

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

Jamon Jordan

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

July 18, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Jamon Jordan is a historian and teacher who grew up in Detroit, Michigan. After graduating from Highland Park High School, he went to Western Michigan University and became a social studies teacher. He briefly taught in Kalamazoo before returning to the Detroit area, where he taught at the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility, a charter school in Inkster, and the Nsoroma Institute, an African-centered school in Detroit. In 2013, he founded the Black Scroll Network, which does tours focusing on African American History in Detroit, Michigan, and the United States.

Outside Source: Black Scroll Network website
(<https://blackscrollnetwork.weebly.com/>)

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.

Abstract

In this interview, Jamon Jordan talks about his childhood in Detroit and how the city has changed, his experiences with racism during his childhood, how white supremacy in Detroit takes the form of policies more than individuals, his activism in high school and college, and how he got interested in Black history and social studies. He discusses his teaching career and teaching philosophy at length, including why teachers should be activists, why African-centric education matters, and how history can be a weapon for activists. He also explains the connections between housing, education, environmental policy, and emergency management, how those policies have evolved from the nineteenth century to today, and how local, state, and federal policies tied together. He closes by speaking about what he is learning from young activists today.

Keywords

1966 Northern High School walkout; 1967 Detroit rebellion; 9/11; African-centered education; Bankruptcy; Black Bottom; Dan Gilbert; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Emergency management; Environmental justice; Foreclosure crisis; G.I. Bill; Gentrification; Housing; Integration; Malik Yakini; National Housing Act; Nsoroma Institute; Paradise Valley; Police brutality; Policing; Redlining; Segregation; Social studies; Urban removal

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Transcript of interview conducted July 18, 2019 with:

Jamon Jordan [JJ]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

JJ: My name is Jamon Jordan. I live in the city of Detroit [Michigan], on the northwest side of the city of Detroit. I am the historian and tour leader for Black Scroll Network History and Tours, and I'm the president of the Detroit Branch of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.

PB: Could you describe for us your neighborhood and the city when you're growing up?

JJ: Yeah. I grew up in Detroit but very close to Highland Park [Michigan]. Highland Park, of course, is the city that's totally surrounded by the city of Detroit, and I attended both Detroit Public Schools and Highland Park Public Schools because I live so close to Highland Park, and I grew up in...in really both communities, the West Side of the city of Detroit and High--the city of Highland Park.

[0:00:58]

PB: What was your neighborhood like at that time when you were growing up?

JJ: So, it was very culturally knit. Most of the adults all knew each other, so on your street and the block around the corner, the adults knew each other, and, you know, I learned early--later when I grew up that one of the reasons they knew each other is because of us, because of us children. We all went to school together, so we were all friends. You went to your neighborhood school. You walked to school, so your friends were also your schoolmates, and they...they came over to your house, and you went over to their house, so their parents knew your parents and vice versa. And so, other people's parents could tell you what to do. You didn't...you didn't have to be your mom, dad, or grandma to tell you what to do. Other adults in the neighborhood could tell you, "Stop doing that," you know, "Go home. Stop cussing." Whatever you were doing out there, you would...you could be scolded or even disciplined by someone else's parent, and it was expected--I mean, it wasn't trained. You didn't...you didn't resist or...or...or revolt against this. This was just understood that this was...was the way things were.

[0:02:21]

PB: What are some of the big ways that the city's changed since then?

JJ: Well, one thing is the...the idea of neighborhood schools is almost non-existent. Your--most people are driven to school, so students don't generally walk to school. If they're not getting on a bus, they're driven to school because probably the...the two schools closest to their home are closed, and so they're driven to school. The existence of charter schools that exist in certain parts of the city, you have to get driven to those. And, of course, so many high schools have closed. When I was growing up, you identified yourself first in Detroit by what side of town you lived in. So if you told somebody--you were at the movies or you were at the mall, and they'd say, "Where you live?" And you'd say, "I live in Detroit." East Side or West Side, that's the first thing. And if you say West Side, the next thing is, you identify yourself by your high school, even if you're not in high school yet, you identify yourself by the high school you live next to. I live close to Mumford [High School]. I live close to Cooley [High School]. I live...I live in the Murray-Wright [High School] neighborhood. Well, we don't identify ourselves by these neighborhoods anymore. The children don't identify themselves by these schools because none of these schools exist. Almost every one of these high schools have closed. And so, that whole identifier and...and...and foundation and

rock for the whole community, which were the schools, particularly the high schools, that is a non-existent identifier today.

[0:03:48]

PB: Can you talk about any experiences that you had with racism growing up that influenced your development of your political consciousness?

JJ: So, I can think of a couple when I was very young. Well, one when I was very young, and then another when I got a little older. So me and my friends in Highland Park, we were hanging out. I guess we were high schoolers, so we were about 15, and we were on one of the major streets that run through Highland Park, Hamilton. And I guess one of the business owners, one of the white business owners, saw a bunch of us young Black men, or young Black teenagers, all male, hanging out, talking loud, playing, you know. I guess it was the summer, so it was like ten o'clock, so it had just started getting dark, but it was dark, and they called the police on us. And the police showed up, but they were in an unmarked car. They weren't in a...in a police car, but they were following us on...on...on Hamilton. And then, we all told each other, "Okay. If this car stops, we're all gonna split and run." And the car stopped, and people jumped out, and we all start running, and so I ran down an alley, and then the plain clothes officer stopped at the end of the alley and said, "Stop! Police."

But, you know, you're running, and the adrenaline's going, and, number one, he wasn't dressed as a police officer, the car wasn't a police car, and so I kept running, and he pulled his gun up. [mimes raising gun] Now, none of us, we weren't selling drugs, we didn't have a gun, we didn't, you know, we didn't assault anybody. We were loud outside. We were hanging out. We were, you know, on a main street. We were, you know, you know, being silly young teenagers, but no...no crime. You know, we didn't break any laws, but he pulled his gun like, as I turned as I was running, [mimes running] I could see him pointing it. [mimes pointing gun] He didn't pull the trigger, but he could've. He's a white...he was a white officer. Well, he was a white man in plain clothes, but I mean, I know he was an officer 'cause they did catch one of us and arrested him. So, that's one of the things that as I got older... I mean, even then, I knew that this wouldn't happen in

a different community with a different group of children, 15-year-old white kids who didn't have a gun, weren't breaking any laws, but were loud and boisterous out on the street wouldn't have a gun pulled on them by police officers. And so, we knew that very early.

And of course, when I visited my friends who were in college--by now, I'm a tenth grader in high school, and some of my friends have graduated and they've gone to college. Every time I visited them in college, there would be some racial slur, some kind of racial slight towards me when I would go up to Michigan State University, which is where many--a coup--a few of my friends went to college. It would either be towards my friends or towards me as a visitor. And so, I knew even then that colleges are...are battlegrounds for--against racism. So, you don't go to college to escape racism. You actually go to college to find a better and more effective way to deal with it, and you're gonna have to deal with it in college. And of course, when I went to college, I did. [laughs]

[0:07:20]

PB: I want to come back to that. What do racism and white supremacy look like in Detroit today?

JJ: So...so, there's a part of racism and white supremacy that removes a...a...a perpetrator. So, there's one where there's not like a person in a sheet, you know, with white power buttons on doing stuff to you. There's a...there's a...there's this other part where white supremacy is definitely the culprit, but there is no person you can point to. One of them, of course, is school inequality. So, the fact that so many schools in the city of Detroit have closed, and the schools that remain, resource-wise, and their ability to deal with the issues that the students are dealing with, having to walk through abandoned communities to get to school, having to get a driv--a ride to school, even the policies that are inside of the schools. Most students are being driven to school, but schools still have policies of if you're late this many times, they put you in detention. [lifts hands in a questioning gesture] But...as if you have something to do, the student has something to do with them being late when they're catching buses, when they're getting driven to school by their parents, but they're still treated as if, you know,

you walk to school and you were late. So these kinds of policies, they're...they're...they're steeped in a legacy of white supremacy and a legacy of racism that African American students have to go through, jump through all of these hoops, and still are punished. So, school inequality is one of them.

And of course, housing inequality and housing segregation and housing discrimination, that's another major part, and really that's really the foundation of Detroit's white supremacy is the housing segregation, the housing discrimination because...because of that long legacy of that is why schools are unequal. It is why students in the city of Detroit are more likely to have to deal with pollution because of where they live. Where they live is a direct result of housing discrimination and segregation, not only by individuals, people who refuse to sell homes to African Americans and realtors who steered African Americans to certain neighborhoods and steer whites away, not only because of those kind of individuals, because of the federal government and the federal government's policies that helped to increase segregation even in the city of Detroit. So, that's...that's the one level of white supremacy that you really can't point to like a person and blame it on a person. It is a long-standing legacy of policies.

The other part of white supremacy, or other parts of white supremacy, of course is still the...the relationship of African Americans to many people who are part of the police department. That's a ma--that's, of course, still there. And of course, just recently, in the last few months and definitely last year, a number of these officers were identified by the posts they were putting on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, their racist posts, and one of the officers is recorded telling a Black woman to go home, and it's one of the coldest days of the year, and he's saying racial slurs as he's making her walk. All of this is this--we've already known this, but of course because of social media and being able to be recorded and people having cell phones that record, we're actually getting to see the evidence behind it, but we've also known that the police department, particularly many of the white police officers who don't even live in the city of Detroit, harbor a lot of racial resentment, and they bring that to the job with them.

[0:11:04]

PB: So, could you tell us a little bit about how you first got involved in activism and organizing work?

JJ: So as a high school student at Highland Park High School--that's where I graduated from--I...I had grown up in a house of reading, scholarship. And so, my...my mother collected all kind of books, so we read everything from fiction to biography to history to every--you know, she...she collected everything, so we read everything. And of course, a large part of that is Black history and books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. So, I grew up reading those kinds of things, so it's hard for me to say when I began being involved in Black history and Black studies because I can't remember a time that I wasn't, but actually using it in a form that we would call activism begins in high school when I'm objecting to the way that some teachers are teaching.

