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

Tom Pedroni

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

March 23, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Tom Pedroni was born in New Jersey and grew up in Oxford, Ohio. He has been an activist in various movements since his teen years. He received his Ph.D. in education from the University of Wisconsin in 2003. He taught in New Orleans, Louisiana and Saint Paul, Minnesota before becoming an Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies and Policy Sociology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. He studies Detroit educational politics and is also involved in many educational activist groups in the Detroit area, including Keep the Vote/No Takeover, Detroit Life Coalition, Michigan We Choose (an affiliate of the national Journey for Justice Alliance), and previously We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective. He is the director of the Detroit Data and Democracy Project, which creates "policy briefs, public testimony, and authoritative perspective on education issues for regional education reporters, community leaders, and community-based organizations." (Detroit Data and Democracy Project website)

Interviewer

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

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

Abstract

Tom Pedroni begins by discussing his childhood in Ohio, his activism as a teenager, and why he went into education. Major topics include how Teach for America has impacted Detroit Public Schools, how school closures are tied to gentrification, how schools in predominantly African American cities around the state of Michigan have been impacted by privatization and emergency management, and how Wayne State University aids the gentrification of Detroit and fails to hire Black faculty. He speaks about how he became involved in educational activism in Detroit around 2009, why he felt a responsibility to use his academic knowledge for activist purposes, and his personal experiences with the media refusing to run stories opposing emergency management. He closes by talking about his vision for

the future of Detroit and how his religious views have influenced his idea of what justice looks like.

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Transcript of interview conducted March 23, 2019 with:

Tom Pedroni [TP]

Detroit, Michigan

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

TP: My name is Thomas Pedroni. I'm a professor at Wayne State University in curriculum studies in the College of Education, and I work with a number of community advocacy organizations, both in Detroit [Michigan] and across the state. In Detroit, I am currently working with We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective and an education organization known as Detroit Life Coalition. I also maintain a site called Detroit Data and Democracy, and I work with a statewide coalition called Michigan We Choose, which is a local affiliate of the National Journey for Justice Alliance, and they are an organization that works with African American and Latino communities in cities across the country who are being dispossessed educationally and otherwise in their cities. I currently live in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

[0:01:01]

OY: Could you describe your neighborhood and the city growing up? Or, when you got here?

TP: My neighborhood in the city I grew up, is that what you said?

OY: Well, the city growing up, like Detroit when you were growing up or when you got here or just the neighborhood in general, your background.

TP: Okay. Well, I grew up in cow country in southwest Ohio in a small university town, Oxford, Ohio, where Miami University is located, and that was a pretty different place than metropolitan, or certainly than Detroit. I don't live in Detroit currently, but I do work at Wayne State in the midst of, you know, what is now called Midtown. It used to be called Cass Corridor, and even I can't, as someone who has a middle class profession, I couldn't afford to live there if I wanted to anymore. I'm aware of how much there has been investment in certain parts of the city that has in turn dispossessed lower-income people who live there, and I'm also aware of the underinvestment in other parts of the city.

So I've been knowing Detroit, not living here, but being very active in many neighborhoods in the city for about ten years closely and 15 years at a little more of a distance before I built a lot of close relationships here. So yeah, I would say--if I were talking about generally the city and how it's evolved, I would say that we're seeing a pattern of increasing dispossession of many people in Detroit, and that dispossession is, I guess you could say, required as a part of the fast-paced growth by accumulation that many investors are involved in as people take back the city. And so, I've seen a lot of the violence inherent in that across multiple sectors, many of which folks have outlined: water, land, housing, governance, and also education, which is the one I've worked in most closely. But I'm also interested in seeing how education does connect to those other sectors, and it very much does connect those other sectors.

So, you know, one of the ways the neighborhood has changed since I've been here is 200 of the 300 schools in DPS [Detroit Public Schools] have been closed since 2002, which is just a couple years before I came. A lot of times, that has left the schools, which were formally the centers of identity and social networks of community, as vacant bombed-out shells, and that has dramatically negatively affected the neighborhoods in which they're located.

[0:03:50]

PB: So, could you talk a little bit about your background in education and how you got to your current profession, what your roots are?

TP: Sure. I'll try not to go on forever.

PB: Go ahead.

TP: So, I mean, like I said. I was born in New Jersey, but I had the sense to leave there before I was one, and I had to follow my dad around to other university jobs he had before eventually landing in Oxford, Ohio. I grew up there and, you know, was there until I was about 18. And I think that I was always an activist well before I was ever an academic. In fact, I felt very alienated from academia because it seemed like a way that an activist spirit was oftentimes co-opted and subdued, and it took awhile before I realized that it could actually be a path for work that really took to heart my activist feelings by working in an academic sense by producing knowledge and doing research and networking with communities that were working around these sorts of issues. When I was in high school, I was very active around groups that were trying to stop and expose military recruitment in my school, so we'd have military flying in with helicopters and smoke bombs to try to recruit kids into the military, and we made demands of our principal that said you got to let us know in advance before they show up so we can organize information that counters some of their claims, and that never happened. But we were once notified a day before, so we put out lots of information that exposed racial barriers in the military, barriers for LGBTQ folks, and things like that. I was very involved in the Central American peace movement at that time, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and other places. I was involved in the denuclearization movement, went to some protests when I was in high school, had horrible nightmares during the Reagan years about nuclear annihilation.

I think I was in the church listening to the gospel, and I think that had a big impact me. I left the Catholic church when I was 12, but I was not leaving the church, I was leaving that church, and I think that that spirit has animated me for most of my life. My conception of being an individual is not very individualistic, I guess you could say. And I think that I've always derived meaning from collective action with

other people, and I can't imagine living a very atomized life that is not connected in that way.

So, that's some of how I got here. How'd I get into education. I went to college I was more...you know, I went to college because I was supposed to go to college. That was the expectation of me, and I quickly drifted over to people who were doing work around critical theory, who were doing thinking around race and class and gender, and I enjoyed that even when it was in areas like English literature, where we would maybe watch films. Like, I remember watching Dirty Dancing and writing an analysis of it, about how it had progressive messages around class and resisting elite ways of understanding lower-income people. But I kind of thought, you know what, this is sort of puzzle solving and it's fun, but it's not connected to real institutions. So, I was taking courses in philosophy and women's studies and sociology and English literature and French philosophy, and it wasn't until I came across some people who were doing amazing work in education around critical pedagogy and critical theory and inspired by the work of Paulo Freire. And I thought, well, this is where the critical language actually hits the ground and connects with real institutions, schools, knowledge building, and that's why despite the very low prestige given to education, not surprisingly in our society given our values, I wanted to work in education.

And eventually, I worked at a leftist newspaper for a few years in Madison, Wisconsin to get residency and went to get my graduate degrees, masters and Ph.D., there because there were a lot of radical, critical people there who were professors who I found inspiring and continue to inspire me. I also taught for a few years in New Orleans, Louisiana before [Hurricane] Katrina. I taught in St. Paul, Minnesota as well as a part of seeing what the educational world was really like, having credibility as someone talking about schools to actually have spent some time struggling within them. Yeah.

[0:08:54]

PB: Since you raised being in New Orleans--this is jumping ahead, but we're here. So, could you... I mean, did you see any, you know in hindsight looking back to your time in New Orleans and following what happened after Katrina and more

recent attacks upon the Detroit Public School system, do you see any parallels there?

