

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

Raúl Echevarria

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

April 6, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Raúl Echevarria was raised in the Humboldt Park neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois. After working as a teacher's assistant in Chicago Public Schools for 13 years, he worked for an affordable housing development organization in Chicago. He also worked at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. He moved to Detroit in about 2013. He was one of the founders of ENCLAVE, Engaging Community Lifting Voices, a community organization in Southwest Detroit. He is now the Director of Land Use and Economic Development at Urban Neighborhood Initiatives, a community development organization in the Springwells neighborhood in Southwest Detroit.

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

Raúl Echevarria discusses his family background, his first impressions of Detroit, and how it has changed in the six years that he's lived here. He talks about the work that he did at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago, who has shaped his political and spiritual thought, the formation of Engaging Community Lifting Voices (ENCLAVE), ENCLAVE's goals, and how it has merged into different community groups in Detroit. Another topic is how he joined Urban Neighborhood Initiatives, the work that he is doing there, and the inherent tension between nonprofit work and radical action. Other topics include the slow, multi-generational nature of societal changes, building solidarity between African American and Puerto Rican communities, the ties between activists in Puerto Rico and Detroit, the issues that arise from drawing correlations between situations without considering specific contexts, the importance of choosing solutions that are based in the material conditions, time, and geography of a place, how Indigenous knowledge can lead to better solutions, and why storytelling is essential to community building and building pockets of resistance.

Keywords

Chicago, Illinois; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit, Michigan; Emergency management; Engaging Community Lifting Voices; Gentrification; Police brutality; Policing; Puerto Rico; Urban Neighborhood Initiatives

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Transcript of interview conducted April 6, 2019 with:

Raúl Echevarria [RE]

Detroit, MI

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

RE: My name is Raúl Echevarria. I have this standing thing and say: R-A-U-L accent over the U just to be clear. I live in Wyandotte, Michigan, about 15 minutes south of Detroit [Michigan]. I'm the director of Land Use and Economic Development at Urban Neighborhood Initiatives. It's a small community development organization that focused on a small portion--about one-and-a-half square mile portion--of Southwest Detroit commonly called Springwells. I have a few other sort of ad hoc affiliations, but I guess they're not necessarily worth mentioning right now.

[0:00:52]

OY: So, could you describe your neighborhood and the city when you first got here?

RE: So, when I first got here about six years ago, probably--I think when I first visited, actually seven years ago, I visited with my pastor from Chicago [Illinois], and we were touring parts of Southwest Detroit, and I think that I wasn't expecting a tug at my heart. I wasn't expecting a sense of home. It reminded me of Humboldt Park, Chicago, which is where I was born and raised, in the Puerto Rican neighborhood where we knew disinvestment. The vacant lots in our community were our playgrounds. That's where I taste grasshoppers. That's where

we played softball as a community. And so, I had that same sort of, like, emotion when I was going up and down the neighborhood in Southwest Detroit. I didn't expect that.

Long story short, when I decided to relocate, it was because of this...partly because of this profound sense of home place that I wasn't expecting. One of the unique observances, there was a coffee shop on Vernor Avenue--Vernor Highway--near Clark Park called Café Con Leche, and I remember sitting there--this was probably 2013 or so--I remember sitting there with my pastor and a couple other folks seeing that gentrification was gonna hit this place in five years if the community didn't organize itself and begin to lay down the groundwork for resistance. Almost to the day--because Facebook lets me know--the coffee shop was closed five years later. Obviously, I think one can't make the direct connection, but five years later, there are certainly new pressures on development, pressures on the community. There's a whole planning study that's done in that area. There's a lot of new development that is planned that includes affordable housing but also includes the forces of capital, which is...which is the precursor to displacement, which is commonly known as gentrification. So, some of the first impressions were there's a lot of room for work here. It's early enough, but we better get on it.

[0:03:41]

OY: So, how has the city changed since then? You had kind of touched on it a little bit.

RE: Yeah, it's been interesting to sit back and observe. Not that I'm sitting around, right, but to sort of reflect on five years, six years of work, and in that brief time how much has changed in the city, right? Emerging from emergency manager to the so-called elected mayor of Detroit to bankruptcy and new development. The new arena down on Woodward. A lot, when you look at it, in five years' time has changed. I think there's also been a lot of resistance work, a lot of organizing work, a lot of healing work that's been done by...by local communities, and I think that that's usually under...under-discussed or not highlighted. This sense that it's...that the development or the private forces are a juggernaut that cannot be

and will not be resisted. I think that wherever there has been exploitation, oppression, there has always been resistance, and I think that that's true too if you're willing to look.

[0:05:18]

OY: What do racism and oppression look like in Detroit today?

RE: Just like...just like any part of this country, it's...it's covert. It's underneath a lot, although it's becoming more overt with...with the big supporter of white supremacy in the White House [Donald Trump]. But, it's...it's still economics. It's still employment, right. It's still these sort of social issues that are not directly correlated or directly linked to racist attitudes, but it's all under it. It's...it's...it's the system, right, of racism and oppression that still have power in the city. The idea of emergency management over a majority Black city is a clear example of racist policy making. You have a country that...that logs notions of self-determination, liberty, and freedom, and yet you have an unelected person who has the ability to dictate trajectory and...and...and the future of...of a municipal organization, the City of Detroit. Add to that the fact that...that the first white mayor in a long time can be elected mayor through write-in campaign, and a write-in campaign because he failed to meet the necessary guidelines of residency to be on the ballot in time and that this just happened, right. There was some resistance, of course, but it's what we have. And so, that to me is sort of...are ways that racism and oppression are still embedded in the systems. Even if you're not confronting swastikas and...and Southern rebel flags, you're still faced with the [laughs] results of it. Clearly.

[0:07:44]

OY: How did you first become active in movement work?

RE: I've often thought about that question, and I think, like, it depends on were you...were you...what's your origin story, right. If I were a superhero, what's my

origin story? It's probably a lifelong--like, I've always been a difficult person, kid. I've always been like a...always had an anti-authoritarian streak in me. So, you know, you can go that far. But definitely, I think in real activism work, when I left the Chicago Public Schools as a teacher assistant after 13 years in 2004, I started working for an affordable housing development organization in Chicago. I was helping to lead a comprehensive community planning process bringing in stakeholders, partners into the planning process. But, I also got my first taste of a protest against a building, high luxury, you know, high-stakes building in the community, and my first downtown rally for affordable housing that I got really, like, this is what is. This is where I want to be. This kind of action is what fans, sort of, the flames of my passion. And so, that...I would probably say that that was probably the start of my really in-depth education and experience in community organizing, community activism.

My job had to send me to a training on community...the basis of community organizing. I went to the Midwest Academy for five days, did the training there, was exposed to sort of more traditional Saul Alinsky organizing type of organizing. But at the same time in the Puerto Rican community, the Puerto Rican leaders had, like, a...a... They didn't like Saul Alinsky. They...they...there was an anti-Alinsky rhetoric that was really deep, and I began to sort of suss out why that was. And so, trying to find a balance. Only now do...would I think about it as...as setting up a dialectic between Puerto Rican self-determination and Saul Alinsky style organizing and saying what's the synthesis between those two, and I certainly feel like the work in Humboldt Park and the Puerto Rican community, even though the rhetoric was anti-Alinsky, they definitely used a lot of the...the tools and tactics that Alinsky wrote about and taught. It just was influenced by a Puerto Rican independence sort of self-determination popular education approach. So, I think that became my approach.

[0:10:48]

OY: Can you... Or, what or who have been some of your greatest influences in your activism and organizing work aside from Alinsky?

RE: Hands down, when I left... Hands down, I'm gonna say it was Professor José López. When I left the affordable housing development organization, I started working for the Puerto Rican Cultural Center. Non-profit, grassroots--more grassroots than the organization I was with previously--and was really doing a lot of the...the building-up of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. Informed by a deep political analysis, but also a sense of love and compassion for a community. José López--I would eventually be the Deputy Director under José López. José López is a professor. He's--of Latin American History and Latin American Studies, but he also was the Executive Director of the organization. The four years--almost four years--that I spent as the Deputy Director was, like, the formation of my political analysis and my political framework, and hands down I still hear him in my head [laughs].