And so, there's a teacher, one of the teachers at Highland Park, who her whole style was we come into class, on the board would be the pages we're supposed to read, and then the questions at the end. That was it. There was really no interaction with the teacher. There was you had it on the board, you were supposed to read it, and then... Okay, so you would read it, and then you'd say, "You know what? I don't understand this part." "Read it." That was her answer. So, you just...that...that was it. It was no actual teaching, no, "Okay, you know what? Everybody stop for a minute. Let me explain this concept." That never happened. And so, we began to disrupt her class, about three of us in the class. We kind of organized ourselves to disrupt her class on purpose, and she would send us, of course, to the counselor or to our principal, and that's where we would...that's where we would tell her style of teaching. We would let them know her style of teaching. We were Black students. No...no white student would have to go through this. We're Black students, and we're not being educated. We're being denied an education in our own school.

And eventually, one of those disruptions got so...so...so disruptive that I got suspended. And so, when we...when I came back three days later, of course, you have to have a conference when you come back. So, my mother's there, I'm there, the principal's there, and the teacher's there. And we, as...you know, I'm...I'm not upset. I'm not, you know, like, "Please let me back in the school." So the teacher said her piece, and then I said mine. And I said, "She doesn't know how to teach

Black students. We've been deprived of education. That's been...that's been the legacy of Black people since slavery that we were denied an education, and right now we're in a school and still being denied an education even though we're sitting in a classroom. She has no business teaching Black students." And the principal said to my mom--my mother is... [opens mouth, raises hands] 'cause she didn't know all of this was going on. You know, she just thought I got...I was talking in class, and I got suspended, and that she's gonna go up there and tell 'em he won't talk in class anymore, you know, let my son back in. She didn't know that this was all a protest, this was all a, you know...a...you... And so...so, she's standing there [opens mouth; raises hands] like, "What's going on?" And the assistant princip--the...the principal is saying, you know, "We...we like outspoken students, but you do have to follow the rules, you know. We...we don't have any problem with you being outspoken, but you do have to follow the rules."

Now, the teacher's crying, and as she's crying she says, "You're talking about me not being a...a good teacher, but you're not a good student." And so, even though I feel like the onus should be on the teacher and not the student, it did hit home that at least I should try, you know. And then if I do all I'm supposed to do and she doesn't do what she's supposed to do, then I've got something to say. But, I was...I was kind of halfway doing school anyway. So all that protest, yeah, you're protesting, and you might have a valid point, but you're not...you weren't doing what you should have been doing either, so I began to be much more serious as a student because it was a...it was a good rebuke. You know, her reproof was on point.

So, I began to be a serious student, and then I began... I had another teacher who was a... He taught Black history, and so this is my final year in school, and basically he allowed us to do oral presentations. You...you can read about, research a topic, and then present in front of the class. And so, you only got to do one, but I think I did about seven that year. So, I did it on Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela. I mean, I just picked all these people who I was studying and did all these lectures to the class.

So when I graduated and went to Western Michi--Michigan University, I was already deeply into talking, presenting about Black history, and when I got to Western, I began joining organizations that were involved in African American

culture and African American resistance to white supremacy. And of course, at Western Michigan University, smack-dab into white supremacy. So, while I was there, I...I started a student newspaper called the Black Scroll, and we protested a number of events including a white professor who told a Black female student to go sit in the corner and stop asking stupid-ass questions. And then he polled the class, "Don't you all think she asks stupid-ass questions?" And so, of course, she...she was friends with many of us. She came to our organization meeting and told us what happened in class.

And so, our first step was to...we reported the teacher to the dean, and then we went to his class and passed out a...basically a written transcript of what happened that day with...with our...with this student Aiyana. So, we passed it out to every one of his classes. We found out what his class schedule was, and at every one of his classes, some of us were there to pass this out to the students so the students would know what he did. Now, the students that were in that class knew that, but the students who were in his other classes may not have known, so we passed it out to every one of the students in his class. And then, we took over his class on the midterm test. We came in and basically had a sit-in or study-in in the class during the midterm. The police came. They didn't arrest any of us, but they of course recorded us, took pictures of us, and then got the Black faculty on campus to identify who the pictures were. Some people they knew. They knew me. They knew a couple of others, but there were many, you know, there were a hundred of us, and so they didn't know all of these Black students. And so, they got Black faculty on campus to identify the others, threatening them with reprisals if they didn't. And so at that point, of course, they were threatening to kick us out of school, but we, you know, we organized people in the community. We organized with the faculty who were on our side, and we continued to be resisters and activists for the rest of our college career, and we weren't kicked out of school.

And as we all graduated, we all kinda held on to some part of what we were doing in college, and I became a teacher teaching social studies, much of which ended up being African American history and...and culture, and part of my activism life was infused into my...my teaching in class.

PB: Flesh that out a little bit for us, like what...what did you, at that particular moment as you're getting involved in the field of education and teaching, ...

JJ: Yeah.

PB: ...what was your analysis there about the importance of this kind of field for continuing...

JJ: Yeah. I saw teaching as activism. So, I thought...I thought...I saw teaching as you can't be an effective teacher for African American students unless you're also an activist. If you're just there because you like math or you're just there because you like English and you...you know your subject, you would not be an effective teacher of African American students who are being deprived of all kind of resources in those schools. So, the fact that you know math real well is just step one. The other part of that is that you're going to be trying to do whatever you can to get these students able to effectively deal with a society that's against them. And so, you have to bring that to the table, and what I found is in education, most of the teachers who were really great in just teaching their subject but not really there with an activist mentality, they're not there because they're committed to something. They teach a few years in a Detroit Public School, and the minute they can get hired in a suburban school, they go--or higher-paying school, they go. So, they were teaching as a profession. They were not teaching as this is something vital and this is a commitment, this is something I'm going to do because I'm an activist. And so, I saw teaching as activism.

The other thing is I saw that social studies would prepare students for white supremacy. So since my students, almost all of 'em, were African American, I thought that teaching this class, I'm not just teaching you the capital of Montana, you know. That's not my main goal of teach...being a social studies teacher. My main goal is to teach these, this history, this geography, this sociology, these current events and mesh them in such a lesson and a curriculum so that you can be prepared for racism, a racist society. And so, I taught like that.

The first school I taught at was--well, when I came, I taught in Kalamazoo [Michigan] where I went to Western Michigan University. So, I taught in Kalamazoo for a little while. But when I came back to the city of Detroit, the first school I taught was...it was called the Benjamin Carson Academy, and it wasn't the one that exists today. It was inside of the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility. So, that's the first school I taught at in the city of Detroit, and probably one of the most powerful teaching experiences I've had in my 20 years of teaching. These are students who were locked up, students who...who, in most cases, were missing years of education. So, in fact, I would argue that a large part of the reason they were locked up was because they were missing years of education. They...they're not...they weren't dumb, and they weren't...they weren't even cognitively impaired. They were people who had missed three years of school, you know. So, they knew they were smart. They...they...they...they could think. They could look at situations and figure out the best way to get around this and do that, so they weren't like they were dumb students. They had never been taught how to read. That's all. They had never--so they didn't know how to read, but that...it wasn't because they had a cognitive impairment. It was because they had missed school. They hadn't gone to school. And in many cases, they were, when we talk about reading, writing, and arithmetic, they were three and four and five years behind where they should be.

And so, I knew I couldn't go in there and say, "Okay, open up the book to page 20, and we're gonna read. You start first, sir." I...I couldn't teach like that. You know, this is not that kind of teaching. Now, I always thought that that kind of teaching wasn't true teaching anyway, but I knew I couldn't do that with this group. And so, I...I talked about current events. I...we used the book, basically, with the students who could read and me, we're explaining what's happening. We're using art. We're using dramatic pre--presentations, so the students are making little skits of this scenario so that they can make it more clear for them, and we did a major one for basically the...almost all of the grades. So, I taught fifth through eighth at the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility, so all the fifth through eighth students were part of this big lesson that we did on September 11th 'cause I was teaching there when the September 11th attacks happened, and so I was teaching this longer history of America's relationship to the countries of the Middle East, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and so I'm teaching this longer history that we...we...we should not start talking about September 11th starting at

September 11th. There's a longer history--Ooh! [gestures wildly and knocks something over] I'm sorry.

PB: That's alright!

JJ: Talking with your hands, [both laugh] that's what happens. I apologize. [laughs] I don't know if y'all want me to...

Herbert Taylor: You're good! Do you.

JJ: Alright. [laughs] So, there's a longer history between the United States and the countries of the Middle East that is a part of what happened on September 11th, and so I had to talk about that longer history. And so, we had a group of people talking about the...the removal of [Mohammad] Mosaddegh from--by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]--from being the President of Iran and the installation of the shah. So, we had a group of students doing that part, and they were acting out that scene. We had a group of students acting out the United States supplying weapons to Saddam Hussein during the war between Iraq and Iran. We had a group of students acting out the United States recruiting people, jihadis really, from the Middle East to go to war with Russia in Afghan--in Afghanistan when Russia invaded Afghanistan. So, we were going through this whole--and other episodes too--we're going through all of it in different groups. They're focused. They had learned about that one, so that was their expertise, so they would teach that. Then another group, that was their expertise, they had researched that, so that would be their... And so, we did that, and...and the students had a much more deeper understanding of September 11th than just what the New York Times printed on September 12th. So.

[0:26:26]

PB: So, could you talk about how you transitioned in...into working with Nsoroma Institute? And then, I mean, kind of what that taught you about the importance of African-centered schools within Black freedom struggles in Detroit or in general.