TP: Absolutely. Yeah. In fact, I'm not sure what others have mentioned, but New Orleans was held up as an example to Detroit as what could happen. People said, some foundations said, possibly what could happen in a positive way. Educationally, there was a long tradition of shysters--or hucksters, maybe I should say--hucksters getting names for themselves claiming great success in a particular public school context, getting that sort of reform to be respected on a national level, and then until researchers and local folks can actually expose the atrocities of that supposed success, those things were actually held up as models, and that was done at a number of levels between New Orleans and Detroit. To the degree that Arne Duncan came here in 2009 and said that Detroit suffered because it didn't have a hurricane like Hurricane Katrina that allowed New Orleans to be renewed educationally, in terms of housing and so on. And I've argued before in interviews that, in a way, we did have a Katrina, but our Katrina was different. It was predatory lending, the foreclosure crisis of 2008 financial decline. So, there are parallels in that way in terms of destruction that created the conditions, the sort of shock doctrine conditions to allow radical--not in a good way radical--proposals for dramatically reforming the education sector as well as other sectors in Detroit.

I know that several of the foundations subsidized in about 2010, a lot of stuff that came on Detroit--on Michigan Public Radio about the great things that New Orleans had to offer that Detroit should emulate, and the Education Achievement Authority was one of those things. Louisiana had a recovery school district which was being heralded as an amazing success in Louisiana. So, as a result, the Skillman Foundation with its national and local partners advocated for a local reform district to be put into Detroit specifically. And because they were so powerful--not because of the knowledge they had, because they were so powerful and the money that they had and the political connections that they fostered--that enabled them to be able to do that and be able to bring a lot of New Orleans style reform to Detroit. I know that Governor [Rick] Snyder for about two years had brought Paul Pastorek, who was one of the architects of corporate education reform in Louisiana, to our context. There were a lot of trips between New Orleans and Detroit with corporate-reform-minded people selling Detroit on their vision. And, you know, we did follow that vision in Detroit.

And so, some of the parallels are the public schools were decimated here like in New Orleans, teachers were de-unionized and pushed out, TFA came in in large numbers, Teach For America, largely again following the New Orleans model and sponsored by the Skillman Foundation. They had been here previously, but they had come back after they had been sort of run out of town, I think in the early 2000s, and then they were brought back in 2010. And, a lot of this feeds into the teacher shortages that we have right now in Detroit. That itself is a very important topic that is linked to emergency management, the sway that foundations had at that point in time, and the negligent actions of emergency managers. So, specifically a lot of people in Detroit are aware that we have teaching shortages in the hundreds and have for several years. And although these stories have never been covered in the mainstream press, a large part of that is due to bringing in Teach For America during a time where there was not a teacher shortage, and Teach For America was originally designed to say basically, well, when there are teacher shortages, it's better to have a young, idealistic, naive white person in the classroom than no one, and that'd be hard to argue with I suppose, but that's how TFA started out. When they came to Detroit in 2010, we had not had the teacher shortage, but we did have the desire among some to push out more veteran teachers, to lower the cost of the teaching workforce, and also to make the teaching workforce more flexible, meaning if you hire in young people who don't have their own ideas already through experience about how to work within a school, then they are more malleable by leadership, in terms of the kind of practice that they should be engaged in. So, the teaching shortage here was--it's happening everywhere nationally, especially in urban centers, because of the ways that teachers have been maligned in popular discourse.

Education has long--since Sputnik, and probably even before--been beaten as a site of well, we aren't competitive with the Soviet Union because we haven't been educating people well in math and science. We had Goals 2000, one program after another pedaled out by the federal government that said the reason we weren't competitive in Japan, for example, in the 1980s was because we were not educating kids properly. When Japan's economy popped, when their housing bubble popped and their economy fell apart and the U.S. had what was defined, at least as defined by elites, a period of incredible growth throughout the [19]90s, throughout the Clinton years, logically we should've said well, teachers caused that, great teachers, but of course there was only blame for the teachers.

Education has long been a sector where the state--meaning not the state as the State of Michigan, but the state as government, at federal and state and local levels--has exported its own crisis in managing inequality and things like that to teaching, to say the locus is teaching, that's why there's inequality because of poor schools, poor teaching, as if that inequality isn't coming out of other parts of the racial macrostructure, the political economy, you know, the economic structure.

So anyway, Teach For America was brought in, disproportionately much more white and young and not culturally rooted in Detroit than the cohort of teachers who were pushed out either through incentivising retirement but very often by bogus drive-by evaluations that took two minutes where the person who had the...who did the evaluation had no credentials, and the person who was being evaluated was evaluated poorly and pushed out. That was one very big factor. The other big factor I was just alluding to was the general disrespect of teachers where they've been blamed for every problem that comes along, and the third thing that currently is contributing to teacher shortages, other than lack of pay, and all these other horrible working conditions, being called a failure all the time, was that we know from inside DPS--and it was DPS then--that several emergency managers in a row--including Jack Martin most prominently, I believe our third emergency manager of Detroit Public Schools--sat on hundreds of applications from people who had been prepared specifically to teach in DPS under a memorandum of understanding with DPS, who were coming from four universities through Eastern Michigan [University], Wayne State [University], University of Michigan, and Michigan State [University] through a program that specifically prepared them to be effective teachers in Detroit. Those people were...their applications were never considered. They just simply sat there, and we know that from people who worked in the Talent Office, as they called it in DPS at the time. Many of those...some of those people do ironically now teach in DPS, but only after they first went to charters who were willing to hire them unlike DPS, and then they were able to move from charters into DPS, which we now call DPSCD [Detroit Public Schools Community District], which sounds like a mental illness, DPSCD. I think I suffer from that.

Yeah, so...so I spoke there a little bit about the teacher shortage. All of these things are connected to the politics of emergency management, the folks who found the terrain of emergency management a rife terrain on which to push their

own interests, their own agendas, that are now--that were then and are now--deeply implicated in the dismantling of the Detroit Public Schools and in many other districts as well.

[0:18:49]

PB: Just for greater clarity, could you flesh out what those agendas, what those motives are from your analysis?

TP: Sure. Well, there has been a big push toward privatization in education and in every sector, public sector, really, in the last probably 30 years now. But to bring it specifically to our area, it used to be that there would always be a strong push by corporate interests against more funding for schools, largely because those were seen as schools for other people's children. But as capital continued to look for more places of investment, the same sort of thing that led to the predatory lending crisis, the recognition became more it's not so bad to put money into the public sector, including public schools, depending on who is sort of on the receiving end, at the catcher's mitt of those public funds. So, the problem had been that--from their perspective--that the public sector itself was retaining the public funds. But if you could put in all kinds of mechanisms that allowed private players--charter management organizations, consultants, large contracts with curriculum providers--to get their hands on public monies, then it wasn't quite such a big problem after all.

So basically, especially in a state like Michigan where we have per pupil funding that follows students wherever they go, whether it's into a charter or into another district, students--Black students, white students, all students--are a valuable commodity, about 8,000 dollars a pop, which can fuel those contracts, which can fuel the health of a district or a charter school. So, you know, all of those things have put a lot of value into being the one who provides educational services again, whether it's whole school services through a charter management organization or the contracts that a local district organizes under emergency management. That's one piece. So, you know, the current reform movement in education, which hopefully is losing some steam now, part of it is about putting public wealth into private hands in education itself.