And...and...and if you worked with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, you know, there's, like, this almost like this love/hate because there's this, like, intense pressure, right. The work is an urgent task. Not you have urgent tasks within the work. The work is an urgent task. And so, there's this constant sort of pressure to...to...to live up to that. And when you're in it, you're just, like, loathing it, but you love it because it's what you're passionate about. And then when you're out of it, you realize how important that was. And so, hands down, I would say José López was the deepest influence. As a side note, José López's brother, Oscar López Rivera, was the longest-serving Puerto Rican political prisoner, over 35 years. That was...his sentence was commuted by President Obama--Obama, Barack Obama, gosh. Barack Obama, I think two days prior to his end of his administration. And, I remember that time because we weren't sure if he was gonna do it and were counting the days left, and the second-to-last day he commuted his sentence. So, the...the...the deep political analysis and framework is there, for sure. It's a radical framework. It's a radical set of politics. I learned how to navigate the world of nonprofits and elected officials and still maintain your radical world view and not be sullied or not be influenced negatively by that engagement.

And, probably a second influence would be the philosopher Enrique Dussel, who originally comes from Argentina and now is exiled in Mexico and he teaches at the university there. Enrique Dussel is like the foremost authority on liberation philosophy. He's also written about liberation theology. But from Dussel, I found my mantra as an activist, which is as a Puerto Rican, as a Puerto Rican whose land is colonized by the United States of America, I view the world through the lens of a

colonized subject whose aim and goal is to decolonize himself and decolonize his land, and that means liberation. And so, I operate by three...three major aspects, three major themes: a philosophy of liberation, a politics of liberation, and a theology of liberation, and I got that from reading and...and...and...and watching videos of Enrique Dussel's teachings. In many ways, he's become a teacher without me having to attend his class and without him knowing who I am.

But, those are probably two of the greatest influences, but a close third one would probably be Professor James Perkinson whose...who teaches at Ecumenical Theological Seminary. He's doing a lot of the work--water activism work in the city partnered with St. Peter's [Episcopal Church] here, and he's also my academic advisor at seminary. I'm working on my master's in divinity. And so, he's probably been the most immediate influence in terms of getting me to think about land justice and how it relates to the work that I'm doing around community development and community organizing. And so, I think there's something emerging out of there, and I think it's a lot due to the courses that he...he has taught on ecology, spirituality, liberation.

[0:16:10]

OY: Could you talk about some of the organizing work you've been involved with in Detroit?

RE: So, probably the most clearest organizing work was--I think at the time I was still commuting. So when I first came to the area, I came...I was on a part-time contract with the Presbyterian Church in Detroit to continue some work that was done in Southwest Detroit. And at the time, I was commuting every other week from Chicago, spending a week in Detroit, and I found myself... At that time, I found myself having similar conversations. So, the context was Urban Hygienic Dress League or something like--arts collective--had a mural near the Bagley area that was defaced, and it was defaced with like, "no gentrification," "gentrifiers go home," kind of like that, and that was like the--everybody was talking about that. There were articles being written. People were talking about it in Café Con Leche, and I found myself having those conversations with folks. Of course, like, I looked forward to those conversations because anti-gentrification work has been what I

knew and understood in Chicago with the Puerto Rican community. It's what we've been...it's what we've been doing by trying to develop a Puerto Rican neighborhood to confront gentrification through Puerto Rican identity.

And so, I was gravitating towards those conversations, but one day it dawned on me that I was having the same conversation with, like, two or three different people who are Detroiters who know each other but weren't having the conversation together. And so I said, "Why don't we have one conversation, and why don't we form a...why don't we form a group?" And eventually, that group came to be known as ENCLAVE, or Engaging Community Lifting Voices, which is--was sort of what we wanted to do. It was our approach to having conversations about development in the community was that, first and foremost, we needed authentic community engagement, and when we...and when people couldn't speak for themselves that we wanted to be the ones to lift up their voices in...in spaces that we had access. And so, that was probably the most clearest organizing work. I tried to hand that off a couple times to native Detroiters and each time was sort of...was...was commanded by the group to say, "No, Raúl, we need you to sort of facilitate the process because you have a more objective lens than we do. [laughs] We've been living in this so we're definitely, like, tied to it really emotionally where you're able to disconnect from it emotionally and look at it politically, and we need that right now." And, I operate by the notion that the community commands me, and so I accepted that each time.

Eventually, the group--eventually, we as a group decided to confront a local non-profit--which is the non-profit I work with now, Urban Neighborhood Initiatives--who was undergoing sort of a com...a community branding or marketing campaign utilizing Springwells Village as the moniker for the community. They didn't create it. There was a different process that created it, but they certainly had a grant in place to create marketing materials to encourage businesses and...and...and customers. And so, we began to confront that, confronting...confronting it with the idea that while the organization did reach out and did engage the community, it wasn't authentic enough. It was...it was a limited number of people.

There was sort of some pushback by some community leaders that say, "You haven't spoken to this sector or that sector, these sort of harder to reach sectors,

right? We could help you if you stop your process,” and I think that at the time there was a decision that money was in play, plans were in place, and it...it just was at a point where it couldn't stop. And so, I think part of what I tried to do was try to say, “Can you pause? Can you be open to a dialog?” With a, like, hope behind the back of my head that the organization would not entrench itself and take a difference of posture because I know what that means. That means that then you have to escalate, and I felt like it wasn't that big a moment to have to escalate tactics. But, what...that's what we got. We got entrenchment. So, we started like a wheat pasting campaign with a message sort of saying, “We are Southwest Detroit” with the images of...reflective of the community. “We're not a brand. We are Southwest Detroit.” Those kinds of phrases. Collected some petitions, sent letters to funders, and all with the idea of putting pressure.

Eventually, the organization underwent a leadership transition, and so we paused the campaign to see how it was gonna come out on that, you know, the organization was gonna come out on the other side of that. The new executive director said, “Let's meet. Let's talk,” and we had a series of maybe like three meetings to sort of talk about how to reconcile and what each group was willing to do. And then, at some point soon after the third meeting, I was approached about a position at the organization. I...I... First, I...I entered the interview process. By the time it was clear I was one of the finalists, I went back to the group--to our group, ENCLAVE, to the leadership--and said, “What do you think?” I said, “This is my concern. I'm concerned that if I take the job that I'm going to be looked at like an opportunist who took advantage of the campaign to get a job.” I was unemployed at the time. I was on unemployment at the time. The other concern was that it would be seen as being co-opted.

And so, I went to the community that said, you know, “Raúl, we want you to facilitate this,” and said, “Well, what do you think?” And, I think everyone, hands down, said, “We think it's a natural progression of the campaign. We think there's a new leadership. There's a new willingness to sort of accept the critique and...and...and build on it, right, to correct it, and we think that it would be great if you were the one trying to correct it.” The campaign was never against the organization. The organization as a whole was doing good work. The campaign was around this question of community engagement.

And so, I accepted the position almost--next year, it'll be three years. So, that's probably like the clearest community organizing effort. Currently, I'm in the process of weaving organizing principles into how the organization does what it does. Ultimately, our goal is to say when we go to a community meeting or when a...a...a stakeholder or an official asks us, "What does the community feel about this?" We want to be able to answer with great certainty two questions. The first question is how does the community feel about it? The second question is how do you know? If we can't answer those two questions, we haven't done the work that we need to do as an...an organization.

So, thinking about how to incorporate community organizing principles into a traditional community development organization, and when we began--when I began--to sort of try to talk about that and frame it, of course I went to the partners, external partners, and said, "What do you think? I want your feedback." And, the feedback that I got was like, "Instead of just doing that for your organization, why don't you do that for all of us? Why don't you organize a network where small non-profits who aren't plugged into the mainstream because of values, lack of shared values, but don't have enough power as individual organizations, why don't you organize a network so we can build the power we need? We all believe in community organizing principles. We all don't have the capacity to incorporate them into our"--so, instead of getting just feedback for what I want to do as an organization, now my charge is to try to organize...create an organizing network in the Springwells area, Southwest Detroit and raise funds to place organizers, at least half-time organizers, in each organization and have a stronger organizing collaborative community. And so, that's the current level of work around community organizing that I'm engaged in.

[0:26:04]

PB: How's that process going so far?

RE: It's...it's...it's slow when you don't have dedicated staff. So, on top of...on top of that, which is time intensive--just the idea of building relationships and...and coordinating listening campaigns and things like that is very time intensive. The idea was never that I would be the organizer on the ground but that we would

hire organizers. I would organize the network, but not do the on the ground organizing. I have re...renovation project that I'm also responsible for. We're rehabbing a former Moose Lodge into a--well, half of it has been already renovated. I'm doing the phase two, which will convert it into a youth activities hub and...and some storefront space. So, I have to raise the financing for that and facilitate that process. There's a bunch of other things on my plate, and so it's been slow, and I've had to, like, be patient with myself. The organizing is what I have passion for. Some of the other stuff not so much, but...but I have to balance that.