JJ: Yeah. Nsoroma became a school actually in Highland Park while I was in high school, so I knew of its existence since I was in high school. And of course, that was during the time period that I was an activist in school, so I...I was paying attention to Nsoroma. There was a newspaper called the Michigan Citizen, and it printed in Highland Park, and so I would read it as a high school student so I would know. I knew about Nsoroma even when I was a high school student. When I was in college, when I would come home or when I would get an issue of the Michigan Citizen, I would kinda...kinda keep up a little bit with Nsoroma Institute, this African-centered school. Because by the time I'm in college, probably even high school, even though I don't use...I wasn't using that term yet, I was Af--I was African-centered. So I was in--well, we were using the term Afro-centric back then. So, I was Afro-centric. I don't really probably embrace that idea until...until I'm in college, but I was, you know, already kinda doing that, wearing African clothing, you know, practicing or going to African celebrations like Kwanzaa, so. But by the time I'm in college I'm embracing it, and I'm kind of still keeping up on tabs with Nsoroma from afar. I'm in...I'm in Kalamazoo, Michigan at Western Michigan University, but kinda keeping tabs on what Nsoroma's doing. And, they've moved a few times, I've read that in the news that they no longer in Highland Park and they've moved, but...but I've been keeping tabs on what they were doing.

And then, I was working at Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility, and the...this is...this is a charter school inside of the...the...the jail, inside of the detention facility. So, I'm working at a charter school that...whose...whose company that runs it is out of New Jersey, and it's, of course, all white CEO [Chief Executive Officer], board. And little by little, the staff, particularly people like me, are coming in loggerheads with this white CEO, Vice President, and manager, and they began to become very strict about rules. So, they want us to wear uniforms, white polo shirt, Black slacks, dress shoes. So, they want us to wear uniforms. They...they say everybody else is in uniforms. The...the guards are in uniforms. The students, of course, are in jumpsuits. So, you should be in uniforms. And so, a number of us are leading protests against the uniforms. But...and now...then, they're gonna get real strict. So if you're one minute late, they have a person at the elevator. So when you come up--'cause you have to, when you enter the school, you have to come up an elevator. There's a bad--they send a person who's going to mark you late if you're one minute late on the elevator, and if you're late however many times, you're fired. And so...

So this is what they're doing, and then they lose the contract with the county. And so, everybody's laid off. Everybody loses their job. Some people apply for the new company that comes in. Some of us go other places. I go to Inkster [Michigan]. So I'm working in Inkster for a year, and the...the school is clearly on its way to closing. It's another charter school, and it's on its last leg when I...when I go in that, you know, if they don't do good this year, it's over.

And so, I'm... Nsoroma, who I've been keeping tabs with, I send my resume to them. They don't respond, and I go into Nsoroma and meet with Baba Malik. So, Malik Yakini is the director of the school, one of the founders of the school. I meet with him, and we talk for hours, maybe about three hours, about Black history, about Black nationalism, about faith, about all kinds of issues. But, he doesn't hire me. He just says, you know, "If we get an opening, you know, I'll...I'll give you a call. You know, it was nice talking to you." You know, like. But, he walks me into some of the classes so I can see how the school works, and the teachers think I'm hired. So... [laughs] So...so the teachers--you know, 'cause he's walking me through these classes. They saw me. They think that, oh, he must have got hired.

So when I come and visit like two weeks later, you know, as a...as a, you know, a follow-up, you know, I'm still available if you need a, even if you need a sub or a TA [Teacher's Assistant], you know. I'm still available. One of the teachers is like, "Oh man, you here? Alright, I'm...I need go down to the...to...to my car and grab this and da da da da." And so, I'm...I'm teaching his class. So, he... [laughs] And so, as Baba Malik finds out about all this, he makes me a TA. So, he's like, "Really, there's no TA opening, but, you know, you...you...you been...you've been here, you've been doing it. People think you work here." So, he made me a TA. So for...from January of 2003. I think January 2003...maybe 2004. January of 2004 to June, I was a TA. In September of the next year, I was a teacher. I was a middle school social studies teacher, sixth grade--I'm sorry, seventh grade social studies teacher. So...and that was the beginning of a ten-year working with...at Nsoroma. I worked there for ten years and eventually becoming the African cultural studies instructor and the--for the whole middle school, not just seventh grade, but sixth, seventh, and eighth grade.

[0:32:55]

PB: What kind of impacts did you see Nsoroma having in the city and the students that...

JJ: Yeah, so what I was doing at the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility teaching students to grow up, to be able to respond to oppression, was what the whole school's philosophy was. So, it wasn't just me and another teacher at a school doing something. It was the school's philosophy that this is what we're doing. We're not teaching these students just to grow up, be real...be really good and become lawyers and doctors and...and...and engineers. We want to teach them to be--if they want to be lawyers and doctors and engineers, that's fine, but they're gonna be lawyers, doctors, and engineers committed to doing something for the African-American community. That's what we're...that's what they're gonna be doing, committed to bringing progress and...and fighting against racism. So, the philosophy of the school was that. So, it wasn't just me, you know, in the wind. It was the philosophy of the school, so I fit very much with the philosophy of the school 'cause what I had been doing on...on my own at other schools was the whole philosophy of Nsoroma.

PB: This is kind of a more general question, but why is...are African-centered schools important in Detroit?

JJ: Yeah. African-centered schools are important because they are surrounded by a Euro-centric environment, and Euro-centrism, if you don't know it, you accept it as the norm. You accept it as that's regular, and this other stuff you're doing is strange. The idea that European norms, Euro-American norms, customs, ideas, philosophies are the norm is only because Euro-centrism is the norm.

And so, we want to ground them in African culture, number one, to let them know that there is a culture before Black people showed up in America. That's first. No group of people start out in slavery. So, there's this longer arc of history that Black people are a part of that you ought to know something about. You should not believe that math begins with Pythagoras, you know. That's false, number one,

but number two, it...it...it initiates you into believing that Europeans are the standard for all things. You should not believe that Euripides is the beginning of drama, Black folks don't have drama. [laughs] Alright, you should not believe that science begins with Aristotle. So, Africans had math, science, poetry, drama, architecture, engineering, philosophy, astronomy. All these things were already fully in place on the African continent before there was any relationship between Africans and Greeks and Romans and...and...and what is called classical western civilizations.

Even the idea called classical western civilizations is a Euro-centric idea because when you look up classical in the dictionary--I would have my students do this all the time. Look up classical in the dictionary. The first definition, the first two definitions of classical is having to do with Greece and Rome. That's the first two definitions of classical. You start out with the idea that Europeans are what the standard should be based on. Of course, classical means a thing or a society or a practice that is at a high point that influences other...others. So, if it's classical music, it influences later musics. It's so great and so powerful that it influences all other kinds of music. If it's classical art, it does the same thing. If it's classical music, it... Whatever it is, classical dance. But, we're taught that classical really means what Europeans have done. So if it's classical music, then it's what we hear with Beethoven and Bach, and so it's that music. John Coltrane can't be classical. I mean, that's what we're being told. And, I'm arguing that...that definitely jazz is classical. It influences all kinds of music. It is a foundation of so many other kinds of...so many other elements of culture. If you're talking about classical dance, you're talking about ballet. You ain't talking about African dance, but African dance is classical. But of course, if you're talking about classical art, you're talking about art from...from Western Europe.

And so, so much of Euro-centrism is embedded in the culture that you don't even know it when it's there. It's almost a Euro-normative ethos that European stuff, that's just human, and everybody else is something deviant from, something...everybody else is doing something other, and that's a problem. We don't want our students to start out that way and then we have to reprogram 'em in college. A lot of the concepts that I learned to combat this way of thinking, I didn't learn them until I was in college. What we were doing at Nsoroma was growing, teaching them from a child that you don't have to accept Euro-centrism, and so it...the norm for them was being a self-determined person, and

Euro-centrism was outside thinking. It wasn't embedded within them like it was for many of us who were teachers.

[0:38:26]

PB: So, what do you see as the real-life consequences in Detroit for...for Black students not having...or for Black students not having that perspective that Nsoroma was teaching or like being indoctrinated with Euro-centrism?

JJ: Yeah. One of the things is that the whole idea of anything, any kind of progress, you're goin--you're...you're embedded with the idea that that has to come from white people. So, if there's any form...if...if we want to solve the issues of... [long pause] I want to say almost any issue, but we want to solve the issues of poverty. We want to solve the issues of people not being able to get a job. We want to solve the issue that schools are being closed, and there's all this vacant land in the city of Detroit and it's blighted buildings. The...we...the idea for many people is we need white people, and...and that might not be as harmful as the...the concomitant idea that when white folks come in and do something, they become the heroes.

And so, what's looked on in Detroit, for...for instance, many--I do tours for schools all the time, schools in the suburbs and schools in the city of Detroit, and one of the things I've found the students and even the teachers believed, when they think of Detroit, they think of Detroit is moving up, is getting great because of Mike...Mike Duggan, Dan Gilbert, and the Ilitches. So, they credit white developers and a white mayor with the greatness of Detroit now, and when they talk about when Detroit was messed up, they think of Kwame Kilpatrick and Coleman Young. And so failure in Detroit, that's assigned to Black people, and progress in Detroit is assigned to white people. That's how they see it. The teachers see it that way. The parents see it that way. The students see it that way. Both white and African American students and teachers and parents see it that way. And part of that is because they've in...they've been in...in...initiated. They've been engulfed in white supremacy in that progress comes when white folks are...are involved, and failure comes when Black folks are involved. And some of 'em say it outright, and some of

'em don't verbalize it that way, but if you hear what they're saying, that's what they're saying.

And so, part of what I do with my tours, with my lectures, with my presentation with the students is orient them to another history that has been hidden from them, partly about the world, partly about the United States, but largely about the city of Detroit, that they know nothing about and that it...that show that African Americans brought progress to the city of Detroit and that Detroit wouldn't be a place like it is without African Americans, and...and some of them had never heard that before. They never knew that there was a Black business district in the city of Detroit with 350 Black-owned businesses called Paradise Valley. They...they...they never heard that. They think that businesses came downtown because of Dan Gilbert. And that there's this other history that happened way before this that could probably be diff--downtown would be a different history had they not been removed by government policy, not by, you know, a...a band of Ku Klux Klansmen, but by the government removed this Black business district. And that we would have a different downtown had Paradise Valley been allowed to continue.