But, what we see nationally and certainly in Detroit as well is a way in which the dismantling of public education has also been about who gets to claim the wealth of the city, who gets to claim the city for its benefit, for its agenda. So, people like Pauline Lipman of Chicago [Illinois] were the first to lay this out really clearly about how we need to understand urban reform movements--corporate urban reform movements, neoliberal urban reform movements--as not just being about the school sector itself but also being about the larger shape of the city, but more importantly the way school reform connects to what various urban sociologists have called growth by accumulation--which means, I'm sorry, accumulation by dispossession, which means basically something like this. In a city like Detroit or Chicago , there is a huge potential money to be gained in a city like Detroit.

It has, you know, the suburbs have in many ways lost their sheen, you know, held as a place of racial flight where you are heading to the unsullied lands that have been sullied with the blood of native Indigenous people and sort of starting a new life in nature, the bucolic suburbs that had a lot of appeal during the era of racial flight in which the same actors--real estate actors, financial actors--made huge sums of money because of racial animus and racial fear. And you have the examples of blockbusting, of Black families being paraded through neighborhoods so white people would sell way below market value, and the Black families, if they were able to buy, had to buy well above market value given the limited spaces Blacks were already allowed to live in a city like Detroit.

What we're seeing in many ways now is a reversal, you know, saying, you know what? Actually, the suburbs are kind of boring and drab, and there's all this beautiful architecture in Detroit, and it's by the river and walkable spaces and museums and all the condos and so on and so forth. But that sort of investment cycle had a problem, which is that it had been so successful for so many years precisely out of branding Detroit as a Black city, as a place of whites' racial nightmares, like the white imaginary details of the Black city and doing anything to stay away from that. And we know how rife--I taught at Oakland University before I came to Wayne State up in northern metro [Detroit], and students were serious. I would ask them to do projects where they were to come to better understand a neighborhood in which particular schools were situated, and some students chose to go to Detroit, and I had students who told me--and I felt some sympathy for

them--that they had panic attacks when they came to Detroit, like even to Fox Theatre and Comerica, because they had been told all of their lives that they would simply perish if they set foot in Detroit, even around Fox Theatre. And they were furthermore told if they don't, that they will get killed if they go there, but even if you don't get killed, I as your father will kill you when you get home.

So when you have that sort of branding of Detroit, it's hard to unlock all of this tremendous value that developers have long known that there is in Detroit. One of the things that I've done is look back at housing studies the city has commissioned. I've only looked back to 2006, but I would assume they go back well before then. And what you can see is that since 2006, detailed analysis said there is a lot of potential wealth to be unlocked, and sort of, if you can imagine--I'm sure you all know this--but if you can imagine an upside down 'T' where you have the Q-line as the backbone, going up the cultural corridor, all the way from the river, down to New Center, maybe a little bit further down to North End, but then also along the river to Corktown, so-called Mexicantown or Southwest, and the other way as well towards Belle Isle and--what do you call it, where the Native American names are, Seminole, those streets? Indian Village, right? Those have long been areas that have been seen as having tremendous potential for development, and it's an upside-down T shape or, as I like to say to my students, you have to think of it as being...basically being this shape [holds up middle finger], right? So, this is the river on both sides and then the cultural corridor, that's where all of the investment has gone obviously. But the point is is that in order for you to be able to unlock all of that value, you need to change the branding because if you keep the branding simply as Detroit is the place of white nightmares, that's what has been keeping investment out. At a certain point, you have this tension rope of white supremacist racism, but also you have the desire to make money and how do you--sometimes those things usually cooperate very well, but sometimes they're actually antagonistic to each other if the whole idea is, you know, we want to unlock all this money but there's a problem, which is that people think of Detroit as Black and as a place of nightmares and crime.

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And so, you know, there's been a lot of active rebranding obviously, and this is not something that is hidden, and there's a lot of business groups when you're

thinking, well, how do you do that? And part of it is that you don't do it simply by pretending that Detroit was never Black, you do it more like what they do in New Orleans, which is you get...you make money off of the culture. So, New Orleans is jazz and the whole big band music, the food, brass band music, but you want to lop that away from the people who actually produce that culture, right? Because that is a contaminant of real estate value, so keep New Orleans and the authenticity and the feel of what New Orleans has produced, but do as much as possible to get rid of the people who actually produced the culture because they're not necessary. In fact, they get in the way of and contaminate the potential for real estate value. And it's the same way in Detroit, you know. Part of the identity of Detroit is supposed to be, well, it's gritty. It's the land of Eminem, it's the land of 24 hour adult entertainment whether it's gambling or Motown, all of those things. White folks can carry their Detroit Hustles Harder stickers when they just moved in a couple months ago. There's a lot of identity to be co-opted there, and it has been co-opted. But you have to--at the same time, they have to get rid of the underlying contaminant that is there as well.

And, you know, there are many ways in which that's being done, and one of the things that needs to be talked about is the Detroit Future City plan, which I'm sure you've heard about, know about, but I also connect to education. And you need to think about education, about schools as representing places of Black identity. So you need to disrupt and destroy important markers of Black identity both because they signal Black identity to people who might come in and gentrify, but also because they fuel the spirit of Black folks who remain in those neighborhoods. So, destroying their school is like destroying the heart, the soul of a neighborhood oftentimes. They are one of the most important cultural markers in neighborhoods. So when you lose 200 of 300 schools, think about what that means in terms of the identity, as well as all of the social networks that are built into those individual schools.

You know, I view it as...as long-term strategies about how to develop real estate in a way that profits particular people amongst, and the way that I understand it is that one of the things that could harm that process of robust accumulation through dispossession is if there's too much land that's on the market all at once. So, what you want to do is start somewhere, you know, this neighborhood, then you can gradually move out from there. As you probably know, the Detroit Future City plan grew out of a proposal that [Dave] Bing, Mayor Bing, first floated back in

2009. That wasn't his idea either. It was one he got from a consortium of banks and Living Cities, which I believe is an organization that has Deutsche Bank and a bunch of others, and they basically laid out a strategy for development in Detroit. And, you know, Bing was...he rushed the basket a little bit too much in that he went on the radio and said, oh yeah, absolutely we're going to close down parts of the city. You know, he talked a lot about are there going to be forced relocations. He said absolutely. He said this on the radio, you know. He just didn't have the nuanced political touch that you need to actually propagate that kind of violence, right? So, he talked a lot of about seven to nine urban villages and the other areas would all be cordoned off.

And this vision still largely exists in Detroit Future City, and what Detroit Future City does is that is basically triages the whole city into--it doesn't call them neighborhoods, it calls them housing markets, so what we used to think of as a poor housing market has now been reconceptualized. I mean, what we used to think of as a poor neighborhood deserving the support of government to help stabilize it and advance it is now seen as a poor housing market. And borrowing on the educational sector where since No Child Left Behind came around, we said that failing schools need to be recognized as failing schools and, just like in the market, failing businesses need to be shut down. The same thing was now held over to whole neighborhoods. If they weren't poor neighborhoods, they were poor housing markets, and scarce market resources should not be considered failures but should be redistributed to the up-and-comers. You know, limited public resources should go to the neighborhoods that are showing promise, that are showing possibility for prosperity, for wealth generation basically, right?

