come into play for a truly equitable society. Like, on the radical end side of things which is where kind of my politics lie, we need reparations. You know, the 2008 financial crisis, nobody was ever held accountable for that. We need housing, we need capital, we need land, we need land trusts. All of these things are like positive alternative visions for the way a community could look.

I think in the climate change era we're going to have to transition away from looking at housing and property as, like, for capital accumulation and looking at collective ownership of these sorts of things. So, I think at some point we're going to need to discuss public ownership again. I mean, we've had a radical decline of the public good and things in the public sphere for the last 60 years, and we're going to need to start talking about public control and ownership of those things. The market is failing us. It's failing the world. It's failing future generations. So, we're going to need to begin to think about changing that, you know, and transforming our sort of market fundamentalism.

So, this is like the ideological side of it, but the real practical side of it is Black and brown folks need resources. We need wealth. We need land. We need money just to get by in society. So, there has to be some sort of redistribution of resources and wealth. So, equity starts with redistribution of wealth for sure, and power. And then, also a strengthening of the institutions that will allow us to actually stand within that power. Because at this point, a lot of these equity conversations are difficult to have because when we come into these places it's often in a position of being tokenized. It's like the diversity member or, like, the local community guy on the board of some problematic institution.

So, like, there has to be a commensurate, like, increase in people's awareness and analysis for us to be able to stand in that power, and that's like one of the difficult things because no government is going to give you the tools to destroy it, you know. There's no...no capitalism is... [laughs] No country that embraces capitalism is going...is going to give you the education required to dismantle it. So, I think

we're going to have to do a lot of work on our own to increase that level of consciousness among our community, and I think that we'll be...the conversation will be forced by climate change. I mean, when it comes to Detroit, we're going to see more long summer drought, we're going to see more deeply cold winters, and there will...the private market will not be able to handle and adapt for climate change in a sustainable way.

So, there will need to be bigger conversations around how we as a society are going to respond to this crisis that we've created, and there even has to be... It can't be just Detroit either because all of our ancestral homelands are getting screwed over in this process as well. So, it needs to be like a global conversation. Yeah, I think that awakening of consciousness is happening all over the world, but it's just a matter of being able to overcome the oil and banking interests that really dominate the world at this point. And now, information is the new oil too. So like, those information...those information systems are really important too, and obviously, like water...go on, I mean, water is the next thing too. So like, water, oil, information, having conversations around the commons in all of those things has to be a part of that vision as well. So, there's a global societal, technological conversation that needs to happen in order for that equitable vision of a community to be realized. Yeah. In short. In short. [laughs] I could go on about that.

[1:42:01]

PB: I know. It's a good question.

AC: But, yeah, equity means power. It doesn't mean just, you know, more colorful representation in oppressive institutions. Like, that is not the way. Diversity, while it...it came off as a noble goal, like, the push for diversity because people who were not people in the original social contract of the United States should have more of a space in those areas, but it's got to be from a position of, like, actually giving our communities power.

And for Mama Lila [Cabbil], I first came to meet her with the Uprooting Racism Planting Justice. It was this sort of like lecture series conversation that was happening. It became a proxy for talking about gentrification in urban agriculture communities. It became a proxy for talking about race, and it's just such a bright space, and I met her there. And one story in particular that was really beautiful to me, there's this guy who owns a bunch of land. His name is Donald. It's on the East Side. He's colorblind racist douchebag, and he was being really interruptive of this space that she facilitates, and she faced him down with such, like, ferocity and, like...like unapologetically telling him, "No, you're wrong. You're going to stop talking now. You're taking up space. If you want, like, you can do this outside." She faced him down in a way that just immediately, like, endeared me to her, you know. Like, I just... Like, I was just so impressed with the way she engaged and didn't take any shit from him, you know. Like, I've seen so many--again, I talk about that as a problem in Detroit. Like, people are, like, treating problematic people with gloves, you know. Like, we're really soft and, like, coddling people who are saying stupid shit, messed-up things.

Yeah, so that was like one Mama Lila story that I can really appreciate. Yeah. There's a lot of other stuff I want to say, but I don't want to say it on camera. Like her mentoring Sam at the end of her life is like, fuck, it sucks. Yeah.

PB: Thank you for sharing that moment with us.

AC: Yeah.

PB: Is there anything that we might have missed that you'd...

AC: No, I mean, that's like the breadth of it. I mean, I've been blabbering on for a long time. I think, yeah, it's just like seeing the structural from the individual. I mean, but everybody's mindset's in the individual here, so you have to engage people where they're at. So, seeing the micro...the macro from the micro I think is super, super vital.

PB: Thank you so much for taking this time so you could share with us.

AC: Yeah.

[Inaudible]