So, they don't know anything about that. They don't know anything about the fact that there were...the police department had this long history of police brutality and harassment and shootings of African Americans until Coleman Young became mayor and began to fully integrate the Detroit police department. He never fully solved the problem, but it went down from 3, 963 complaints of police brutality the year before he's elected and after his second election 895. So, 895 is not great, but compared to 3, 963, it's a...it's a big difference. Alright.

So, some things they don't know, and my...my job, or part of what I see as my job, is to inform regular folks, but activists too, so that they're equipped with armor. They still got to go out here and deal with this world, you know, and the world is still, particularly our society, is still Euro-centric. So, you still got to deal with that. It's never gonna...that's not...learning from me is not gonna stop that from being the case, but I want to give them some armor, some weapons to go and deal with that, both activists and then just regular folks, to be able to have something to protect them against this other world that is coming down upon them.

[0:43:38]

PB: I want--I was hoping we would get into that...

JJ: Mm.

PB: ...since we're here, like could you talk more about...just like flesh this out for us like how...how can history be used as a weapon in struggles for liberation?

JJ: Oh, yeah. Alright. So, yeah. One of the things that history does, it gives...it...it teaches possibilities, alright. So, there are people who have not envisioned possibilities until they hear it, until they hear that, oh, folks did this. This happened before. So, one of the things that it does is it focuses possibilities.

The other thing is it focuses...it...it gives people a...a...an understanding of activism that they themselves didn't already know. If you didn't know, you would have thought that 1967 was nothing but a riot. You might even be weird enough or...or...or uninformed enough to think it was a race riot. So, you would have thought that it was that. But if you get some like kernels of history that connect this longer history to [19]67 and [19]67 to today, you find that [19]67 is an outgrowth of activism, outgrowth of Black power, civil rights activism against all kinds of...of oppression, especially police brutality. And so, now you see that you didn't...if you had activists, you didn't just start being an activist. There were activists already doing things that you've been contemplating doing. They've already been doing it, and you're really building on a longer history of activism, and you ought to be able to reflect and...and look at some of that history and see what you can pull from it for...to active--to be active today.

One of the things that existed is we had a Black bookstore. So, Ed Vaughn's bookstore, which was attacked by the police department on the third day of the rebellion and burned down, this was a gathering place for Black people who were activists. First, for education. They were reading the works there and then trying

to apply them in some form. They were trying to write about what's going on with Black people. They were trying to get involved in politics as they were reading about African Americans getting involved in polit--so they were trying to be...using this as a base. So, we have places today that can be used as bases.

If you go back even further, there's this longer history of faith and freedom where churches were the...the hotbeds of African American political and social activism, and we have African American churches today. Is it time and is it possible that some of these buildings that Black people owned--because, in many cases, the churches are owned by...they owned their own buildings. Can they be used again as community centers for organizing, for education, for activism, for political education? Can they be used again for that kind of stuff? If you never knew it happened, you might be less likely inclin--or less inclined to think that you can do this, and so you're out here like, man, what are we gonna do? What are we gonna do? Well, some folks did this stuff, and they used churches, they used bookstores. They used...they started little organizations, and they printed little pamphlets and...and newsletters. They...so, these...these are things that existed before.

Today, you can do that, and you got Twitter and Facebook and all of those things. You can build on what was already happening, and I think it's important for people to understand that, and I also think it's important for people to make linkages that things are connected to other things. So, I know people who are involved in fighting against unconstitutional tax foreclosures. They're involved in that, and they've gone on my tour, they've brought me in to lecture. I work with...with them on...on history stuff although they're focusing on unconstitutional fax--tax foreclosures. I know other people who are focused on school reform and the need to remove emergency managers from controlling education. So, I know people who were working on that. In many cases, some of the people who were working on one and working on the other don't have no clue that these things are connected and there's a historical line that connects. These are really the same thing. You're fighting the same thing without knowing that's what you're doing. Housing and education is the same fight, but we just don't know that.

The reason why you have unconstitutional tax foreclosures is because these homes are being valued at a level that they should not be valued on. The...the market value of these homes has gone down, but the taxes on the homes have

stayed the same. You can't keep up with it. Your life has changed. You've been laid off. You don't have the kind...you're not bringing in the kind of money you were bringing in. That home, you're upside down in that home, you can't keep up with the taxes, and it gets foreclosed on. It gets sold, and now you...the home you were living in and you were paying mortgage on, you fail...you...or...or you pay the mortgage, but you didn't pay the taxes, you've lost that home. The reason why that is, the reason why houses are in this upside-down world, is largely connected to white flight, whites leaving the city, and you get all this abandonment in the city, and African Americans can't make up all of the missing app--missing whites who left, and they can't make up for the missing middle-class Blacks who left. And so, you have a city that has 1.3 million people less than it did. So, you...there's no way to make that up, so housing value is gonna go down, but the taxes don't go down. Well, the reas--this...this lack of people, white flight, Black middle class flight.

You got these schools. Schools are funded by this population. And so, the schools are unequal, and you're gonna get schools closing, and you get a bunch of 'em closed, and schools that stay open have less resources than the schools where everybody went to. Everybody went to Bloomfield [Michigan] or Birmingham [Michigan] or Grosse Pointe [Michigan] or whatever. So, the...the resources went, and those schools are...they're...they're not funded, but you're blamed. The emergency manager is gonna come in and say teachers make too much. So and so makes too much. You pay too much for gas and electricity in this building. We're gonna shut this building, shut this one, shut this one, but there's a bigger problem that has nothing to do with the lights or the...or...or how much the teacher's salary is, which is definitely not the problem.

But if you don't know this history, you can't connect the fact that housing and education are connected. The crisis in both of them in the city of Detroit is the same problem. You're just addressing them as if they're separate, and you're...you're being told to address it that way. You're being told in the local and state level, the emergency managers are trying to say we just need to close 80 schools and that'll fix the problem. On a national level, you're being told No Child Left Behind and Obama's Race to the Top. So we...you do these tests [laughs], and through these tests we'll make school equal, you know. So, we'll give you a bunch of tests. If your kids do bad, you're gonna...we'll punish you, and then after we get rid of enough teachers and administrators, the schools will get better, and they'll

eventually be equal to Grosse Pointe. This is what you're being told by the national government to believe that if you test the schools and they don't pass 'em, you punish the schools by getting rid of the bad teachers, that's what they gonna call 'em, and the bad administrators, put in new people, they'll act right. The schools'll, the...the students will get better on the tests, and eventually the schools will be equal to Farmington Hills Public School.

That's--but what they're trying to do is deal with education outside of the issue of housing. The reason Farmington [Michigan] schools are the way they are, or Royal Oak [Michigan] schools are the way they are, or Grosse Pointe schools are the way they are is because of the income level, the wealth level of the people who live there. That's directly connected to the resources in that school and what those students get inside and outside of the school. And so, you can't make a school equal without addressing housing. You...it's no way. But, you're being told on the local level, on the state level, and on the national level that that's the only way we're gonna deal with education is without attaching it to hou--to the issue in housing. But history would show us that these...this is all the same thing.

[0:52:32]

PB: Yeah. I want to flesh out some of these historical connections, and...

JJ: Yeah.

PB: ...we can go down the line.

JJ: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

PB: So, let's talk a little bit about the connections that you see between struggles for community control of education in Detroit in the [19]60s, [19]70s and these ongoing struggle--struggles for community control that have been waged since the state takeover in [19]99.

JJ: I want to go way before that and then bring us there. So when Detroit Public Schools were founded in 1842, Black people can't go. So, we start out with a Jim Crow system of education. In fact, maybe Jim Crow is being nice because Black people can't go to school when Detroit Public Schools are founded in 1842. Black people have to start their own schools, most of which were in churches, and the people who were starting those schools were Underground Railroad activists. So, the same people who are fighting to save Black people from slavery and help Black people escape from slavery, they own churches. They have started churches, and not only do they have faith and freedom going together, they have education, faith, and freedom going together. So, they've started schools, the first one being inside of Second Baptist Church, the oldest Black church in the state of Michigan, founded by leaders of the Underground Railroad. That's where the first school is.

When Fannie Richards comes to the city of Detroit at the age of ten, she is from the Black elite in Virginia, so she's not a poor or enslaved Black girl. She come from a, really, a wealthy group, a...a wealthy family in...in Virginia, and she's had a private tut...tutor much of her life. When she come to the city of Detroit, they expect that she's gonna go to school, you know. This is Detroit. It's not Virginia, you know, where Black people can't go to school. This is the North--and of course, there's no school. Her family joins Second Baptist Church. That's where she continues her schooling. Now, she, eventually, she's gonna go all over the world and learn all kind of concepts of education and bring those concepts back to the city of Detroit after the Civil War when Detroit has finally opened up a public school for Black people called Colored School. So, now we definitely talking about Jim Crow. So, she applies and gets a job at Colored School, and they've opened up the second one, Colored School Number Two.

She brought from Germany, where she went to...to learn, she brought the concept of kindergarten to the state of Michigan, and she's teaching it at Colored School Number Two where she's clear this is not a real school 'cause she's been in schools all over the world. She's like, this is not a school. There's no books, no paper, no pencils, no desks, no chalkboard, no chalk. It's a public school, so that means taxpayer-funded. Black folks pay taxes, but they don't get anything in the form of education for their schools, which is kind of similar to today. And so, she leads a lawsuit to overturn segregation in Detroit Public Schools. It goes all the way to the

Michigan Supreme Court in 1869, almost 80 years before Brown versus Board of Education. She leads this lawsuit and wins and teach--and gets a job now 'cause the state has said that segregated schools is unconstitutional. So now, she teaches at the first integrated public school for Detroit, Everett [Elementary School], and she taught there for 44 years. Altogether in Detroit, she taught for 50 years, and she taught there for 44 years.