And so, I think where we are now we were...we were gonna plan a retreat to the Highlander [Research and Education] Center--and oddly enough, you know, recently their main building was vandalized and burned down--because we wanted to learn about Highlander's approach. It resembled what we've talked about with there's sort of this strong critique of typical Saul Alinsky sort of power organizing, and we wanted to use storytelling, we wanted to use popular education as part of the model. And so, we wanted to go and learn their model and then think about how it makes sense here. So, that's still an idea. We've had some meetings to sort of flesh things out further, and we've got a...we've got a grant in for the model for the process that, if funded, would allow us to at least place some part-time organizers. So, we're sort of on that wait, hurry up and wait stage.

At the same time, my executive director [Christine Bell] had put in my...had put a seed in my brain about picking a day mid-summer, mid-August, closing up the office, and having all staff just go out and listen, have porch conversations, door-to-door conversations, park conversations with the community. And, that--so naturally, I said, "Well, why don't we include the other partners, and why don't we make it...let's see if we can make it into a network listening campaign," which is not just as easy as sort of doing that, right? Like, there's some training. Like, what...how to listen, what do you listen for. You know, from an organizer's standpoint, you're not just having conversations. What is the goal of the campaign? What are you listening for? Like, those kind of things. So, I'm now in the process of trying to frame a work plan so that in mid-August we can actually launch a...a listening campaign. So, that's my...that's my attempt to do it, to do the organizing work without the staffing, right? Not waiting. Not just waiting for the funding, which is also a lesson I learned from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.

Most of the work that we did was out of a need and out of a community cry and then found the funding later. That's not the most efficient way to do things, but [video cuts out] that's how...that's how we approached it, and that's how I learn. [video resumes]

[0:29:54]

PB: So, you mentioned previously about kinda that concern you had in going from really the neighborhood-based, grassroots-based organization to the non-profit organization that you'd been protesting against. In making that transition, have you found any--I guess, what's that transition been like? Have there been limitations on the kind of organizing that you're used to doing from--in ENCLAVE and then compared to being part of the non-profit structure?

RE: I think, yes, there have been... I mean, there's limits. There's--I never entered the work with the false expectation. I knew. I think that's one of the things that my experiences taught me is how to navigate, right, and still be true to your core, right? First thing you have to do is identify what are your core values, what are your core principles that you're unwilling to violate. Once you identified that, then you can go in and out of other spaces that might seem to be contradictory. But as long as you're not violating your core, you can...can navigate that, or as long as you're not allured by sort of power that cause you to violate your core. And so, I already knew that. As a matter of fact, I...that was part of my interview response to a question was like, I have a radical lens by which I view the world, possibly more radical than anyone in the organization, but I know how to navigate. I know that I'm in a non-profit. I know the contradiction of the 501(c)(3) designation and how...and how it's built off the exploitation of pep--of...of communities.

So, I already knew that. I knew that there were going to be limitations, and I said that I would work the best I could within the parameters, push...certainly pushing the envelope as far as I could in terms of radical action. But then, when I hit that wall, where can I find the release? And so, I know that when I hit that wall, I can't do it within the nine-to-five. I have to see if I can carve out some of my own time outside of work to then push it further, and I think that in that sense I'm still able to keep true to my core and not violate it, knowing that I have limitations within

the nonprofit world. And so, I think that that's...that comes out of experience, and I know that when I've shared that with younger activists, I think that many people are trying...trying to--first of all, like, that's what they're looking for. So when I...when I...when I articulate it in a class or in a lecture, that's the response I get. This is what I've been wanting to know, wanting to understand. And then, you have to go through it. You have to experience it. It's not as easy as me telling it. You have to experience it. You have to go through the trial and the error. You have to go through the frustration of the limitations, right, and you have to under...fully understand what your core is. If your core is ambiguous, then you're not gonna do well in terms of the contradictions.

And so, I think that...I think that that's how I always entered it. I always entered it knowing that there were limitations, and I put it clear. I sort of said, "I have a critical lens." Also, I am a very critical person. I said, "I don't know if you want someone just pointing out your flaws." And, I think that the response that I got was like, "No, Raúl, we have blind spots. We have to identify them. That's why we think you're a good candidate for this work. So by all means, don't hold yourself...don't pull yourself back." Not that I would, but. So, I think part of it is, like, real expectations. I don't know that, you know, that too many people--this is not like bragging or...or--because what I want to do is highlight my experience. I don't know that too many people can enter a space like that and hold it clearly, right? But, I think that more people should. I think that younger people should be exposed to this way of thinking of how to do work in communities, how to be passionate about your critique and the work of liberation, and how to find release through the nonprofit world, but also knowing that that's...that that's gonna limit you and saying, "Okay, maybe I have to be part of a collective so that I can push further," right, and not...and not feel bogged down or...or straitjacketed.

[0:35:02]

PB: So, what became of ENCLAVE? Is it still around?

RE: No, I think--it was always a small...it was always a small group, small movement. I think I--one of my frustrations was that it was small and it was not diverse enough. It was not--we didn't have enough minds to sort of solve a lot of

issues. And so--but it exists, right? The spirit of it exists. So when you think about...when you think about this organizing network, a lot of the same people who are leading these organizations were part of the ENCLAVE process. So, Young Nation, Grace in Action Church and Collectives, Garage Cultural, all like very long-serving institutions in the community. They all part--they're the ones who said, "Let's form a network." So, I think the spirit of it is still there. The spirit of sort of having a unified voice, having a powerful collective voice and collective work, I think it's still alive. The difference being now UNI [Urban Neighborhood Initiatives] is part of that. So.

[0:36:19]

PB: So, I guess what can that--that's a theme I think we're hearing a lot in conversations we're having is the importance of ground...laying that groundwork to build networks upon. So, can you speak a little bit about how you see the importance of that like day-to-day, like real small-scale, like neighborhood-level, grassroots organizing and what the...what the importance of that is and what the...how you see that, like, as laying foundations?

RE: I think that--so, a lot of the framework that I use, certainly more in the last three years, is rooted on centering Indigenous practices. Not appropriating that, but out of real experiences with folks sort of saying there's a teaching there that I...I ought to apply to my life. The teaching, the Indigenous teachings of the seven generations helps me to understand that community organizing at its most basic level yields results to the seventh generation. And so, if you're...if you're wanting to see things manifest now and only now, that you're gonna burn out. You're going to be frustrated. It's understanding that you're laying groundwork that you might not even benefit from. That allows you to keep doing or keep moving forward. It's knowing that that child that went through your program is now leading a program in your organization is the realization of why it's important, right? And so, fully understanding that this work is about laying seeds that someone else will harvest, maybe. Maybe you might...maybe you might witness one or two transformations, and that's good, but the expectation that this is going to lead to change right now, I think is a false one.

And so, I think from a community organiza--and this is a lesson I'm learning and have to learn because I want to see things change. I want to see action. I want to see things in my lifetime. And so, it's something that I'm still learning. So, how do I...how do I understand that we're just laying seeds, and that I'm okay with that? That's how you push against the juggernaut. That's how you push against the systems, right? It's not this...it's not...it's not the...the old lefty idea of revolution as instantaneous. I think Dussel helps me think about revolution as something that happens in gradations and over time. Dussel talks about that in his book *Twenty Theses [on Politics]*. And so, it...it... This idea of instantaneous change there, history has...history hasn't taught us that that actually happens. That even, say, the French Revolution, which is the most sort of talked about spontaneous and instantaneous world paradigm change, if you really look at it from a historical lens, you'll see that there was some gradations to that, that there was some build up to that.

And so, it's understanding that transformation is not instantaneous. Rather, it's over time, and that's what the organizing--that's sort of what grassroots organizing for sure--is about, being patient with the work, being patient with yourself, and being patient with people. Unpacking internalized colonialism, internalized slavery, internalized oppression can't happen in a day. You can change the socioeconomics of a person in a day. You can change their political relationship to the rest of society in a day, right. You can unlock the jail cells and set someone physically free in a day. But spiritually and psychologically, that might take more time, and I think that mainstream community organizing sort of centers on these instantaneous gratifications of, like, 30 jobs, 60 jobs, a new policy, right, thinking that that's really gonna transform. And, history has taught me that it's not true, that if you still have a colonized mind that you're still...even though your body is free, you're still enslaved.

And so, the work that we're doing as grassroots organizations particularly around utilizing stories and popular education is this unpacking that has to happen. I'm using my hands. I was really trying not to use my hands. It's unpacking the layers, right? It's sort of like there are these layers of social conditioning and psychological conditioning that have...have buttressed the systems of oppression, right, so that even if you change a policy here and there, you're still tied down. And so, it's gonna take time and action and reflection to sort of unpack those layers--and a dedication to that approach to organizing, I suppose.