And so, Detroit Future City uses this tool of market value analysis to triage the city in that way, and the idea is that some neighborhoods deserve--at first, they said deserve the investment while others don't. And then, they said, well, it's sort of like multiculturalism. Different neighborhoods have different kinds of needs, and poor-off neighborhoods have different kinds of needs than wealthier neighborhoods do. So poor-off ones, if the...if the sewer main breaks, we'll do some patchwork repair, but we are not going to rehabilitate the whole system, we aren't going to put in a whole new system, but in the up-and-coming neighborhoods, we will. You know, we'll make what we already have, the infrastructure, last as long as possible in the poor neighborhoods, but the

wealthier neighborhoods, they'll get the new investment because they're up-and-coming.

So, you see this paralleled in so many ways. A bus service becoming worse at the same time we built the Q-line, which people call mass transit, but it was basically just a gift to developers. I mean, there are some nice things about the Q-line. Everyone likes to have a nice downtown they can show friends, you know. It's something that looks robust, sure. But as a city that has such a--we know the jobs are not where people live, and we have people who need jobs, and there's no mass transit, and the mass transit is actually getting worse. And you put all this effort of state and federal and local wealth into something that is--it doesn't even go quickly on the few miles it does. It goes sort of on the side of the street, you know. They specifically rejected it going down the middle of the street which would be more serious mass transit except in parts of it, right? It's basically like we know that things like light rail greatly increase the real estate value of projects that are around the lightrail, so that's what that project is really about, you know, at the cost of investment in mass transit and other neighborhoods which could actually serve people.

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And I think that's one of the most important things that I always think about is that it's amazing to me that at least 20 years after the field of economics, which is certainly not a very left-wing social sciences field, you know what, trickle-down theory, eh, doesn't really work. Supply-side economics, they've long disavowed it. It is still the gospel in terms of urban development. So everybody says, well, the problem is just that you have all this urban development downtown, and it has to kind of just roll out into the neighborhood, but that's not the way it works. The investment in downtown is actually the dispossession, and Detroit Future City makes that clear as it moves scarce investment resources, public resources, out of those neighborhoods, out of those market failures. You know, sorry kid, your park wasn't plowed because you're kind of a market failure, right? So the park where you play, your grass wasn't mowed, but on the river side there's a lot of development happening in the parks there. You know, that's what it's really all about is changing that investment and having it follow wealth.

And that reflects a larger shift in governance in general in the United States is this idea that different levels of government are not there for the purpose of realizing the social contract, which never was a great thing. It was always deeply racist, sexist, gendered anyway, right, the way that the welfare state played out. But at least you have this notion that it was what we were supposed to do, that if people were poor, it was because the government hadn't done something that it should do. But now, that notion has completely shifted where in neoliberalism times, the role of the state is to compete against other states, you know, whether we mean other cities or other states actually or other countries, you know, foreign investment, you know, so with the Amazon bid, to genuflect as much as possible to compete for investment, which is all built into the trickle-down theory, and the reason why that's good for everyday people is because the wealth will trickle down to them. Only it won't. I mean, it might along the immediate area around the Q-line, you know, some neighborhoods who are just in back of that might get some splash-off benefits from that, but it's actually the disinvestment in other parts of the city.

So anyway, to get back to schools, you see different schools having different kinds of futures. I think it's valuable to think of that T over the Detroit map because you have one future for schools in those areas and you have a different future for schools that are the Mumfords or the Burns or wherever else around that still exist that weren't among the--those are both schools that were almost killed by being put into the Education Achievement Authority but that are still there. But you know, there's a school near us that I'm interested in finding more about, near Wayne State, called Golightly [Education Center]. It's sort of in that little elbow near where I-94 turns into I-75 then heads toward I-375, where that's still a school. It's in the wrong place because it's in Midtown. And the people--and right around the school, there are lofts. While there are one or two people in the lofts who go to the school, it's not largely the case. It's mostly people who they live nearby, but not within Midtown. And, you know, that is a--I don't know if it would be that particular school, but that's not the direction that the schools within that upside-down T are going. Those schools, they will welcome some folks within the city, but they will move in the direction of being hopefully, from the perspective of developers, the beachhead schools that people who don't want to go to school with most people of color will be willing to send their children. And the other schools, you know, are experiencing again massive disinvestment. And I don't

want to make it totally demoralizing, because there are some victories and some backsliding, but I think that is a pretty valuable general outline.

Let's go back to Bing and Detroit Future City. The idea was--I remember watching in a video interview with Anika Goss [-Foster]--I think she has a hyphenated last name--but who's the director of Detroit Future City or maybe the spokesperson. I'm not sure what her title is. But she talked in a way--she was being interviewed about, well, what about those neighborhoods that are being slated for disinvestment? As long as the services last, as long as the infrastructure lasts, it's fine, but you're welcome to stay there. And she said, "Well, you know, people might choose to stay there because you'll have water features, you know, water swell right near where you live, and you might not have services but, you know, if that's where you choose to be near that picturesque water swell, that's fine." And, you know, one of the things that I've noticed as someone who studies the education sector is how Anika Goss is the daughter of Carol Goss, and Carol Goss was the CEO of the Skillman Foundation when they rolled out the Excellent Schools Detroit reform which called for the disbandment of the elected board, the creation of the EAA [Education Achievement Authority], to rethink of schools not as parents but as consumers in education markets, to close down failing schools. And she was also the chair of the executive board of the Education Achievement Authority, along with the majority of board members who were part of the Excellent Schools Detroit coalition, right? So, that's not lost on me that you have the same family literally involved at both levels, the citywide level and the schoolwide level.

But...but basically, the way I see it is that something like Detroit Future City by letting areas--and it sounds very progressive if you're a hipster I guess, which is that you're gonna be creating new green spaces and new blue spaces, blue spaces being the bubbling water swells across the city. There's a certain amount of ecological appeal. But, I think the idea is to get those areas off the real estate market because it...it's sort of like you want a fire that burns well over time, it's not just a quick [explosion sound] and all of your wood is gone. If you're gonna heat your home, you wanna...you want it to burn slowly and efficiently. And that's great if it's heating your home, but this is about heating the home of health investors. So, you know, first, you develop, get, create scarcity. You don't want all this land on the market at the same time. You know, do it then, first focus on the T and then--and this isn't about distributing benefit to people outside the T, but

rather it's about distributing, how do you maximize accumulation outside the T, you know, gradually, which will be about displacing more people when it comes. But I've spoken pretty broadly, and you probably want me to say some more specific things about education, and I'm happy to do that.

[0:41:23]

PB: This is great, particularly to better understand and get an idea--a better idea--about the role of education and these big processes and systems that are at play. I want to provide some space because I think that your question about Wayne State would fit logically here.

OY: Okay. So basically, like, you know how educational institutions like Wayne State and CCS [College for Creative Studies] and those kind of use that as a selling point is that you're downtown or right in the heart of Midtown. So, do you think that framing this to students without any information about the larger information about those campuses being in Midtown is irresponsible?