And she's teaching in Black Bottom, which is where she lived. When she's growing up in Black Bottom and when she's teaching in Black Bottom, Black Bottom has all kind of people there. Black people are there. They've been there for hundreds of years, over a hundred years. And, the Irish immigrants are there. Italian immigrants are there. Greek immigrants are there. Greektown is really in Black Bottom. Greek immigrants are there. Polish immigrants are there. So, the school is integrated because all these groups of people live in Black Bottom alongside Fannie and the African Americans who live in Black Bottom. Black Bottom wasn't named that for Black people. It's named that because of the soil. And so, you have all these groups of people living in Black Bottom, and so her school is integrated. She won. She had a victory. She died in 1922. When she died, Black Bottom was integrated.

But in 1934, the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1934, which is going to fund home loans for working-class people. But, the caveat is Black folks can't get these loans. Immigrants who came to Detroit ended up in Black Bottom, many of them, alongside African Americans, but their children and grandchildren aren't immigrants. They don't speak with an accent. They make more money than their parents from the old country. Many of them work in the factories, and they make, you know, more money than their parents who left from Greece or left from Italy or Ireland. And so, they make more money. They don't speak with an accent. They're white Americans for the most part. They're treated as if they're white, not as if they're Irish or Italian or Greek. They're treated as if they're white, and they're able to take advantage of those federal government loans. But of course, the federal government loan, the only way you can get that loan is if you move into an all-white community, a racially homogeneous neighborhood is what the federal government called it, which means they had to move out of Black Bottom. They can't stay there in Black Bottom.

Now, Fannie's dead. She doesn't know any of this. In her life, Black Bottom was integrated. Her school was integrated. But now, whites are moving away into other neighborhoods where the federal government is giving them money to move into a new home and build...paying construction companies to build the homes for them, and they move away, and Black Bottom, by the [19]40s, is gonna be an all-Black community. Fanny won't see that. Her school would be an all-Black school now, not because the Supreme Court has switched their position and said that segregated schools is okay now, but because housing is segregated and whites are moving away into all-white communities where Black people don't live, and you're zoned to go to school where you live. School and housing are connected. Fannie would never see that, but by the 1940s, Black Bottom is segregated. It's all...almost all Black and the schools are...are unequal.

Unequal schools in the [19]20s, [19]30s, [19]40s, and [19]50s would not have been what we call unequal schools today. Unequal schools today is Detroit versus Bloomfield, Inkster versus Birmingham, Pontiac [Michigan] versus Grosse Pointe, inner-city, predominantly Black schools versus suburban, predominantly white, upper-class schools. Unequal--and it is. They're unequal. The schools are unequal. But, that's not what we would have been talking about in the [19]20s, [19]30s, [19]40s, and [19]50s. We would have been talking about a Detroit Public School versus another Detroit Public School, a Detroit Public School that's predominantly Black versus another Detroit Public School that's predominantly white. So, Northern in the [19]50s and [19]60s, Northern High School versus Mumford. Two Detroit Public Schools with the same school board in charge of the resources that went to both, and more resources would have went to a school as it becomes most...mostly white, and less resources go to a school as it becomes mostly Black in the same school district. Housing is what prevents African Americans from accessing Mumford because they can't live next to Mumford in the [19]30s and [19]40s. Housing is why Black people live next to Northern and Miller [High School] and Southeastern [High School] because that's where Black people live, and so those schools have the lowest resources. Housing is education. They're the same thing. We just call 'em something different.

[1:00:11]

And so by the time we get to the 1960s when Black people are talking about community control of schools, Albert Cleage has joined with the students who have walked out of Northern High School in [19]66, and their focus, their...their major protest is about the resources are unequal. The level of education they're getting is unequal. You got kindergarten teachers teaching high school students. You got teachers that don't show up for two or three days, and a student is teaching the class! They don't even send a sub. You know, the students know all this. They know this is not what happen at Mumford [High School]. This ain't what happen at Denby [High School]. This ain't what happen over at Redford [High School], the new school, the...the Henry Ford [High School] that just got built on these white sections of the city of Detroit. They know that that's not what happens there. So, they're clear that this is unequal, so they lead a walkout.

Albert Cleage throws in curriculum. He adds that into it. He says you need a curriculum that will create a self-determined Black community. So not only is all the other stuff unequal, you shouldn't be learning that [Christopher] Columbus discovered America. You know, you shouldn't be learning that. You shouldn't be learning that Washington never told a lie. You know, you shouldn't...you should be learning--so that's another problem, and he adds that component into schools and that Black people need to be running their own schools and hiring teachers that would teach this other truth that Black people need to know, particularly Black students.

And so, you have this rise of the idea of community control of schools, Black people being able to control their own schools. And the more that happens, the more whites are leaving. First, they're leaving the schools before they leave the school--before they leave the city. They're taking the kids out of the public schools. So, in some cases, they still live in Detroit but their kids go to U of D [University of Detroit] Jesuit, Mercy [High School], East Catholic [High School], Saint Mary's Lutheran. They're going to private schools, so they do that first and then still living in the city of Detroit. And then as they move out, of course, they enroll their kids into the suburban schools that they move to.

And so, how we...so as this is happening, as Black people are becoming the majority in the city of Detroit, and so there's no i--there's no way to do integrated schools in the city. Of course, you know Milliken versus Bradley, and I'm not gonna

spend a lot of time on Milliken versus Bradley 'cause I know there's others who can deal with that much better than me, but of course the whole idea is that Black people are gonna have to leave the city if they want to have access to those resources.

This is not about diversity, either. The fight that Fannie Richards fought back in 1869 and the fight of Milliken versus Bradley is not about diversity. It's not about having Black people and white people sitting together, and we'll get a better education 'cause we're sitting next to white folks or we got, you know, white teachers. That's not the idea. The idea is to get access to the resources in those schools. That's the idea. They were not fighting for what we talk about today. We talk about diversity in our workplaces, diversity in schools, diversity in colleges, diversity in community. That's what we talk about today, but that's not what Black folks were fighting for when they were fighting to have access to these white schools. They were fighting for the resources in those schools. They wanted--if...if you're gonna give me a school that don't have books, paper, pencils, desks, then if I'm in a white school, then those white students don't have books, pencils, papers, desks, and Black people knew that would never happen. It would never be a case where white folks in their school don't have any of these resources, the city and the...and the school board won't provide that to a white school. They knew that would never happen, so the fact that they were putting their children there was to have access to those resources.

The...the side effect is diversity. You do get diversity, which is a good side effect. Now, you have Black people and white people at a young age knowing one another and not believing...having to believe all the stereotypes because they're seeing the stereotypes of each other being overthrown every day as they're out on the...playing baseball or playing tag or in class or taking notes or listening to students raising their hands to answer questions. They're seeing, okay, all the stuff I thought about wasn't true, you know. Some white students don't know everything. Some Black students do actually--are smart! So they're learning these... to overcome some of these stereotypes, but that wasn't what the activists were fighting for. That's just a great side effect that we get. What they're fighting for is access to those resources, and that's what they're attempting to have even under Milliken versus Bradley. But of course, we're gonna lose that fight eventually. Black people won't be able to cross district lines to have access to those schools. That fight is gonna eventually be...be lost.

So, Black people say, “Well, if we’re gonna be in the all-Black school, we want it to be the best.” And little by little, they’re creating these places, these...these havens of true education. And in the [19]90s, you have a group of activists, teachers, some people who have even got on the school board, and they are pushing for African-centered curriculum, number one. They’re pushing for instead of all the contracts going to white businesses, these contracts will go to some women businesses, some other people of color, and of course some Black businesses. We’re gonna subdue...they’re gonna be doing some construction. So Jenkins Construction gonna be doing some of this stuff that Walbridge used to do, you know, and so that’s happening.

But, of course, all of these companies are highly allied with the political leadership of the state, and they push the state to use the...the problems in Detroit Public School as an excuse to take it over. But the whole...the whole issue is really about money. The issue has nothing to do with the fact that some schools don’t have books and some schools the...the...the...the kids got a bad test scores. That’s not why the state takes over. They use that as an excuse. What...the reason they’re taking it over is because there are people in the schools and on the school board who have become self-determined, and they’re turning...they’re starting African-centered schools, they’re starting giving contracts to Black-owned businesses rather than giving them all to white construction companies and white printers and white uniform makers, and so what used to go to all-white businesses is now going to some other businesses. Those business complain to the people that they’ve been supporting in the state legislature and in the governor’s office, and the governor and state legislature responds by taking over Detroit Public Schools.

And we’ve been living on...at some vestige of that--although it’s...we have an elected school board now--for...we were living with that for almost 20 years. We were living with some form of that for...for 20 years or so, starting out first with the state choosing a board, so not...no longer elected board, but a state-imposed reform board, and then eventually an emergency manager. First, an emerg...emergency financial manager, but of course the emergency financial manager argued that I have to be in control of everything. I can’t just be in control of finances. Has to be in control of hiring teachers, has to be in control of

curriculum, or I'm not really in control. And so, eventually we get an emergency manager that's not just in control of finances but is in control of the whole district. And so--and, of course, every year that we had one, we lost more schools and we got deeper in debt. So, they didn't even solve the problem that they ostent--ostensibly were...were there to do. So, we didn't get...we didn't lower the debt. They got higher under the emergency managers. And we didn't save schools, we closed more schools in the city of Detroit under these emergency managers. So, education got worse in the city of Detroit. And so, we're living with all of that, and all of these things are connected to one another, but we don't know that they're connected to one another.

[1:08:28]

PB: What's the connection between--and maybe we could get into like the historical context with this too--but what's the connection between, in your mind, the state takeover of the public schools and then like the coup de gras when the state takes over the entire city?

JJ: Well, yeah. They...they are...they're highly connected. Every time that an emergency manager was chosen--in fact, before that the state reform board, when they created... [John] Engler created a board first, and...and then the Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm will impose the first emergency financial manager. When we get...every time we got one, the mainstream media applauded them as a hero, as a savior. They were always presented in a favorable light by Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, Channel Two, Four, Seven. They were never presented as this could go this way, or it could go that way. So, they weren't even objective about it. They never were like maybe this person can help, but maybe they'll fail too. It was always presented as the problems of Detroit Public Schools are...are...have shown that there's a need for someone to take over, and, you know, each time they had one, he's...he's gonna cut the...the...the...the budget. He's going to solidify the schools and...and...and keep them from...from falling into the abyss. They would always present it as if this is the solution, and despite all evidence to the contrary, they presented it that way each time. And one would get fired or leave, and then they'd get another one, and they'd present them as a hero, too. And then he'd go, and then they'd get another, and then they present them as the hero.