[0:41:59]

PB: So, I... When you're speaking, I'm hearing a deep reverence for your spirituality and for your family and your identities. Could you speak a little bit about your family history, your roots, and how this recognition of your place within this history influences your political thought and your organizing work?

RE: Sure. My father left Puerto Rico in the late 1960s to Chicago. He would say to find work and to find a better life than what country living, which is sort of living in the *campo* is how we refer to it. But, you have to contextualize the 1960s [laughs] historically to what was happening on the island, and what was happening on the island in that time was somewhat austerity measures. The jobs that were available were few because the incentives for companies to locate on the island were such that sort of the growth of the pharmaceutical companies--pharmaceuticals, one might say, "Oh yes, wonderful. Factory jobs." Pharmaceutical companies employ very few people, and so you have this whole sort of economics that is happening on the island that caused sort of this migration out in the late [19]60s--the [19]40s and [19]50s and certainly in the late [19]60s. By the late [19]60s, all of the factory opportunities in Chicago, some of the Midwest had gone, right? They were no longer available, and so the...the dominant sector was service. So, my dad first got a job as a busboy at Seven Continents Restaurant, which was the only restaurant at the time at O'Hare Airport. It's a huge...it was a huge restaurant. Eventually, he would become a waiter, and he waited on tables for 30-something years. That was his only job. And so, that's how we got to Chicago.

I was born and raised in the Humboldt Park area of Chicago, Northwest side, historical Puerto Rican community. I, for a long time, remember as a child hearing grownups say that...say, "He could pass. He has light-colored skin, green eyes, blond hair."--when I had more hair--"He could pass." And, I feel like... Retrospectively, I feel like I spent the early part of my childhood trying to pass, trying to be the good American, trying to hide my Puerto Rican-ness. Worse than that, really, saying I'm not Puerto Rican, trying to negate my Puerto Rican-ness,

saying that I was a U.S. citizen, I was an American, and never really seeing the doors open that were supposed to open.

My first...my first real mentor was James T. Swayze. I've committed to always say his name. He was a physical ed teacher in Chicago by way of Natchez, Mississippi, Deep South. They, he and his wife, migrated north during the Great Migration period and became school teachers, and I understood the struggle for justice through hearing Mr. Swayze tell the stories of the Civil Rights movement. But more importantly, he took me under his wing. He saw a kid who was sort of lost but had potential, and he invested in me, and I remember. To this day, my mission statement is what he told me, "To the degree that I have invested in you, to that same degree you give back to your community." And, I have tried to exhaust myself of that mission. When I left Chicago and moved to Michigan, certainly it changed that a little bit because now I was outside my community, my geographic community where I grew up, but my community now became the Latino/Hispanic community. And, I've still been trying to exhaust that. That...that level of investment altered my trajectory in such a way that I will never forget it.

And so--but...but during the [19]90s, if you know or maybe you saw--maybe you guys are too young. Maybe you saw something on a documentary. [laughs] It was a resurgence of the Black Power movement, right, and the cross colors culture wear. And so, we were... Being in urban Chicago, you know, we were all in that. And so, I began to connect--you know, the LA [Los Angeles] riots, the Rodney King beating--I began to connect to the Black struggle more than the Puerto Rican struggle because something about social justice was embedded in me.

And then eventually, that would lead me to search out my own--slowly--my own identity as a Puerto Rican, certainly when I met José López and through his talks he talked about these giants of Puerto Rican history, figures that I had never known or heard about. Pedro Albizu Campos, the first Puerto Rican graduate of Harvard University who helped write the Constitution of the Free Irish State and who came back to Puerto Rico to the struggle of independence. Like, that was mind blowing to know that we...we came from warrior stock. We came from...from intellectual stock. Eugenio Maria de Hostos, who set...travelled all of South America and set up schools where there were no schools because

education was an important part of liberation. And so, I began to be more in touch with what it was to be Puerto Rican.

So, I think my sense of justice comes out of the Civil Rights, understanding the Civil Rights struggle because that's what...that's...that's what connected me with my mentor and connected me with the [19]90s, and then in the recent 10, 15 year period is...is recapturing my identity as being Puerto Rican. And, what that means, right, how...what does it mean to embody being Puerto Rican in Detroit, right? And, I take that seriously. Like, I...I...I represent not just myself. I represent a community, and I want to do right by that community, and...and...and I wanna help that community and liberate those around me at the same time.

So, a lot of it emanates from this trajectory around social justice, my commitment as a follower of Jesus, right. So, this... Like, people might say Christianity. I have a problem with that as such, but I'm decolonizing what it means to be a Christian and saying, "Is there anything redeemable in that?," knowing that it was a force of colonization and oppression and slavery. And so, unpacking that, getting rid of the stuff that I feel is nonsense, and sort of what is the true essence to follow the teachings and how do I embody as a Puerto Rican? And so, liberation theology helps me to frame it properly, right. And so, an example would be Puerto Rico is governed by a...by a governor who's elected but really is a puppet of the great empire to the north. And so, I think about Herod in the Bible who was king of Jerusalem, king of Judea, but really was a puppet of the Roman Empire. By setting up those parallels, then I can unlock, sort of, the liberation aspects of what it was when Jesus overturned the tables at the temple or when he was persecuted and eventually crucified, which is a political punishment. I can understand better, right.

And so, that deep spirituality both comes from my identity, both as a Puerto Rican and then also as this sort of follower of these teachings of a Jesus of Nazareth. And so, reconciling those two and then saying how does it look like or how can it look like and trying to do that in communities so it's not just an individual work but always a communal work.

PB: So, it's...it's coming across very clear that your thing... Internally, there is this intrinsic connection between struggles that are waged by African Americans for civil rights, human rights and anti-colonial struggles in Puerto Rico. How are you bringing that into your work? Is there solidarity work that you're involved in in the city between Black and Puerto Rican communities? Because I know that that, like, if we're looking at it from a historically...from a historical perspective, has been marked with periods of success, periods of shortcomings, throughout cities across the United States.

RE: First, let me say that in Chicago there was no--like, at least in Humboldt Park--there was no challenge between Black and brown sort of, you know. Humboldt Park is unique for sure because there was historically always a Black community embedded in the Puerto Rican community. But, some of my...some of my...some of my neighbors, some of my African-American neighbors spoke Spanish, and they loved Puerto Rican food. Some of us Puerto Ricans love soul food. And so, there was never... I didn't experience that sort of dichotomy growing up. For sure, knowing that it exists in other communities. I think that part of the challenge in trying to do solidarity in Detroit with Puerto Rican and African-American communities is that the Puerto Rican community is not organized, and so you can't have solidarity of one person, right? Like, and so, I think a great part of my effort outside of my job--this is what I can't do in the nine to five--is...is really trying to organize space for Puerto Ricans in the Detroit area to be community.

Now, there used to be the Puerto Rican Social...the Puerto Rican Club. It was a sort of a social club more than anything, recreation, dominos, and music, drinking, those kinds of things. Very little politics, very little consciousness raising by...almost by rule. And so, I think what I want...part of what I wanted to do was create, be part of creating space for consciousness raising, cultural preservation, and identity formation in Detroit. And then, we can talk about solidarity. In the meantime, I think that I have to be in relationship, right? I have to be in collaborative relationship with the Black community. I think...think the first five years have sort of been me getting my foot wet--feet wet and sort of trying to anchor myself. I think I've...I'm in a better position now to sort of build stronger relationships. I have good relationships with some leaders in the African-American community. I think one of them is Yusef Shakur who I really want to be intentional

about building a deeper connection with. He has a radical approach to Black liberation, and I think it...it's similar to what I...how I view Puerto Rican liberation. So, I want to be...I want to be in connection with him stronger.

I also think that there's, you know, there's a Detroit-Puerto Rican solidarity movement that I feel it's important for me to be a part of as well, particularly because there's nuance. There's similarities, but there's nuance, and I feel like the nuance gets lost. I don't know if that's where you want to go right now, but [laughs] the...the... I feel like we...we...we want to always go to socioeconomic similarities or overlap. We want to talk about emergency management and bankruptcy and then see how you guys dealt with it and how you're dealing with it and try to, you know, try to build off of that, and I feel like there's a whole context that's missing. That's important, especially when you begin to solutionizing.

Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States of America. Detroit is a municipality of Michigan, a state of the United States of America. And, I know even though... Like, I know activist circles who will talk about Detroit being an internal colony, and I know that emerging...that emerging analysis of be--internal colonies, but it's not the same as a geopolitical relationship, right? An entire nation of people has been...has been imposed financial management, not a municipality. There's a big difference there, right? The governor of Puerto Rico is not equivalent to the mayor of Detroit, right? May not even be equivalent to the mayor--to the governor of...of Michigan. Although, you know, you can sort of talk about size and scale, but Puerto Rico's...Puerto Rico's a nation. This idea of colonialism and imposing financing management and bankruptcy is at least exponentially dire, more dire--or rather than...rather than using comparative, it is part of a 500-years-long treatment of a people.

[1:57:16]

And so, simply saying that, well, this is what Detroit did. Detroit mobilized, but, you know, protested, whatever. Without the nuance you're not gonna get...you're not gonna be able to glean the learning and the wisdom because you can't just simply say--so, for example, the police departments in communities of color in this

country haven't been really good relation--haven't had really good relations, to say the least. A colonized police department who's trying to prove to the colonial masters that they know how to police their people is exponentially worse than an internal colony, let's say. And, I'm not saying that we have it worse. I'm not saying we have it worse on the island. I'm saying when you come up with solutions, you have to understand that, right?

So, May 1st last year, there was a big protest scheduled by...primarily by the students of the University of Puerto Rico, and they wanted to get to their magnificent mile, their *milla de oro*, where Wall Street, where the hedge investors sort of offices are. And the last time that something like that happened, there was vandalism. There was, like, windows and stuff broken. And the depart--the police department was adamant in not allowing that, but not just not allowing, but using advanced tactics and paramilitary weapons, funneling the crowd in such a way that you can hit them with tear gas and other gases and then as they scatter, their only escape is where you meet them with the most force. Like, that was... Like, that was some war tactic, right? For a May Day rally. And, I say to myself, "This is like exponentially"--and now, now, if you think like Ferguson [Missouri] is bad, this is like exponentially--because you've got a bunch of Puerto Rican cops who are trying to be good, you know, trying to prove themselves psychologically as better than the cops in the [United] States because of that internalized colonialism. Now, I...I gotta be...I gotta be more astute when I talk about how are we gonna do a protest or how are we gonna be a manifestation, democratic manifestation, because I have to counter...I have factor this in.

Another example was the conversation around saving--post-bankruptcy--saving the...the Department of Arts and Culture, the artwork. So, we were at an Allied Media [Projects] conference. There was the first attempt to try that--I think DEAL [Detroit Equity Action Lab] hosted this first attempt to have a solidarity network. And at the conference, some of the folks in Puerto Rico said, "We want to know how you saved the artwork." And the activist on the panel said, "We were willing to sell the artwork." [laughs] Right? Why is that difference? Well, because the artwork at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts] is external artwork collected. It's not resemble... It's not...it's not...it's not the Charles Wright Museum of African Art and Culture [laughs], right? It's external arts that's collected. There's no value to the community. There's no connection. The artwork in the Department of Arts and Culture in Puerto Rico is the art and cultural product of a nation. Simply taking

how you save the art and simply looking at it at face value without nuance and context, then you have this sort of, like, disagreement, right?

And, that's why I'm saying that any kind of solidarity or network, solidarity network, between Detroit and Puerto Rico has to be properly contextualized so that when solutions come up or when wisdom is highlighted that it's applicable, that I can use it, right. Because if I just take that answer, the answer's like, F the artwork. And, I...I understood it from the Detroit activist perspective, but from Puerto Rico, I don't want to F the artwork, right, because this is, like, what we have as a resistance to colonialism. If we didn't have this artwork, this preservation, we would've lost our identity and become Americanized much, much, much more sooner or to greater degrees. And so, the artwork has different meaning, right? And so, knowing and understanding--so, I think that my participation in a solidarity...a solidarity network, especially from a diasporic lens, helps--or can help--or other people like me--can help suss out some of that nuance, right, and make sure that we're having the conversation with a proper context.

[1:02:37]

PB: I want to come back to the Allied Media conference and what some of those conversations were. Do you want some more water?

RE: Yes.

PB: I want to come back to like look--if we were to be a fly on the wall, like, in that conference space, what the conversations were, but I think it might make sense to backpedal just a bit to when you're getting into Detroit during emergency management, during this destruction and imposition--not imposition, but the destruction of democratic rights in the city. So, could you talk a little bit about what that looked like through your eyes and through your analysis and then maybe taking us forward into what you were seeing after the hurricane in Puerto Rico and any connections you were making there?

RE: So, I...I wish I...I wish I had a better sense of the timeline, but regardless. I remember watching the election results. I still was travelling. So, I hadn't relocated because I wasn't watching it at home, but I remember watching the election results particularly to note if the emergency management law was going to be repealed, and I remember watching and saying, "Whoa, like, democracy happened in Michigan. You know, the people did it." And, not just...this was not just Detroit, right? This was, like, the state because overwhelming it was...it was voted to be repealed. So, not only... You needed, you know, some of the suburban counties. And I remember saying, "Okay, democracy can work out here." You know, people, when they get together, they can make a thing happen, even an insurmountable thing. I said, "Okay, this is an interesting time to be here." Right? So, like, what now?

And the--of course, months later during the recess session, Governor [Rick] Snyder pushed through an unrepealable emergency manager law. And I was like, "Wow." I was like, "This is what it's gonna be like to fight for justice." Not just in Detroit, working in Detroit, but because so many people were looking at what's happening in Detroit. I know that the emergency management, you know, has been a policy that a lot of other cities were looking at throughout this country, and they were watching to see how Detroit was doing--or how Michigan was doing it so that they could impost it in their own...in their own--I mean, the governor of Illinois at the time when he was elected, Governor [Bruce] Rauner, specifically said he was looking at what's happening in Detroit, right, particularly around bankruptcy and emergency management. He wanted...he had his eyes on the school system, and then eventually he had his eyes on the rest of the city and municipal employees.

So, I was like... On the one hand, I was like hopeful that it was gonna be repealed so that the message could be sent throughout these other states that it can't be done, that the people still have power. But then, to see this recess appointment happen and go through, I was like, "Oh. Okay, it's not gonna be that easy." And then...and then, to witness the bankruptcy process with the former staff or principal leader of Jones Day as the emergency manager--how is this possible? How is this ethical, right? Where is the outcry against the ethics of taking someone who is working for the firm, leading the firm be the emergency manager and that firm being the firm representing the municipality? It's just wild to me that such an overact of borderline unethical behavior would happen with very

little repercussions from, you know, from people in the system. I knew the community was gonna protest and was gonna let them know what they felt, but...but there was no recrimination. There was no--the politics did not respond to the outcry. And then, to have, you know, the first white mayor elected through a write-in campaign, who had to go towards a write-in campaign requirements to stay on the ballot, and that he would win. I had never seen something wild like that.

I'm not given to conspiracy theories too much because I think they're killers of action and killers of hope, but if there was ever room for a conspiracy in my mind, it would have been that time. How could this happen? And why weren't the politics responding to the outcry? There's something fundamentally wrong when the politics don't respond to the people. Like, something seriously has happened. Like, even...even a locally elected leader feels pressure from the people, the constituents, and then takes action, even if it's minimal action. The politicians in the city and in the state are not responding to the people's cry. When that becomes disconnected and continues to act that way--so, they continue to get elected, they continue to govern, and they don't ever have to respond to their constituents, something is wrong in that democracy, and that...I remember all of that coming to my...coming to my mind because the people's will was to repeal this law, and the governor and all the legislatures that passed this unrepealable law felt so secure politically. Even though the people's will was spoken, they felt so secure politically that they passed this against the will of the people, and many of them were reelected. Something is wrong with your politics, and the only way I know how to fix that is through manifestation of people's power.

So, I remember all of that coming up in terms of, like, observing this happening and knowing that it was probably gonna be a blueprint, knowing that after the largest municipal bankruptcy that other folks, other cities were looking at that and knowing, hearing reports, reading reports, that even Puerto Rico was looking at that, and saying, god doggit, like, whoever's behind this, these kinds of tactics and policies are really powerful, including, you know, in the Barack Obama administration. The Barack Obama administration passes the Promise Law, which is *lay de promisa* in Spanish. The acronym is *PROMISA*, promise, but it's basically we're imposing financial oversight on this island colony as a promise. Figure out the contradiction there. Barack Obama signed that in June 2016, 2017, maybe 2018. Wish I remembered.