TP: I guess without the broader framing, yes, it is irresponsible. Do I think that that framing could be pushed in progressive ways? Yes, I do, right. So, if Wayne State wants to say and some folks at Wayne State want to say, you know, look, you know, rather than go to the University of Michigan and come here as a tourist by bus for a day to have an outing to Detroit, to actually be situated here, if being situated implies having real or, dare I say, authentic relationships to Detroit which are fostered through building trust and through being here clearly in the interest of people who are in the community or who are an important part of the picture, then I think that could be very progressive. I don't think that that's largely what happens right now, but it is an argument that I try to make. So what actually happens now, I mean, Wayne State is a prime gentrifier within Midtown. That's why when people are like, you know, talk about--I never make the argument you simply should not take funding from a reprehensible foundation. I never make that argument because my funding isn't pure, either. I mean, nobody's funding is pure, right? I mean, Wayne State has done a lot of nefarious things. It's been a white space in the midst of blackness.

My own college has done a horrible job recruiting and retaining faculty of color. So we just, just now, like this week, are hiring in teacher education what will be, if she comes, our first African American faculty member in a faculty of about 40 people in a city that is 82 percent Black, right. So historically--and these are exceptions but I'm painting with a broad brush--but what Wayne State has done in terms of faculty is it has done a horrible job recruiting African American faculty, and when those faculty have miraculously come, they either have been quickly snatched up by other institutions that value them more, or they have not been properly supported and have not received tenure, which I have always viewed as a failure of administration and not of the individual scholar because any scholar worth hiring with proper support will get tenure, will do the work that is needed. And, you know, we've lost people like that. So, you have a lot of...you go to Wayne State College of Education or my division specifically, and I hope it's--I think it is changing for the better in the last couple of years, but you will see African American folks there, but they are the secretaries, they are the janitorial staff, they are some of the clinical faculty, meaning not the "real" faculty, not the tenure track ones, not the research ones. You know, that's incredibly shameful, and students feel the same way. I mean, can you imagine? We do have some African American students and they, some of them, have told me that when they come and they're checking out Wayne State as a space, one of the first things they do when they're deciding if the College of Education is a safe space is they look for faculty of color. And if they don't see any, then it's just further more communicated that spatially this is white folks' space, right?

So. You know, opportunistically, Wayne State's leadership is looking at its location within the city, and it's saying, gee, you know, University of Michigan, Michigan State [University], other places are making, in a marketing way, inroads into our turf. How do we position ourselves to protect our market share? And the way they've said is that we're actually here. If that...if that we are--that literally is the slogan that our college is the adopting, we are here. If that comes to mean something of substance and it's not just a marketing tool, that could be great, right. If we are here means we're not just gonna cater to--with our shortage of funding--to getting grants with wealthy foundations who have nefarious agendas or doing things for corporations, but we're actually going to remember our public role as in serving the public, especially the public that has experienced the most disservice in the public realm, then that could actually mean something, you

know, and I think there are progressive ways of rebranding, but refocusing that notion of being embedded here in ways that are progressive.

And I assure you that we are fighting for that, some of us. I mean I am, and I have some good colleagues who are as well. To say, well, what does it mean to really be here and to really serve the local population? And to me, it means things like making yourself useful to the local community. And specifically as an individual faculty member, it's been to say, you know what, I'm not just going to make my career by writing about the misery of Black folks, and isn't it colorful and authentic, the way that their schools are being taken away, the way that they're hurting, but actually thinking about a way...is there actually a way that I can be just not a parasite and actually serve a role. And that took me a long time to figure out, like 'cause I was always interested, and I was always an activist before I was an academic or a scholar, but what can I do that actually helps? And it's not just--you know, because universities have a tremendous history of experimentation on marginalized people and colonization and, you know, saying, well, we're the experts, so move aside. Let us tell you what the solution is, right. So, how do we develop an anti-colonial, a decolonized vision of what it means to share the wealth of a university with the public? Because, inherently, it's their university, you know. Some of us have been more benefited by the public. That's part of what got me into the position I am. That part of it is the way I, as a white male, middle-class, grew up in a university town, the public has enriched me. And so, if I am a public resource, how do I redistribute that public resource in ways that make sense to folks who are actually doing the work?

And so, you know, I remember the first time I directly interacted with activists was when there was a walk out at Frederick Douglass High School, and I went to a meeting that I had never really… I hadn't met Helen Moore yet at that point--this was probably 2009 or something like that--and she was meeting with parents and teachers who supported the student walk out, and I remember that I just kind of sat there in the back, and it was kind of like, well, what the hell is he doing here? And I felt that, like, why am I here. This is just voyeurism, you know. But to gradually learn what does it mean to really struggle with the community and to not need to take things over and to actually be useful and not to be colonial. And I think that's happened in a lot of projects that we've been involved in. I think that there are...that there are ways of building that solidarity. I would never claim

perfection, but of that sort of solidarity where you are actually redistributing the good of the public resource to the public that needs it most.

[0:49:42]

PB: That seems like a logical segue in my mind to talking about your work with We the People Detroit and--is the title of the forthcoming publication Mapping the Education Crisis or...?

TP: I believe so. I believe that's correct.

PB: So, could you talk a little bit about how you got involved with We the People and maybe the scope of that project and some of the big takeaways that you got when you worked on it?

TP: Sure. Sure. Well, let me just preface that by saying, you know, I first became involved in the educational realm as an effective advocate and not just a voyeur through work with the board in exile, which Elena Herrada was a part of, you know, actually when they had no power and horrible things were being done in the district, and through my friendship with Helen Moore. That existed starting in like 2010. And you know, we had a lot of good struggle and victories under our belt before I ever became part of We the People of Detroit. I mean, I've known those folks for a long time. I've known Monica [Lewis-]Patrick since that era because at that time she was working as a researcher for JoAnn Watson's office. But, you know, so our victories included taking, for example, the Education Achievement Authority, which Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education at that time, was calling the future of American education and making its name absolutely toxic. And eventually, it fell apart because of work that was done, because of alliances that were built, and those alliances are still there. That's a permanent--well, I don't know about permanent--but that's a long-lasting game that was built during that era. But I first found out about the more recent work of We the People of Detroit and specifically the Community Research Collective through Kate Levy, who I've known since she came to Detroit. As soon as I met her, I mean, she was amazing.

One of our big struggles was around defending Oakman School before it was shut down. Maybe Elena [Herrada] talked about that, I don't know. But Kate's first big film project, she came to my office once and just said, "So, what is the story you'd like me to tell?" This is probably 2012 or 2013, I don't know. And I said, well, one thing is this Oakman thing. It's basically this school with basically no money, and it's an incredibly loving school in the heart of real Detroit serving 40% of students with disabilities who are everyday interacting with 60% students who are considered general education, and it's a school who Roy Roberts condemned to shut down. And there was a rationale given for why it should be shut down and that was, you know, that it was losing, that it was 50% empty, lost half of its enrollment in the last 4 years, and the building needed $900,000 of investment and upgrades, and we showed beyond a doubt using DPS's own data that every one of those claims was false. And Kate Levy produced a documentary about it, and it's still available. It's called *Because They Could*, I believe, and it's really powerful. And, you know, Elena was in that too, and a lot of the parent activists like Aliya Moore, who is amazing and maybe someone you should talk to.