So, they're always represented as the heroes even though there is no evidence that they're doing anything great. In fact, there's evidence that things are getting worse because of them. So if that's the presentation that they're the heroes and now Detroit, the city, is in trouble and these heroes have been saving Detroit Public Schools for a decade, then in Detroit Pub--the city of Detroit is in trouble, well, then let's get one for them. Now, let's be clear. There has been...this has already been going on in cities throughout the state. Yeah, it happened to Detroit, but it's happened in Highland Park. It's happened in Hamtramck [Michigan]. It's happened in Benton Harbor [Michigan]. It's happened--so, it's happened in other cities throughout the state. And so along with school districts and now other cities, Detroit is seen as the...you have the same kind of problem that the schools in other...those other cities are having, you need an emergency manager.

But I'm...I'm pretty clear on the idea that for Detroit, the emergency manager situation is a lot different for... It's not like Benton Harbor and those other places, not like Highland Park and...and...and even Detroit Public Schools. My position that the emergency management of the city of Detroit was always gone into with the express purpose of declaring bankruptcy. It was never meant to solve it some other way. The emergency manager was chosen from the beginning to declare bankruptcy. That's what Jones Day--where Kevyn Orr came from--that's what Jones Day had been writing about for a few years, municipal bankruptcies, how to do municipal bankruptcies. It's not an accident that they chose Kevyn Orr, who came from a law firm that's been working on municipal bankruptcies, as the emergency manager. He--they haven't been working on emergency management at Jones Day. That hasn't been what they've been studying and writing legal briefs about, emergency management. They've been writing legal briefs and articles in the Journal of the...the law journal about municipal bankruptcies. That's what they've been writing about! And they chose an attorney from there to be the emergency manager of the city of Detroit? My position is that they always--when [Rick] Snyder chose him, the plan was to put Detroit in bankruptcy. So, it was not...they weren't even gonna try to solve it some other way.

He was--so, he's not like the Highland Park emergency manager, the Detroit Public Schools emergency manager. They closed a bunch of schools, fired a bunch of teachers, but they didn't declare bankrupt--they didn't declare the district

bankrupt. So that's...the...the Detroit one is a little different, and I think the Detroit one has changed the focus of emergency managers. Now when emergency managers are chosen, that's on the table, which prior to Detroit going into bankruptcy, that was not on the table. That would have probably been considered the very, very last resort. But now, oh, they go in with that on...on...on...on the first page because of Detroit, yep.

PB: But bankruptcy not being like the end goal?

JJ: Yeah.

PB: It's the vehicle by which...

JJ: Yeah, it's...yeah. It's the...it's...it...they go in with this is...this is where we're going, bankruptcy. And then, we good--we do bankruptcy. And then, this is...they...once we do bankruptcy, this is gonna happen, this is gonna happen, this is gonna happen. And of course, the first thing that's gonna happen is it's going to...we're gonna take pensions. You know, we're gonna take money from workers. We're going to decrease this...the influence of unions. We're going to take assets that we think are valuable from the city, so those assets won't no longer belong to the city. They'll belong to some other entity, some authority, or the state. Belle Isle, the state. The Water Department, an authority, Great Lakes Water Authority. Cobo, Cobo Authority. We'll...we'll give land away for a dollar--the Little Caesars Arena. So, bankruptcy does a few things, but one of them is of course take assets away, remove money from...from pensioners, and decrease the power and influence of labor unions.

[1:14:45]

PB: So you touched on the land bit--and you touched on this earlier when you talked about your...your relationships with the Coalition to End Unconstitutional Tax Foreclosures. Can you give us a crash course on the historical context of this current wave of mass displacements through mortgage foreclosures and tax

foreclosures and how that relates to the displacement of the urban renewal programs and highway constructions of the [19]50s and [19]60s?

JJ: Yeah. So, the earlier form of displacement of course were urban renewal, which Black folks called Negro removal, and the...they began. And in Detroit, you have the...the major forms of them beginning in the...in [19]49 after the National Housing Act of 1949. Let's be clear: Mayor Edward Jeffries has proposed it to the city council by 1946. The city council agrees with him to begin demolishing Black Bottom, but the city doesn't really have the money to do this monumental destruction of this African-American community. And so when the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1949, which is meant for slum clearance or urban renewal, but what we know, again, Black folks called it Negro removal, the federal government is going to fund these kinds of things.

And so, the city which has had on the books for three years the destruction of Black Bottom now has some funds to do it 'cause the federal government is gonna provide them, and they began tearing down Black Bottom two months after the federal government passed the National Housing Act of 1949. That's when they began tearing down the first sets of houses in the area known as Lafayette Park. Lafayette Park is a portion of Black Bottom. It's the first portion to get destroyed. And so, the working class and poor people who live there--'cause that's who lives there, working class and poor people--are gonna...gonna be displaced. They're gonna be removed, and the mayor who comes in after Jeffries--Jeffries came up with the policy as mayor, but he won't be there to in...initiate it--the mayor is Albert Cobo, who ran on a platform of segregation. He runs on I'mma keep the Negroes out of your neighborhoods. That's what he runs on in 1949 and wins the 1950 election, which you have to understand the context of him saying that and running on that kind of a platform.

He is Governor [George] Wallace before Governor Wallace. Governor Wallace in Alabama says after the 19...the Brown versus Board of Education, and the civil rights bill was being argued. He comes out and says, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." That's George Wallace in the [19]60s. But...but this is--and so, what he's saying is I'mma defy the federal government. That's really what George Wallace is saying. I don't care what the Supreme Court said about Brown versus Board of Education. I don't care what [John F.] Kennedy

and [Lyndon] Johnson are gonna say about a civil rights bill. I don't care even about voting rights act. I'm gonna defy all of that. I don't care what the federal government is doing. I'm the state governor, and I'm gonna defy all of that. That's what Wallace is saying in the [19]60s.

But this is [19]49, and what has happened? The Supreme Court has ruled in 1948--and it's a direct connection--in 1948 that racial restrictive housing covenants cannot be enforced by the government. They're unconstitutional. So in the deeds of many homes in the country, definitely in the city of Detroit, it states you cannot rent, sell, or lease this home to a Negro--or they used the word colored or some other name that means Black people. Can't rent, sell, or lease this home to a Negro or a colored person. And so the year after the federal--the Supreme Court rules that, Cobo runs on I'mma keep the Negroes out of your neighborhood. What he's saying is I don't care what the Supreme Court says. I'm gonna enforce race-restrictive housing covenants. I'm gonna keep Black people out of white neighborhoods. I'm gonna enforce hou--housing segregation by any means necessary. He's saying this before there is a Wallace that's im...important yet.

So, he runs. He is the mayor. The federal government starts giving money to the city to tear down Black Bottom. He's gonna do it with fervor. He's gonna be in charge of the administration that's gonna begin tearing it down, and they tear down Lafayette Park while he's mayor. Also while he's mayor, the federal government offers more money for the ne--the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. He's the mayor. He's won three elections now. And he says, "Oh, I know exactly where I'mma build the highway. Down Hastings Street!" Which was the main street in Black Bottom and in Paradise Valley, the Black business district. So now, he's gonna take the Black business district by eminent domain, and so you're gonna lose not just residential homes in Black Bottom, you're gonna lose businesses, stores, restaurants, clubs, shops, hotels, concert halls, bowling alleys, roller rinks, all these Black-owned businesses are gonna be wiped out too 'cause they're gonna take the land by eminent domain to build a freeway because the federal government gives the money to a segregationist mayor.

Now, let's be clear: he don't want Black...these Black folks to move into white neighborhoods either. So, Black Bottom is being destroyed, but he don't want

them moving to Rosedale Park. What he's really trying to do is a version of ethnic cleansing. He's trying to remove the Black community--the Black neighborhood and leave Black people with nowhere to go but outside of the city of Detroit. Get out of here. Go to Inkster. Go to Pontiac. Go back down South. I don't care! But, I'm not opening any other areas for you in the city of Detroit. So, that's what he's attempting to do, alright. It don't work out that way, but that's what his...that's what he...he dies in office, but that was his attempt to really box out African Americans. You lost Black Bottom where you were living, and you lost Paradise Valley where your businesses were, and I'm not opening up any other places for you, you know. And so, that's what he's attempting to do, but of course he dies in office.

So, the freeway gets built. We lose Paradise Valley. We've already lost Black Bottom, and this is displacement, massive displacement, which is, of course, another cause of the 1967 rebellion, the fact that Black people have lost all of these things and now they're crowded in another neighborhood 'cause it's one of the few neighborhoods that this many Black people can go to, the Twelfth-Dexter-Linwood neighborhood. So, they... Then, they ain't in Black Bottom like they were because Black Bottom has been flattened.

And when they build the first structures, they build the Mies van der Rohe homes. None of them 80 percent working-class poor people can move there. They build the...the Lafayette Towers, and they can't move there. They build 1300 Lafayette, and you can't move there. Those working-class structures that are there, they're Martin Luther King Home and some of the co-ops, they don't get built till the [19]70s, [19]80s, and [19]90s. So in the [19]50s when they're destroying, and the first thing to get built are built for upper-class people. So, most people in Black Bottom were working-class and poor. They cannot come back to...to the first buildings that get built in the new Black Bottom, Lafayette Park and then Elmwood Park. So, they're in Twelfth-Dexter-Linwood, many of them. Some of 'em had to leave. Some of 'em did end up in Inkster and Pontiac and Benton Harbor and Muskegon [Michigan]. Some of 'em couldn't...couldn't stay in Detroit, but some end up on Twelfth-Dexter-Linwood neighborhoods, and so they're there, and that's overcrowded. That's gonna play a part in the [19]67 rebellion as well.