And...and...and, this...this...this legislation created the conditions to replicate the...the bankruptcy procedure and process perfected by Jones Day and perfected in Detroit and Michigan, to the degree that initially they were gonna appoint a lot of the same actors, to the degree that Judge [Steven] Rhodes was one of the...was one of the key influencers in how it happens in Puerto Rico. The only thing that saved that from happening was that the Obama administration said that the optics wouldn't look good so they...they...they put different people in those...on the board in those positions. But essentially, it's the same process. Essentially, it's the same vulture capitalists that got paid in Detroit and that are gonna get paid in Puerto Rico. And so, rooting against the process in Detroit knowing that it was gonna influence, you know, my island, my island home. So, watching it closely.

[1:12:11]

And then obviously, I think the intersection with the Allied Media conference is that the Allied Media conference happened in June, more or less before the hurricane, so there was this talk about, like, how do we create a solidarity network in resisting emergency management and bankruptcy? How do we learn from the failures even of Detroit to sort of develop new tactics? I mean, that...that was the conversation that was happening. And then, in the fall, somewhere in the fall, hurricanes Irma and Maria hit. And so all of a sudden, the solidarity network now is like how do we raise support for recovery? I think the parallels are still there because I think the tools of empire don't change. And so, the same tools of empire that have dictated what's going to happen in Detroit are the same tools of empire, even the same personnel, that's dictating it in Puerto Rico, that's gonna dictate it in other places.

When the grid goes down in Puerto Rico, as the grid often goes down in Detroit, one asks themselves, "How is this possible?" On the one hand, you can say, "Oh, the hurricane-force winds blew down the grid," but when you look at the details of how the grid is laid out and how absurd it is to lay out a grid like that on a tropical island with mountainous terrain, it befuddles the mind, right? How is it possible? It's not rational, it's business. And, I think that it's the same thing that empire has been doing. Why...why can you talk about a Detroit resurgence and a

comeback because you built the pizza arena [Little Caesars Arena] and you built other multi-unit developments, and you can't ensure that the grid won't go down? How does that make sense? How does it make sense that through bankruptcy you're acknowledging that your revenue sources are...are not enough to pay your debt expenses and that your revenue sources, a large part of them, come from the collection of property taxes? That's what bankruptcy is. How much sense does it make that that's the condition you're in and you're going to give tax abatements, which means you're not going to collect property taxes for X number of years, so that you can build an arena? From a developer who has the money to pay. Not a broke developer [laughs]. How much sense does that make rationally? The numbers don't make sense. It's economic theory of absurd...of absurdity. It's the economic theory of market capitalism on paper out of context, right? So, on paper it works, but you're not doing it on paper. You're doing it in communities where people live.

And so, to think about...to think about Puerto Rico trying to recover from a hurricane and...and...and seeing...sort of exposing the absurdities, the absurdity of Trump coming down and tossing paper towels and saying, "We've done a wonderful job. Only 16 dead," and that Puerto Rico is surrounded by water. What water, right? The absurdity of this is what's running the country, but also the absurdity of colonialism. This is colonialism writ large exposed by Hurricane Maria and...and the history of colonialism in the U.S., by the U.S. And so, you have a grid that's propelled...that's connected to one or two sources. So, it's not a redundant...it's not a multiple redundancy. It's connected to one or two plants. The plants are fueled by oil. So, you have to...you have to import the oil. You have to import the oil from the U.S., right, which is a favorable relationship for the U.S. enterprise. Your colony pays more in oil than the oil is valued because your colony can't pay...can't import the oil from anywhere else. There is no competition. The free market's supposed to be compet--there is no competition. You have to buy it from us, we can raise the prices, and you will always buy it because you need it to keep the lights on. That doesn't...that doesn't make sense rationally, so that means to tell me that the systems that are in place are irrational systems, absurd systems intended to favor a few, particularly U.S. corporations.

[1:17:55]

And, that's precisely what Detroit is facing, this continuous onslaught of capital and favorable treatment towards already capitalized million and billionaires who get tax abatements, and you can't pay your bills, and you're bankrupt, and that's what's... And so, you have before the...before the...the *promisa* was signed, it led Luis Fortuño elected as governor as Puerto Rico, who was a rising leader and voice in the Republican Party in the U.S., who's also colonized, right? So, he's trying to show how good he can be as a Republican. In 2008 when the economy collapsed and the global economy in 2008, 2010, the global economy was collapsing, and the harshest austerity imposed on any nation at that time was Greece. You had a Puerto Rican governor who was a Republican trying to prove himself a good Republican who verbally said he was gonna show that Puerto Rico could impose austerity measures greater than Greece. So, he begins to cut municipal jobs. He begins to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, leading to population loss, population loss. People leaving, going to the United States to try to find jobs now because the greatest employer in the isla--in the colony was the public. And so, you start to cut the public payroll, now people have got to go find jobs. And, he was gonna austerity Puerto Rico out of financial calamity in a way to prove that he's a good Republican. He's gonna be a better Republican than Republicans up north.

And then, you have *les Promisa*, and you then...you have--so, you have a series of things leading up, right, to the hurricanes. We can say that the hurricanes devastated, and they did, but you have a series of things that are happening that are...that had led to that. If the grid could've been reno--renovated and adjusted to make sense for the terrain, but the oil interests in the U.S. wouldn't allow it. And who built the grid? It wasn't local folks. It was U.S. firms. It was all set up to benefit the firms. And so, just like Detroit, Puerto Rico still loses power because you have an absurd system set up not to benefit the people but to benefit the...the, you know, the capitalist class.

The last thing I want to say about that is one of the...one of the things that raised in my mind during the trip to Puerto Rico with DEAL was there was a guy who was like an urban planner who was giving a presentation and...and he listed--I...I...my only lament was that it was purely in Spanish, and so I have to... Like, for me, even though I'm bilingual, there's a catch-up. But, he listed the trajectory of land use laws, right, some of the problems in...in contemporary moment, right. He traced the history of those land use laws, the precedent, right, and some of the land use

laws go back to Spain's, you know, administration of...of the colony. And so, some of the origins of how to treat the land were written by Spain.

And then, you have 1898 when the United States colonized Puerto Rico and they began to amend the land use laws, partly because you couldn't have Spain precedent, like, but they're amending the law according to precedent in the United States. The United States as a whole is obviously much larger than Puerto Rico, the terrain is much different, but you have sort of absurdities manifest themselves. For example, you have a precedent--I think it was a precedent in one of the plains states. I can't remember right now--that informed the way that Puerto Rico would--and...and...and the terrains were totally different. So, how do you...how do you interpret a law that was...that was designed for a flat land, you know, a plains, and interpret it for mountains? It's like, how do you--this is like determining ownership rights, right. How do you...where do you drive the stake at what point in the mountain, right? But, it was in law, and so now you have multiple precedents without one single origin to go back to and learn from.

And, people are trying to figure out how to...how to take vacant land and make it usable for the community, for the public, legally, right. They didn't know. They were trying to fig--so, all of this stuff is stuck in legislative process. Meanwhile, things have continued to deteriorate. And so, people are squatting in abandoned buildings and fixing them up and...and making them work for the community good. Schools that are abandoned were being--in post-Hurricane Irma and Maria--were being transformed into affordable housing without paper, without legal ownership because they couldn't figure out who had, you know, original rights to it. And so, I think... In some ways, I think about some of the unique things happening in Detroit, right, around land use and sort of, you know, taking action and asking permission later and, you know, squatting on land, doing gardening on land without care for ownership. My only concern on both sides is once the land begins to value, then, you know, they're gonna try to take it from you, so making sure that you have some kind of precedent and some legal standing and ownership rights because then your whole project is jeopardized, and I think that that was partly why they wanted to know what we were doing in Detroit because I think that they were really concerned about losing some of the work that they had started.

[1:24:48]

PB: Are there any other... I mean, whether it's at the Allied Media conference or afterwards in those lines of communication or in your trip there with DEAL, were there any lessons that you were bringing back to Detroit in terms of resisting these really global systems and structures?

RE: I think the biggest, probably the biggest lesson for me was during the trip that I took a year ago in April to Puerto Rico through DEAL with Eliza [Perez-Ollin], the director of DEAL. What began to emerge in our debriefing and our talks to the School of Law--and we did a podcast. We did a couple of engagements. What began to, like, solidify in my head was that the way out of this mess was rooted in centering Indigenous practices, that globally the ecological...the impending ecological disaster that capitalism and colonialism and imperialism has wrought on the earth, if there's any hope, it will be found in thinking about how the Indigenous people had relationships to the land and equally how they had relationships with each other.