But, so Kate is the one who connected me with We the People. We knew each other from that work. She was actually still working--I was at the time the director of this new collaborative, sort of this new center at Wayne State, which has since been taken over by some not-so-good people. But at the time, I was the director, and I hired Kate Levy, and she played all roles. She was... I think we called her the associate director. She did everything from mundane clerical work to producing films, and that's how the DSA [Detroit School of Arts] film was produced, too, and the Oakman film. And...and so anyway, she had...that was when the work was being done around water. That was the first booklet which is out--it came out two years ago, maybe two and a half years ago--about mapping the water crisis. I think the quote is dismantling African American communities or something like that. All of the titles have that in it. It's all mapping the blank crisis and then about dismantling. And so, they were working on the water book and, you know, Kate had been doing work with Curt Guyette around Flint, and they produced a movie that won some national awards. So she was doing that work around the poisoning of Flint, so I think it was through that work that Kate connected with, you know--I knew Monica Patrick and I knew Debra Taylor, but they were working on a specific project around mapping the water crisis, and the first book hadn't come out yet, and they were going to then do a specific project about housing afterward.

So, she suggested that I get involved. They were happy to work with university partners as long as there was an understanding that the community had proprietary control over the data that was processed. They were willing to partner with public institutions and--which to me looked like exactly what I was talking about, you know, redistributing the public wealth back to the public--and they had already been working with like a water scientist from Michigan State and from some folks in architecture from University of Michigan. And since they were going to be soon moving toward education, we came on board--by 'we,' I mean myself and one of my doctoral students--when the water book was still being put together. You know, because I've long wanted to bring attention to the connection between the different sectors, I was very interested in that, too. Not just like, well, that's just about water, it's not about schools. I mean, it's about the right to the city, and the larger frame is about who is being dispossessed and who is struggling against that, and a lot of it has to do with the white spatial and racial imaginary and about fighting back against that and what folks have called the Black spatial imaginary, and, you know, basically, how could we accumulate knowledge in order to bolster our side

We had Loveland Technologies or Loveland whatever which was putting together specific information that groups like Skillman had been requesting. And I think they viewed that sort of as a neutral process, well, they're paying us for data so we are going to put this data out. And our focus was more, well, what would be the data that the community needs to fight back. And so, a lot of it involves original analysis to understand, to really… I think one of the ways we've looked at it is that it's worse that Detroit Future City is the narrative because what it really is is that Detroit Future City is the public narrative for something that is actually more nefarious. And it was this public face, the more pleasant face, of what is actually happening. And that's why it foregrounds things like walkable spaces and, you know, green living and urban farming because it's more for public consumption. And I think that--and I wasn't as close to the water work as some other folks were, but what they were basically beginning to show was that the work, the root, what was actually happening on the ground didn't always match the Detroit Future City rhetoric, but it did match development interests. So if you looked at how foreclosures compared with water shut-offs compared with infrastructure development, it began to paint a more clear picture of exactly whose interests these developments were. And then, a lot of the pretty stuff

wasn't there anymore, when you looked at it at that level. So, that's how I became involved. And you know, we're doing the education work now. I still have had a hard time being as involved as I would like to be, although I am hoping that that will change now that we're getting closer to production.

[0:58:30]

But I certainly, you know, have been not just watching and observing but actively involved in the contours of the educational struggle in Detroit at least since 2009, 2010. And now, that work has actually broadened out statewide because we began to realize it's not just Detroit that has a low income mostly predominantly African American enrollment that is being negatively affected by state policy. We realized more that there has been this archipelago of predominantly African American enrollment communities across the state, and they're the ones that come up again and again when you talk about emergency management and closing down schools based on the idea that they are failing academically, which I think it a reprehensible term.

So, you know, now I'm part of a network where we're working very actively for Benton Harbor [Michigan] right now. We were approached by some community activists who already had a coalition out of Albion [Michigan], which was annexed by Marshall [Michigan]. So Albion, the enrollment in the public schools was predominantly Black. The enrollment in Marshall schools was predominantly white. Both of them had huge financial problems. When Marshall annexed Albion, it solved most of the financial problems for Marshall. In the first year that basically Albion schools became managed by predominantly white Marshall, in the elementary school K-5, which is now controlled by Marshall, January in the first year--this is two or three years ago--16 Black kindergarten boys were suspended on one day. 16 kindergarten Black boys suspended in one day. You know. And, I mean that should've made national news and it didn't. It just goes to show you, I mean, and so another person in our parallel story is in Inkster [Michigan].

In Inkster and Buena Vista [Michigan], which is near Saginaw [Michigan], has...they've had their districts dissolved in their entirety. Those districts simply don't exist anymore. We kind of found this out. We were doing work at a town

hall on Detroit and its education, and a woman stood up and said, “You think you have it bad in Detroit because you have emergency managers and all these schools are closing? Take a look at Inkster. We’ve got nothing.” I mean, the folks of Inkster are still paying and will be for 25 more years, I guess, on buildings that simply don’t exist. Not only do they not have schools, the school buildings themselves are gone, and they’re still paying for them, and their kids are going to the four surrounding districts where they’ve had the same phenomenon of their children, who are mostly African American, are being treated like invaders in those schools. And, you know, disciplined accordingly, and discipline is only the most overt. You know all the other ways disinclusion plays out, you know, this isn’t your space, this isn’t where you’re supposed to learn, you should be grateful, you don’t measure up to our standards, you know, this whole rhetoric.

So, that’s just to say, like, you know, emergency management hasn’t just affected Detroit, and, you know, there was emergency management, but the same state power with the state--and here I mean Michigan--basically looks at it as there are two ways to close down or otherwise disrupt districts. One is using academic criteria. The other is financial criteria. So, treasury at the state level assembles a list of all the districts that are in financial distress, and surprise, surprise most of those are African American districts, relatively low-income communities. To me, that would be fine. Okay, you want to identify them so you can support them. That’s great to be like it’s a poor neighborhood, it deserves support, right? Yeah, definitely, identify it and come to partner and rebuild. But instead, what is meant is you’re having financial problems, oh, it must be because you mismanaged it. It’s not because of anything macrostructural where, you know, where those in the very communities where charters have parasited people off which has caused the district to go into a financial freefall, where the 2008 financial crisis hit the hardest. You know, that’s not how it’s looked at. It’s blamed as YOU caused it, you the local body caused it, and therefore the state will either take over or dissolve you or whatever it might be.

So, Inkster and Buena Vista...Buena Vista were dissolved in their entirety. Highland Park [Michigan] and Muskegon Heights [Michigan] were--you know, all of these were primarily African American enrolled districts--were charterized in their entirety, right, so that the whole district was handed over to charters, to a single charter company. In Muskegon Heights, that was Mosaica, and Mosaica left after a couple years because they realized they couldn’t make profit there. So, they didn’t

have any purpose there, so they left. In Highland Park, it was the same one that would run the Cesar Chavez [Academy]--I'm not going to remember it. I always forget it. But anyway, also a for-profit charter management organization which basically said, "Well, we can make money at the K through eight level, but not at the high school level." So they shut down the high school, so now Highland Park is a public district that doesn't have a high school. It has K-8 still. But for high school, it has to send its students out. It has to farm its students out to neighboring districts, mostly DPSCD [Detroit Public Schools Community District]. Leona Group. That's the name of the charter company. Leona Group is a huge national--so is Mosaica--charter company. So, you have...you have dissolved them in their entirety, you had charter take over, you have emergency management. Obviously, DPS was decimated during the period of emergency management.