But now, this form of displacement that's happening in the city of Detroit today is not...it's a legacy of that, but it's not so direct like now. Now, you have developers, of course, the largest being Bedrock. So, Bedrock is the major developer in the downtown area--actually, the major developer in the city of Detroit. And of course, that's Dan Gilbert, and he owns 90 buildings at least in the city of Detroit, most of which are in downtown. He just bought the Marriott, Courtyard by Marriott couple of days ago. So now, he owns that hotel on Woodward--I mean on Jefferson across from the GM [General Motors] Renaissance Center. The GM owned it, and he bought it from GM, so. So now, he owns that, but he owns 90 buildings in downtown Detroit. And so, major developer.

As he's fixing up these buildings--which, when I was growing up, many of these buildings were blighted, they were closed, they were abandoned. So when you go downtown and see them vibrant today, it's no way that you can get around the fact that that gives you a feeling of wow, Detroit's coming...coming back. It's really--you know, because when I was growing up, most of the buildings that are down there that are owned by Gilbert, they were abandoned, they were closed. You mighta had one little store in 'em, and the rest was empty places. And so, you have to have some level of--it's no way of getting around it--man, wow, those really kind of look nice down here. And so, he's done that. But as he's done that, of course, the few Black-owned businesses that were down there, their...their...their property taxes have gone up because now this place is more valuable now than it was, so their property taxes have gone up. If you're a renter, your rent has gone up. And if you're renting from Gilbert, not only has your rent gone up, your lease agreement gone up. You have to give a portion of your profits to him. That's part of the deal to be in a...in a Bedrock building. You turn over your business plan, he...and Bedrock assesses how much of your profits ought to also go to them. And so, you pay a lease, a blanket lease spa...a lease payment, and then you also pay a portion of your profits. They argue that being in a Bedrock building makes your business more successful, so we ought to take a portion of your wealth. I argue that it's very akin to sharecropping in the South, which is when African Americans were being paid by crop, but they had to pay rent for the work that they were doing on the plantation. And so at the end of the year, they were in debt to the landowner, and they had to work the next year to pay off the debt, and, generally, they'd be in more debt the next year.

But this is--so, that's his form of development. Ilitches' form of development was different. Gilbert's was buying old buildings that were decrepit, falling apart, putting companies in them, leasing space to them, charging them lease rent, and taking a portion of their profits--that, and he's filled up a whole bunch of buildings downtown. Ilitches, the Ilitch family, they bought old buildings and left them abandoned until taxpayer money came in to do some development. They didn't use their own money. They used taxpayer money. So, that's how you get Fox Theater. That's how you get Comerica Park. Really, that's how you got Ford Field, too. That's how you get Little Caesars Arena. Taxpayer money goes into that. That wasn't Gilbert's way of developing at first, but now it is. Now, he's adopted the same form of development that the Ilitches did and that is accepting taxpayer money--not accepting, taking taxpayer money to build instead of using your own money. You know, I mean, Gilbert himself is worth billions. His company is pretty successful. They could afford much of what they're doing in downtown on their own, but they're using taxpayer dollars to build that new skyscraper and some of the other developments that he's trying to do, and the Ilitches have been doing that for years. I mean, for decades. This is...this is what they do. That's their form of development is to use taxpayer dollars.

So government--'cause taxpayer dollars come from the government--government is choosing winners and losers just as they did before. It's a little different than the old way, giving home loans to one group of people and blocking another group from getting those same home loans with the 1934 Housing Act, which is what the federal government did, but now what they're doing is they're taking taxpayer dollars helping to build...give...to give this money to developers so they can expand their businesses. And, of course, that's at the...at the sacrifice of the working-class folks who are paying these taxes and the small businesses that have been here for years who've gotten none of these subsidies. So really, taxpayers in the city of Detroit are paying for their own displacement. It's their taxes that are forcing them to be able to not afford where they live and be forced to move out.

And so in the downtown area and the Lafayette Park area, which was Black Bottom, and the Corktown area, what's happening there is tax, property taxes are going up, people can't afford to own 'cause they can't afford the property taxes. People can't afford the rent because the rent is going up, and a new class of people who are more economically resourced are able to come into those places

and replace them. So, the hand of government is still involved, but it's a little different than the...than the other way with just building a freeway or the government saying we're tearing down this whole community and we're gonna build something new that, you know, those old folks couldn't afford. But, it is another form of displacement, and... So even in areas that are being developed, we're getting property tax foreclosures. Of course, we're getting that in the areas where there's not much development happening because those homes have fallen in wealth and in value but the taxes have not, which is why we call those unconstitutional tax foreclosures because the taxes should not be so out of sync with the value of the home. And so, so many houses were foreclosed. People were removed from their homes because they're paying hundred thousand dollar taxes on a house that's worth 30,000 or 20,000. In some cases, 7[000] to 8,000 dollars. The house is worth 7[000] or 8,000, but the taxes are rated at a house...as if the house is worth 80 or 90,000 dollars.

[1:29:20]

PB: I think one of the things that we don't talk enough about right now in this conversation is about how with highway construction, urban renewal there was a mandate that at least owners of property would be compensated...

JJ: Yeah, that's right.

PB: ...through eminent domain. I mean, but now, with the tax foreclosures, that the county is taking properties in ex...and selling them in excess of what the back tax is worth...

JJ: That's right.

PB: ...and keeping that profit.

JJ: That's right. So yeah, the original form of eminent domain really means that...that you're offered some...something for--if you're the owner. Now of course, for Black Bottom, that's almost meaningless because 80 percent of the people who live in Black Bottom are renters 'cause they're poor and working class, and so they don't get a...any package. They get an eviction notice, so. And of course, because of housing segregation, many Black people even who could afford homes are renters. So even though you had some Black folks who could afford a home had they been given a home loan backed by FHA [Federal Housing Administration] under the National Housing Act of 1934 and 1937, they would have been home owners, and they would have gotten something. But because the federal government is blocking them from getting a home loan, they're still renting, even though they work down the line on...at the Ford plant from a white worker who got a home loan. They make the same money. They both work at Ford, they got the same money, but one got a home loan, and one is still paying rent. One might even be paying rent at the Brewsters [Brewster-Douglass Housing Projects], so they're living in the projects, but they make the same money as their co-white worker, their white coworker at Ford.

So the federal government, even with that...with...even with eminent domain giving you something if you own, housing segregation plays a part in the fact that Black people don't even get that because they're unable to own. Some homes, of course, have a rent...a...a racial restrictive covenant on it, so Black people can't own in those cases. So, you have all of these things that--and after the World War II, the GI Bill. It... One of the benefits of the GI Bill is you get a low-interest-rate home loan with a low down payment. And so, a lot of people came from the war, got their first house because of their GI Bill benefits. But the GI... The VA [Veterans Affairs] turns over the housing portion of your GI Bill benefits to the FHA. The VA say we don't know how to do housing. You run that. So the FHA runs it, and they run it with the same policy that they've been in...been in place since 1934, so they don't give home loans to African Americans. And so...so, you got Black people that came back from the war who can't get this low-interest-rate home loan 'cause the FHA is blocking it. You only can get a home loan in a race-restrictive--I'm sorry, in a racially homogeneous neighborhood. So, whites who lived in Black Bottom got to move away from Black people if they want to get a home loan. They cannot live in an integrated neighborhood, so neighborhoods that were integrated become segregated, and whole neighborhoods are created segregated from the jump because of the federal government in this case.

But, Black Bottom's gonna become all Black. Black Bottom's not only gonna become all Black, it's now racially homogeneous, which means it's eligible for Black people to get a loan because the FHA only gives loans out to racially homogeneous neighborhoods. If all the whites move away, you're gonna get some all-Black communities now, and that happens, and Black people attempt to get those loans 'cause they're living in a racially homogeneous neighborhoods. But, the FHA of 1934, the Federal Housing Act of 1934 and 1937, and then the GI Bill have maps drawn by the Home Owners Loan Corporation which are color-coded. Green meaning you get the loan. Blue meaning if your neighborhood is in the blue, you'll probably get the loan. Yellow, you might not get that loan. And red, you cannot get the loan. All of the African American neighborhoods, including Black Bottom, are in the red. Red-lining is a federal government term created by these housing policies, including the GI Bill. And all of the...all of Black Bottom, the all-Black community, is...is red. So they can't get the loans even in the all-Black communities! They definitely can't get it if they move into a white community because the federal government doesn't give loans to integrated communities. They can't get it in the all-Black community because it's in the red.

And so, Black people are blocked from one of the largest wealth-building periods in America's history when the federal government is backing home loans. And so even when we get to eminent domain and the fed--and the government is going to give you something for your home, this is meaningless to most Black people because they've been blocked from own...home ownership for...by every level. Personal own...home owners won't sell to them. Real estate people have steered them away into all-Black communities, which can't get home loans from the government, and the government itself has blocked African Americans from getting these loans.

So, eminent domain is not all that much better for African Americans than the one...than the tax foreclosures we're getting now. But of course, the tax foreclosures benefit waves of people outside of the...of the...the people who owned it. And so, they sell it. They...you know, you...you...you're...you're behind on your taxes, and they sell it to another person. And then, that person, if they get behind, they...it can...it can be taken from them. That home can be resold over and over again, and that person can fix it up though. A person can buy it, fix it up,

and then sell it for a much higher price than the people in that community could ever afford to live in.

And so, this is...this is a very problematic, and the city has two development plans I've seen since I've been leading tours throughout the city of Detroit that are--to me--work in opposition to one another. One of them is selling lan--homes through the Detroit Land Bank for kind of a low price, and of course the person has to move in it, fix it up, and it...they have to live in it, and it's their home, and they got a home for a...a...a discount. But, they move into an area where, you know, it's...it's...it's...it's challenged, and they were willing to do that, and they fixed that home up. So, that's one plan that sounds like it is promising.