And so, it became crystal clear to me that a community land trust, which is a creation of Western U.S. sort of organization theory, is really rooted in the Indigenous practice of collaborative ownership, of...of everyone owning and no one owning, right, that...that we were stewards of this land and that our...that our responsibility was to take care of the land and to have a right relationship with each other on the land which we lived, and that's in many ways what a community land trust tries to do or cooperative housing tries to do. And so, for me, the...the answer out of that trip--especially because I was thinking about Puerto Rico sort of from a colonial standpoint. You had these laws that were imposed by Spain that were absurd because they were rooted, right, when you look at the community planning processes or the urban planning processes, they're rooted in Spanish urban planning. But, Spanish terrain is different than Puerto Rico terrain. They were trying to duplicate Spain, and the geography was, like, we're not the same.

So, I'm gonna take a tangent. Imagine I am...went to my father's house. My father recently bought a...bought a small piece of land and has a house in Puerto Rico in the mountains. He was really...he was really upset that the water. At one point,

the water, the tap water was irregular and had stopped flowing, and everyone has a...like a cistern collecting water, right? Or--but, he was really like embarrassed by it. And I was like, "Don't worry about it, Dad. I, you know, I would want the experience, the full experience. I don't have a bougie life, you know. Like, I wanna live the life of Puerto Rico." But...but, imagine the absurdity that in a place where it rains where everybody is not collecting rainwater, where it's not common practice, Where you're not thinking about not just the cistern, but how do you collect if off the roof, you know? Very few people had rain water collect...being collected out of the roof. Instead, what they depended on was like a...a water treatment facility pumping water. Now, going back to the notion of absurdity, how absurd is it to not collect rain water that's falling from the sky and depend on rain water that has to be pumped up from a coastal area up to a mountain?

And then when it doesn't pump [laughs] or when it fails, you sort of have this critique--and in Puerto Rico at the time, there was, like, this post-hurricane critique, like post-traumatic, like [sighs], Puerto Rico will never...will never rise up this way. You know? There was this critique that unless we have the good things and the nice things, Puerto Rico will never...will never lift itself up. And so, same thing when the lights are out, the streetlights are out, and traffic is backed up. Oh, Puerto Rico will never lift itself up. It's a critique against the system and the politics, but how absurd is it that you're pumping water from a coastal plain and that you're expecting it to work all the time? Somewhere along the line, you've got the idea that that's supposed to work. Somewhere along the line, that idea did not come from that island. It came from this sort of colonial relationship. This is how it works in Chicago. So in Chicago, you got running water. In Detroit, you got running water. You know, like, we just want running water. But, you're not even collecting any of it? The Indigenous people know the land the best, and they know how to live on that land. They know not to put up permanent housing near floodwaters, and I have a lot of sympathy for people who lose their homes and lose life, you know.

But, again, I go back to the absurdity. Indigenous people know and understand--now, today's hard to critique because some of it is climate change, so no one can be blamed, but--well, we all can be blamed. But when I think about the land, how did the Indigenous people live on that land and how can we replicate some of that? Because they knew best. They lived in harmony and in an ecology of balance, of reciprocity. And so, I really think that that was, like, one of

the biggest takeaways from...from that engagement was saying, “Okay, Detroit, okay, Southwest Detroit, okay, Springwells, how do we think about land use or economic development or any kind of development? How do we think about it through an Indigenous lens and an Indigenous framework?”

So, one of the things I tell groups is that in...in our work in Springwells, we look at land, and we say, “What does land want to be?” And sometimes, land wants to be a house. Sometimes, land just wants to be open and green, and that that is a value...that is a value to quality of life too, that just because there’s emptiness doesn’t mean that you have to put a building in there, that maybe you just want to plant trees and...and...and...and...and flowers so that the birds and the butterflies can sort of live and thrive because they’re important in your quality of life. And so, how do we center these ideas of, like, sometimes land just wants to be open and free, and I’m okay with that. I don’t need to put a structure on everything. That’s not community development to me. Community develop--community building to me is sometimes land just wants to be open and free, and we’re good with that.

And...and, I think that’s kind of like what emerged out of that DEAL trip. To me, it’s sort of saying both critiquing sort of some of the things that are happening in Puerto Rico in terms of the recovery but also saying, you know, how does that critique land in the work that we’re doing in Detroit? And so, for me, overlapping that and saying, “Okay, if I were in Puerto Rico, this is how I would want to do some work around land. How does that translate here? How does that resonate and how do we adjust according to a Detroit reality?” And...and, I think that’s really embodied my work as director of land use and economic development has been, like, how did the Indigenous people do it? Let’s learn from them.

[1:33:10]

PB: One of the things that was coming to mind when you were talking about that disconnect of that...that...that mentality that, well, Chicago and Detroit have running water, we should have running water. I’m thinking of this as a segue to talking about the importance of storytelling. So, it’s clear from what I’m hearing that there’s this disconnect from our historical traditions and our byways and our

folkways and our relationships to the land. So, could you speak a little bit about in your work what's the role of storytelling? What's the importance of storytelling for community building, for movement work?

RE: I think--and I think this is a lesson that I learned from Detroit. So, one day I was talking to a community leader, resident leader, Liz Valdez. She's always, like, involved in a lot of things in Southwest Detroit. She's got some time, and she uses it for the good of the community. I think it was a Halloween something in Grace in Action, and she was like--you know, we're sort of shooting it, and she was like...she started to talk to me about, "I remember when we"--and she started talking about a lock-in. Now, a lock-in is a bad term for like church folk who sort of just have youth come in and do an all-nighter in the church and there's some program, but they call it a lock-in, which is a really bad term. But she said, "I remember when we had lock-ins and...and...and how much that, like, as a young person influenced our...our social development, our connection to each other. I remember how impactful that was, and we don't have that anymore."

And at that moment, it became really clear to me, and I shared with her. I think part of community building--which is what I want to use a synonymous term for community development and community organizing. Building community, building space where community happens that sometimes is in a building. I said, "I think that that's the goal of community building is duplicating 'remember when we' moments," that is to say that people's connection to space is related to their memory, 'I remember when we.' And so, I remember when we as a community youth would play kick the can, and why don't we play kick the can anymore? That's a good question. Beginning with the 'remember when we,' the memory, intrinsically connected to space, community, neighborhood, and then asking the question, "Why don't we do that anymore? If we did it, how would that look? How would it be the same? How would it be different?" Right? Knowing that you...that it's not just duplicating. Everything is different in time and space.

But from an organizing standpoint, having a "remember when we" gathering as the source energy for community organizing, if you can duplicate "remember when we" moments, adjusting for time and space, you reconnect folks, a new generation of folks, to land and space. "I remember when we did this on Carson Street." That's a physical geographic space and that's the key for the next

generation is to get them to also remember when they. And what do we need to do to create “remember when we” so that people find value in staying here? For people to find value where no one found value, right? Where the land is so dirt cheap you can’t give it away, where it’s so without value that you just dump shit on it. Right? How do you unpack that internalization of, “The minute I get a chance to I’m out. There’s nothing here for me. The hood has nothing for me.” That’s not true. I don’t believe that, but that’s part of the condition.

And so, I believe that the way that we get past the conditioning is by hosting “I remember when we” and then saying, “How could we again?” If we’re able to get there through storytelling, through historical memory collecting, then I think you begin to get through the psychological conditioning, and I think you begin to sort of build a sense of community that goes beyond sort of the old heads and goes onto sort of the next generation of young people trying to figure out what is this life about and this idea of, like, abandoning or giving up, you know, the hood for something better that eventually never emerges or that emerges for a select few, right, who find their path in the...in the system. I think that the way that you get yourself out of this system of oppression, exploitation, racism, has to...has to incorporate packets of neighborhoods of people are remembering collectively and at some point they’re intersected as a network. If you can create that, then you have framework for resistance, a solidarity framework that understands we’re not all doing the same thing, but we’re in solidarity with each other.

We’re creating sort of pockets of resistance, which is also an idea I glean from José López, that the Zapatista will tell you in Chiapas, Mexico, “Don’t come here and help us. Stay where you are and help us. Don’t duplicate what we’ve done because what we’re done is limited to a time and a place. Do what you think you need to do in your time and place and be in solidarity with us.” And in that way, we build a solidarity resistance to the neo-capital-, neoliberal movement, and that’s how we win. And, I do believe that that’s, like, if we can encourage “remember when wes” pockets through storytelling, that...that I think that we find a way out. Otherwise, trying to get immediate change, trying to sort of revolution--you know, bring revolution, which is instantaneous change, like, it’s only gonna continue to allow those systems to continue to beat us down, to kill us, to persecute us. It doesn’t look like it’s waning, judging by the [Donald] Trump administration and by the police departments in urban cities. And, I really do think that we...we need to start with our stories.