And it was so hard to get any word of that out in the press, and that's another issue entirely. But, you know, even--there were many of us who were documenting it, but to get our voices in the press was such a struggle and, you know, to the degree we had any success at all even though we had facts marshalled so clearly that this wasn't happening. But then what else, you have a lot of districts that are under constant threat. So Benton Harbor is...had a CEO appointed by the State Reform Office, the same entity which was supposed to be where the EAA would grow across the entire state, and the CEO imposed on them, who now that the State Reform Office is going away on June 30 by law, there's a CEO who wants to keep his job there. And he's calling...he's been demanding...he's been saying we need to charterize. That's what he wants to do, dissolve all these districts, all of which are the worst outcomes for children, right. But...but, that's what he's pushing. And so, there's struggle now where the elected board is trying to say no, we control the destiny of this, and we know we have financial problems, but we'd like to face those and deal with them with a partnership with the state rather than having us closed down by treasury. So, that's some of what's going on.

But yeah, so thinking about emergency management: yes in Detroit, but also more broadly. I can gladly talk about, you know, what's something about emergency management and whatever question you have next. It'd be great to talk about, yeah, just how hard it was--it is and certainly was--to build up knowledge and to get that out through traditional venues or channels like mainstream media.

[1:06:26. Jump cut.]

[video cuts out]

PB: I would love to go there. Can we pause for a second to fix the wire?

TP: Oh yes, sorry.

PB: The mic.

TP: It's probably the __??.

PB: That's something I think is critical for us to talk about because it's recurring in the interviews that we're having.

TP: Absolutely.

PB: In all the different struggles that we are talking about, the common theme that we are talking about, especially with Shea Howell, is that there are media blackouts.

TP: That's right, absolutely.

PB: And so, one of the things that I think is really important for us to talk about--I mean, only speaking from my perspective--is about how organizers are attempting to get the...to spread knowledge to change the narrative because that's also going to help us a lot, you know, with how we can best be of service, how we can collaborate in using this kind of knowledge base for those purposes.

TP: Yeah, yeah. I have some good stories that I would love to share.

PB: So, I would love for us to go there and then--so, let's go there first since we're talking about it. Before we leave, though, I would love for you to give us a crash course in state takeovers of the DPS because I've got a master's degree in education and I know there's a lot of--and I have a damned hard time understanding educational policy a lot of the times, and I don't think I'm unique in that because of all the different levels with city, state, federal. It's so complicated. So, I think that it would be really helpful if you could give us just like a 101. I know people write books on it.

TP: Absolutely. I have written some stuff on it. But yeah, both of those are great. Should we tackle the media one first?

PB: Yeah, please.

TP: And then you'll remind me about that other one, too.

PB: Yes.

TP: Okay, great. Ready? Okay.

[video resumes]

[1:06:28]

TP: So, one of the frustrating aspects of doing work to try to protect public schools and to move them further in making them be beneficial places for children and places like Detroit to be has been actually trying to get out genuine information into the general media, right? So, you know, of course we also create our own

media and that can be...that is an important part of the story, but I think it's also worth talking about how venues that ostensibly are ones that are supposed to be informing the citizens have been actually huge blocks to the dissemination of information and have been very involved in a kind of boosterism that is definitely not in the interest of Detroit children. And, I'll talk about some of how I personally have encountered that, either individually or through working with others. Everyone has stories to add to this but I think I have some good illustrative ones.

So, for me, I went through this process of--before I became more involved on the ground in Detroit in about 2010--of kind of catching myself and going well, you're doing a lot of interesting work. You're publishing some interesting stuff that's about race and class and inequality. You're bringing some interesting young people in to give lectures. You're helping to educate teachers. You're making your career sort of studying what's happening in Detroit, but are you really going to be someone who sort of stays on the sidelines and makes his career sort of documenting other people's misery because it's so colorful and authentic? And I, you know, I've already talked about how I, you know, I felt like I wanted to make myself useful, and part of the way I did that was by gradually getting to know and work with advocacy organizations. You've talked to people who were some of the first, Elena Herrada, Aliya Moore, you know, who I began to connect to, Shea [Howell] too. But the other thing was that, well, since I'm a producer of knowledge as a researcher, how can I...you know, I started to hear the amazingly stupid things and incorrect things that emergency managers were saying in the public domain and weren't being called out by anyone.

So, one of the first ones that really grabbed me was when Roy Roberts made the pronouncement that he was--so, he was the second emergency manager of Detroit Public Schools. He came in...I think in 2011, and he was the first one that [Rick] Snyder appointed. We have to always remember that Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, met Robert Bobb at [Barack] Obama's inauguration and was suggested to her by Eli Broad, a lifelong Democrat from Detroit and billionaire financier who has been one of the kingpins of educational privatization and public school dismantling. We need to remember that. So anyways, 2011, Roy Roberts, second EM [emergency manager], first was Robert Bobb. Roy Roberts made a claim. He said he had been analyzing the last Detroit board's budget, and it was shameful that the last Detroit board, elected board, only put 55 percent of general revenues into classroom instruction, and that he, because of his business acumen coming

from General Motors with no educational background, was going to make it 95 percent. You know, he was going to start around 90 percent and get it up to 95 percent, which represented his business acumen and how the private sector can--you know, the business sensibility--can reform this, you know, public sector that's self serving and bloated and all that sort of discourse of privatization. And so, I thought about it when he said that 95 percent, and I thought that doesn't sound very realistic. I mean, education finance is not my area. It never has been, but I just thought with a district… There's a lot of overhead in running a district and to only have 5 percent going to overhead and 95 percent to the classroom, that just doesn't sound plausible for me, even in the best, most efficient circumstances.

So, I began to dig around. Again, not my research area at all, but I had the sensibility at least as a person long within the educational realm to kind of know, ehh, this doesn't sound quite right. So, I began to dig, and I dug into national data, Michigan data, national data from the U.S. Department of Education about how much the average district or various districts across the country put into instruction, classroom instruction, as a proportion of their total revenues that they receive for to educate kids, and what I quickly realized was that yes, 95 was a bit out there because the highest that had ever been achieved was a district in New York that was around 71 percent, and it was extremely unusual. The national average was in the low to mid 60s, that the Michigan average was in the high 50s. So Detroit, with its last elected board, doing 55, and I quickly noted had once done 58 in the subsequent year, or the previous year, that wasn't too bad. That was very close to the state average and, particularly given what was already a large debt that DPS was paying on because of past state mismanagement beginning with the first state takeover from 1999 to 2006, really not bad at all. So, you know, basically what I did was validated his claim that the old board only did 55 percent. That was correct. That was correct. But, I didn't validate his claim that that made them reprehensible or that he was doing 95 percent.

Again, finance isn't my area as a researcher at all, but I knew enough to continue digging into the numbers, and I got his budget, which he claimed was putting 95 percent into the classroom, and what I did is I analyzed his budget using the exact same criteria as the U.S. Department of Education does to see how much he was...his budget was actually putting into the classroom. And what I discovered after about ten minutes of digging, of doing this, was that he only put 47 percent

into the classroom. So here he is calling out the public incompetence of the elected board for only putting in 55, and his very budget that he claims as putting in 95 or mid 90s or whatever is only putting in 47 percent.