But the other hand is the...the...the city is allowing whole blocks. They own whole stretches of land, and they're allowing them to be blighted, deteriorate, get houses burn down, fall to pieces because they're not attempting to sell those homes to a person. They want the whole block to be sold to a developer, and they know developers don't want a house. Developers want a whole block, a half a block. And so, they're allowing some homes to just fall to pieces and never get fixed up to be sold so they can sell that whole block or half a block to a developer who might build a...a...a store, a strip mall, a...a plant, a, you know, something else. And so, they...so, these two plans--I know the city probably doesn't think of it that way, but I think they work in opposition to one another, and the city needs to commit to the idea of helping people find adequate housing and just make that a commitment, but that is not where the city is right now.

[1:37:08]

PB: So, we spent a lot of time talking about education and housing. I wonder if you could speak a little bit--about five minutes to 11--...

JJ: Okay.

PB: ...about what lessons that organizers today can be drawing from struggles for community control, self-determination around education, housing from Detroit's Black radical tradition?

JJ: Mmhm. Yeah. Yes, so one of the things is that... What I'm hoping people do is they make the connection that housing is, if not the source, it is the major battleground, and that the other ones spur out of it. So, I mean, I...I work with organizations all the time that are involved in environmental racism, they're fighting against environmental racism. They're fighting for environmental justice. Organizations like Breathe Free Detroit, Detroit...Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice, East Michigan Environmental Action Coalition, EMEAC. Many of these organizations are fighting those things, but all of those things are about housing. We correlate... Pollution is more correlated with race than it is with class, alright. Black middle-class residents are more likely to endure pollution than white poor residents. That's where the term environmental racism comes from. It comes from a study for many years that found the correlation between pollution in the community is more correlated with race than it is with class. And so, the term environmental racism was created to address that issue. Environmental justice is fighting against environmental racism. And so, again, that's a product of housing. That's not by mistake. That's a product of housing, and it's a product of the federal government, too.

We need to understand that you're fighting these local fights. These local fights are connected, housing, education, environment, wealth inequality, all that's connected, and you're fighting these local fights which ought to be fought, but they have to be connected to this larger fight against, really, the federal government because when federal government funded the building of homes by giving people home loans and low-interest-rate home loans and FHA is backing them and...and they're actually paying for the houses to be built in the first place. They're doing that. So, that's the federal government. And so, you get whole communities where there's new housing being built because the federal government's paid for it, and people moved in 'em because they got a loan from the FHA, backed by the FHA. So, they moving in 'em. But, there's other neighborhoods that don't get any new houses being built or very little houses being built, and most people there don't get a loan backed by the FHA, and so they're paying rent and living in a two-family flat, a four-family flat, an apartment

building. They're paying rent, you know. Or it's a project, so they're paying rent in a housing project. So, they don't have a home loan.

The city responds with their zoning ordinances. Hey, this area has a whole bunch of new houses. Now, they were built by the federal government. The people who moved in them had loans backed by the federal government. Hey, this area has a bunch of houses. We won't put a factory there. This area don't have that many houses. It's some apartment buildings, it's some four-family flats, it's some people paying rent. So, we're gonna zone that for industries. And so now, you have industries, factories being built. But what else is connected to this? Race! Because the federal government has been denying African Americans the ability to buy homes, so they're living in those apartment buildings, in those projects where those factories are being built next to. And then later, Latinos are living there, and Arabs are living there, people from the Middle East. So, new immigrants are coming, and they're living there. And so, race becomes correlated with pollution because the city responds and the county responds to the federal government's building of homes in certain areas with zoning. Since we don't have a whole bunch of houses there, we'll put factories there.

So, Detroit is de-industrial--de-industrialized today. We don't... It's not a whole bunch of new factories being built in Detroit today. So, what did the city do now with the...with the legacy of those same ordinances? They're not building factories there. They build liquor stores. They build those kinds of businesses, what we would call fringe businesses. That's why you see more of them in certain areas than others. It is the city's response to the federal government's building of homes and giving mortgages to people in certain areas and not doing it in other areas. The city's response is: well, we got to fill that area up with something. Since we don't got all these houses, we're gonna fill it up with liquor stores today. But before, we filled it up with factories and...and smoke stacks. And...and so--and in...and incinerators. And so Detroit is...Black people in Detroit have to deal with all of these, but the people who are fighting these fights ought to know this. They ought not to think that they're fighting against the incinerator alone, but that's what a lot of the activists for a long time thought. They thought they were gonna try to shut down the incinerator as if that is a thing in and of itself and it has nothing to do with something else.

The incinerator's closed now. Why? Because of what's happening in Midtown! The incinerator sits right in Midtown. What is Midtown now? It's becoming one of the hottest spots for gentrification, one of the hottest spots for people who are moving to the city of Detroit who are not predominantly African American, but of course have much higher level of economic resources than most people in the city of Detroit and definitely most of the people who live in the area near the incinerator. And so, organizations like Breathe Free Detroit, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice--I know they...they don't--but I don't want them to think that purely activism alone closed down the incinerator, you know. 'Cause they've been activists for decades trying to cut that...shut that thing down, and it didn't shut down, and I don't want them to think that--and I know they don't. They are part of the reason it closed, but the other part is because housing.

And if you do not connect housing to your other forms of activism, then you're always going to be fighting a...a fight that you're not...you're really not fighting. You've got your hand behind your back. You cannot shut down the incinerator. You cannot shut down Marathon Oil. You cannot shut down any of these high-pollutant areas if you fight them in a vacuum as if the only thing I'm focusing on is the environmental issues. If that's all you're focusing on, and you're not focusing on education, and you're not focusing on housing, and you're not focusing on police, and you're not focusing on these other issues, then you're not really fighting the fight. You just think you are. And so, I'm hoping that I...the work I do helps people to stop fighting fights that they think they're fighting, but actually fight those fights.

[1:44:07]

PB: So, you've mentioned a couple times that you've been working with various organizations in the city of Detroit.

JJ: Mmhm.

PB: Organizing work.

JJ: Yeah.

PB: What roles do you play within these organizations?

JJ: So, I'm an elder now. [laughs] So, I accept the fact that I'm an elder. So, I'm not the person probably that you're gonna see out with the picket sign picketing. I'm a historian. I'm a teacher. I'm an educator, and what I do when activist groups contact me to work with them, or the youth that are a part of them, is to try to infuse this history to make them more likely to use what they learn from me in their activism struggle. So yeah, I see that as a...as what was going on in the Civil Rights movement. In the Civil Rights movement, there were people who were on the front line, but there were people who were...they were consulting from the [19]40s who were no longer on the front line, but they were from the [19]40s and the [19]30s, and, you know, they were leaders of rent strikes and leaders of sit-down strikes at the factories, and they were doing that kind of stuff. And so, they were talking to those young people. Sometimes, they...they...they jumped in, too.

So, you had people who came from that era who ended up--like Ella Baker. So, Ella Baker will go to Shaw University and talk to the students there. And of course, Dr. [Martin Luther] King and some of the other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference wanted her to tell the students to create a...a student wing of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but she doesn't do that. She comes from a...a longer arc of activism than King and the other preachers. She's come, you know, she comes back in the...in the rent strikes and the...in...in Harlem and the early NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] activism when they were being outlawed in certain states, you know, so she's come from that history. And so, she tells 'em, "You youth, you have to organize your own organization, and you...you do not have to take orders from the older folks. You have to see the problems and address them in the way you see fit." And so, she provides that kind of advice, and then tells them the history of activism and lets them know that this is the way people did it before. They were living in Harlem, and they handled it the way Harlem handles it. People in Mississippi wouldn't have done it that way, but people in Mississippi were doing it the way people in Mississippi would do it, and they weren't looking at Harlem, we

got to do it the way Harlem... People were looking at their conditions and handling it the way they think that they should handle them. And she said, "That's what you guys got to do. You're students. The preachers in Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they're gonna handle things the way they're gonna handle it. But you're students, and if that's the way you want to handle it, that's fine. But if that's not the way you want to handle it, you need to handle it the way that's best for you." And so, she's providing advice. And out of that advice, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee will be formed, SNCC.

And so, I think that's important that people have a historic worldview rather than just what is in front of them in their face at the moment. That needs to be a part of it, what's in front of them in their face, but they also have to have this other form of history to help buttress them through the decisions that they're gonna make.

[1:47:22]

PB: So, I want to leave us with... We spent a lot of time talking, looking backwards.

JJ: Mmhm.

PB: Right, I mean, ...

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

PB: ...all the principles of Sankofa...

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

PB: So, let's move that to the other bookend in asking what's your vision for the future of Detroit?

JJ: So, one of the things I see is--because I'm a historian, so I...I see history, but what I'm being taught to see, mainly from young people, is that there's a future that is...you can't fully determine based on history. And, you know, I always see--'cause I'm a histor...historian--I always see things in history that this will end up becoming this because that's what happened back in the day, and this will end up becoming this because that's what happened back in the day, but they've been showing me that, no, things can go a different way. And so, I'm getting an education too through all of this, and one of the things I see from youth is how there are other streams and other ways of addressing issues and other ways of build...building progress.

I have no concept of cryptocurrency, but that's a thing and that is...that may be some other kind of solution to an issue, but something I never...I can't look at history and see that and see something that would help me understand that. Afro-futurism and all these other ways of thinking about how things can end up, even some of the ways that art is being used, even though that's a historic thing that has happened, the way that it's being done today is so, so much more revolutionary than I could have conceived that, you know, I have no way of...I have no frame of reference, no historical frame of reference of using that as a way of igniting activism and moving people, moving us forward. So my history helps, but there are some other things that are a part of people's reality today that they are also using as tools, and I see them using much more of those tools to bring Black people forward and to make progress in this city but throughout the country and really throughout the world. I see that as happening, and I'm much...I'm...I'm...I'm largely a student of that, not a teacher of it. I'm learning this as I'm watching it. Yeah.

[1:49:57]

PB: Is there anything that we missed that you want to get on the record?

JJ: I think I'm good. I think I'm good. Thank you.

PB: Thank you Baba Jamon.

JJ: Alright, thank you all. Thank you.