And so, as an organizer, particularly someone who doesn't...who doesn't come from a neighborhood, my first goal is to try to peek out, suss out sort of people's stories, people's memories and then agitate them, to use that language, "Why don't you do that anymore? What would it take to do that? Can you do it? Should we do it? Let's do it," right, as a way to organize and build community, especially given that they're not my memories. And so, I have to suss that out as the objective voice.

The interesting end to the story of that conversation with Liz was right there on the spot, she goes on Facebook and says, "Who is," you know, "Who's down to help me organize a lock-in? We can use Grace in Action, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Almost in that hour or two, the thing was organized and a date was set, the team was formed, and they ended up doing a lock-in for the next generation.

And so, that's the power. To me, that's the power of "remember when we," and the organizer's job is to suss that out, is to help people remember because the people have forgotten. They have forgotten because of the oppression, because of hard work, because the enslavement. They have forgotten who they were. Arturo Schomburg, the father of the Harlem Renaissance, who also was Puerto Rican, Afro-Puerto Rican, he said--I'm gonna mess up the quote--but he said something about, "A people who remember their history cannot be easily oppressed." But, that's the whole colonial empire has been about getting you to forget who you are. You can't remember that you're royalty. You can't remember that you come from great stock. You have to think that you come from nothing, that you have no history. But, we know that the Harlem Renaissance was born out of Arturo Schomburg's collection of Africanist literature that spurred a movement of possibility. And so, nothing is new under the sun. An organizer's job in utilizing storytelling is uncovering the memory that's embedded in the DNA and saying, "Why can't we do it again? Why can't we do it now?," and having that be the launching point of your organizing.

OY: So, with storytelling and the “remember when” moments, we see--just even how you said in the past five, six years--Detroit is changing and places that used to be baseball fields are buildings now, restaurants. Schools get shut down, things like that. So, for people who, like, younger people who don’t have those “remember when” moments, how do you bridge that gap and help galvanize them towards having something to fight for?

RE: So, I think that...I think... So, I think that the “remember when we” prompt is more a prompt for some of the older folk to think about, okay, how will this look like for the younger folk? Because the younger folk don’t have that memory, right? The younger folk are...are the ones that went...that have gone through the most recent sort of onslaught of oppression. So, their “remember when we” are gonna be really [laughs] different than the sort of the older folk. I think that part of what...part of what...part of what creates this challenge with the young people--to answer your question in terms of, like, if they don’t have those strong “remember when we” memories to work off of or if those spaces no longer exist, I think that that’s presents a real challenge, and I think that part of the solution comes from engaging the elders. And, I know that our communities have a disconnect between elders and...and...and young people. Part of that has to do with the absence of that middle generation who are no longer alive, who are in prison, who are absent. And so, I think that part of the fabric of our communities need to create space for a restoration relationship with the elders, and that the elders and youth form a strong bond for the possibilities.

I think if you’re working with youth and they don’t have the strong recollection, then I think part of the storytelling is this, you know, this is what was done in other communities or this is what young people--right, like telling some of those stories of what other young people have done or are doing. But also, like, if you had to create “remember when we” memories for your children, what would that look like? And how do you create it now so that when they come up they’ll have that memory? So, I think there’s still a way to sort of use that framework. Obviously, there’s some nuance involved in how you...how you ask the questions. The challenge for me is that how do you get over the psychological obstacles of...of inevitability, of there’s nothing that we can do, of we tried that before, of that’ll never work? And, I think that memories have a way of doing that. The

memories have a way of starting from something that is near and dear and building from that rather than confronting the obstacles.

I think with young people it's gonna take a little bit more nuance to try to draw that out of them, but, you know, one of the things I say...one of the things I say in gentrifying communities is for...for...for young people particularly who say that their goal is to get out of the hood. Now, I'm not gonna hate on that. There are people saying that Nipsey Hussle should've got out of the hood. What I...what I say though is, "Look around you. Who's coming in the hood? Why are they coming in if it's so bad like you say?" There's something that's not aligned with the mental model that you have of what the hood is versus what these people have who are coming in. And so, if the hood is so bad, why are people coming in? That's absurd. Let's unpack that. Let's critique it. And then, let's figure out, like, would you want to be part of that or not? It's a battle with young people to sort of fight against this flight tendency, but I think if you engage it through a critical lens and you engage them both in the critical telling--I think part of what I'm proposing is a popular education approach, right? So, you pose the right questions and let them unpack it themselves. And then, let them do...come to a conclusion. Do you want to be a part of that or not, right?

So from the point of the organizer or the leader or the mentor, it's sort of being adequately prepared, listening to what is being said, and then question-posing or problematizing, right? So, Paulo Freire talks about peasants, and he said--Paulo Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is the popular education handbook almost. There's a moment that he says to the peasants as he's trying to teach them how to read. He shows up with a red brick. "What is this?" And people say, "Ladrillo," the Spanish word for brick. So, he writes it out, "This is how ladrillo's spelled." They all say it, it's literacy. And then, he asks the question, "Where do you find ladrillos?" And they say, "On houses." The teacher says, "Good. Whose houses? Your houses?" "No, no, no, no! Our houses are made of thatched roof and grass and whatever," you know. "But then, whose houses have you seen that have ladrillos?" "Oh, the bosses' house. All the bosses' houses are made of brick." "Which is the sturdier...which is the sturdier material for a home?" "The bosses' house." "Why can't you build your house with bricks?" "Why can't we?" And then, a big program about, like, rectifying that, right.

It's unpacking that through question posing so that the people come up with it themselves, and I think that what I'm proposing, in answer to your question, with young people who don't have those "remember when we" moments to build on, is to sort of ask them to sort of analyze critically what's happening and help them deal with it piece by piece, not in the abstract. So then at the end of the day, they can sort of say, well, do you want to be part of this, building this alternative, or do you still want to leave? And if they want to be part of it, you say, "Okay, let's build a program. Let's build a work plan." You still will get some people who say, "I'm leaving." And, that's okay. I understand that. But, I think that's the challenge with young people is, like, no one is helping them understand the world about them. People are either telling them what to do, telling them what not to do, or not even talking to them because they're...they're irrelevant in the equation. They don't matter. They're non-persons.

And I think for the organizers, how do you make a person out of them by engaging them critically with this idea that they have a deep embedded wisdom in them? Not just in their experience, but in their DNA, the wisdom of the elders and the ancestors, and that my goal is to kind of help them unpack it as a...as a shaman would or a medicine person would in the Indigenous communities, make sense of the world, deconstruct it, and then think about what they would build instead, and then say, "Let's do it."

[1:51:48]

PB: So, I have one last question for you. I mean, I would love for us to just sit here and chat all day. I think that would be wonderful, but in the interest of everyone's time... In brief, like, if you were to give us, like a thirty second to a minute, like, summary of what is your vision for Detroit?

RE: You know that's a bad question, right? That's a flawed question 'cause it's *our* vision. What is *our* vision? And that takes work. That's...that takes organizing. It shouldn't be one person's vision, so I might redirect the question, but I think part of how I see my work in Detroit is both creating a space for Puerto Ricans to i-- to sort of build their identity, to preserve their culture, and to...and to create a sense of hope in collective space. So, I'm working with Adela [Nieves] and some other

folks in creating a Puert--Puerto Rican folkloric house in Southwest Detroit as a cultural center but also a place for consciousness building, consciousness awakening. And so, on the one hand, I have that as part of a vision for my work in Detroit.

The other vision that I have is helping to be part of creating a pocket of resistance, a pocket of conscious...socially conscious folks who are, like, doing the seventh-generation work, right, who are putting in the time and struggle, but then who are also connected with other pockets. We're doing something on the community land trust someone else is doing, we should be talking to each other. We should be connected. We should not operate in isolation. The system is designed to get you to operate in isolation and alienate you, alienate you from your work, alienate you from your cultural production, alienate you from your community.

So, the organizer's work is building those networks, building that fabric that's been torn apart, and part of my vision for the work that I do is helping to create a pocket of resistance where people...like, those people are consciously awake, we gotta treat them a different way, or we gotta go at them a different angle, right? We can't just impose things on that community because these people will fight you. And then, being in solidarity [laughs] with other communities that have this...built this same aurora, right? Like, wait a minute, we can't just run roughshod on them because they're organized and they're building into the seventh generation. They're not gonna be so easily moved. And if we can do that in Detroit, I think that I will sort of have that sort of fulfillment and sense of time well spent and...and...and good and faithful servant kind of expectation from God. If we don't do that, then God might be critical with me in the end.

PB: Thank you.