So I did all of this research, all of the U.S. Department of Education data, here it is, here's what he said in the press. I put together all of this information along with here are some contacts where you can ask other superintendents in the metro area what they think of the idea of putting 95 percent in, and I gave it all to a reporter with the Free Press, and maybe I shouldn't mention her by name, but basically what I did was put together this package of a ready-made story. Here is something that the emergency manager said that is blatantly false, and I gave it to like five or six reporters with the different outlets, you can imagine, and the Free Press reporter got back to me and said, "Have you shared this with anyone else yet?" And I said, "Well, yeah. I did, but nobody else has responded yet." She said, "Could you please only share it with me because I want to publish on this story?" And I said, "Absolutely, great. We can work out a relationship here. I have other stories I'd love to feed you."

[1:14:31]

And she worked on the story for--this is from her own admission to me--she worked on the story for over a week. So, she actually called U.S. Department of Education people and said, "Talk me through this. What do these numbers mean?" She called local superintendents to say, "What do you think of this proposition of 95 percent?" And basically, got back to me and said, "You're absolutely right, this is an important story," and did all of the work to her credit, and then I never heard from her about it. For months. And eventually, she wouldn't answer me as I kept saying, "What's going on? What's happening with the story? Can I give it to other people?" And it was months later, and I said, "What happened?" And she said, "My editor said that he just didn't see the relevance of the story." And you know, she's part of a sorority, the Deltas, and I knew some of her Delta sisters. One of them actually was the wonderful Charity Hicks, when she was still with us, and Charity Hicks knew her personally and was a sorority sister and said, "Well, she's confided in me that they've been instructed not to say anything negative about the emergency managers." So, I began to realize that it wasn't enough to feed stories to reporters, even like where all of the

research is basically done. And to her credit, this reporter's credit, she did more research to make it richer, which is probably more than any reporters would've done. But, you know, so that... I was like, you know, wow, I can't get it out.

Maybe about a year later, I saw the same emergency manager--probably less than a year later--I saw the same emergency manager, Roy Roberts, on a national broadcast, an education town hall sponsored by the Skillman Foundation with their own controlled questions randomly picked from members of the audience who were also members of Skillman asking the questions. You know, both Roy Roberts and [John] Covington were on the stage--he was the account chancellor of the EAA and Roberts was over DPS--and the interviewer was Chelsea Clinton--I remember this very specifically--and Roy Roberts made a claim about DPS improvement of test scores that I, again, struck me again as being implausible. What said he was--and this is probably not exactly right--he said something like 10 out of 15 or eight out of 15 categories, DPS was gaining on the state average. And I just thought, you know, that would be great if it were true, but if that were true it would seriously point to something good happening, I guess.

So I said, well, I'm going to look it up and see if he's right about those eight out of 15 or whatever. And, this is all getting to the media blockades part, right. So, I looked it up, and it turned out that it wasn't eight out of 15 categories, it was zero out of 15 categories. And, he had said something that was blatantly not true--he may not have known that--on this national broadcast, this education town hall on MSNBC. And, you know, so I said--once I was digging into that, I started to dig deeper and said okay, not only is it zero out of 15, but DPS is behind in almost every category, like meaning fourth grade English, fourth grade math, all these different tests that were done under the MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] at that time--now it's called something different--but just the high stakes standardized test for the state, for state accountability. It was 20. DPS...DPS was actually not 20 to 30 percentage points behind the state average in almost every category, more than 30 in some. And so I was like, wow, it's not just that he was wrong, but it's way behind. I was like, has it always been that far behind?

So then, I started to go back, and I looked all the way back until 2009 when emergency management started, which is also when Arne Duncan came and said Detroit was ground zero. You know, you didn't get a hurricane, poor you, ground

zero for the need for education reform. And what I realized was that when you looked at the progression over time, from 2009 on to the current, which was then I think 2013, that the test, that the...that the gap between Detroit students and the rest of the state was increasing dramatically and especially among third graders to fifth graders in reading and also in math. That it was...if it had been bad before, it was becoming much worse.

And so, to me this was a story, right? Like, if we take it at face value that Arne Duncan cares about, you know, this testing gap between the rest of Michigan and the city of Detroit and that that's why--part of why--we have emergency management in the first place, controlling academics and Skillman is doing all these things to try and reshape Detroit education. This should be relevant information, if it's really about children, to get out there. So, I contacted Jewel Gopwani, who wasn't the editorial editor for the opinion page for the Detroit Free Press at that time but was the person who you talked to when you're submitting something, and I submitted my story, you know, wrote it up exactly like I said, you know. I never said the emergency management was lying. I just said I checked what he said against Michigan Department of Education's own records say. And he...Jewel Gopwani, she said, "Thank you so much. You know, we've been laying off reporters, so to have people who are knowledgeable and have been studying these issues and contributing is wonderful. So, we are going to run your story." And I was like, "Oh, great."

The story didn't run when she said it was, so I kind of was like, "Well, what's up?" And she said, "Well, we just wanted to check a couple of your numbers. So can you tell us how you got the numbers that you have? Could you kind of talk me through that?" And I was like, "Oh, sure. Sure. What I did was I went to the Michigan Department of Education website which is here, you can look yourself, and they put all the scores there, and I poured this all onto my excel spreadsheet," which I had already sent her, and I went through every claim that was made in my story and worked with it with her until she stood...understood how I arrived at every single claim I made in that article. By the way, I was supposed to start teaching at five that afternoon, and I just told my students, "This is important, you know, just hang out until I get off the phone." I was with her until 5:30, half an hour after I was supposed to start my class. And she was like, "Thank you so much for taking the time to explain it all to me. This is so important, thank you. We're

going to turn it both online and in print, the hardcopy paper." And I was like, "Great."

When the intended day, maybe a Wednesday or something like that, came around, it again didn't appear. So, I again contacted her and said, "Well, what happened?" And she said, "Well, if you're going to accuse the emergency manager of lying, we need to check with the emergency manager to see what he has to say." And I said, "Well, wait a minute. Nowhere in my article do I say that the emergency manager was lying. I say that he might have gotten his facts wrong at the moment." And I said...I said, "I didn't say he was lying, all I did was compare what he said to what the Michigan Department of Education said, and I offered no explanation of why there was a discrepancy. I just laid out here's what he said, here's what the Michigan Department of Education said." So, I said, "But also, this is an op ed, and I'm an education researcher. So why do you need to get clearance from the emergency manager to publish my op ed?" She's like, "Well, you know, we don't like to call people liars." She kept saying. So she said, "Well, we're going to call." So, she called the emergency manager, and she called me back and said, "We've decided that you can take your story somewhere else." And so, you know, this is all about the educational blockade and how to break it. So, you know, think about that. I'm an educational researcher. I'm well respected as an urban educator. I've published extensively on Detroit and urban education in general. You know, like, in the field, when people talk about urban education and Detroit, oftentimes my name comes up, and I'm not trying to toot my own horn, I'm just trying to say that I'm not some yahoo writing some off-the-cuff, you know, thing.

[1:23:28]

So, what I did was like... I was like, well, it's 2012. A lot of people have been getting stuff out just by publishing on Facebook or on their own sites, and I had never tried that before. So I was like, okay, I'm going to try. So, I had one... I made my own website. I linked to it on Facebook. I sent the link to all my contacts on email, and at least for the nerd/geek squad, it went viral--not meaning millions. It got thousands, maybe thousands of hits within a few hours, and I ended up getting...it ended up being republished in like six different venues, some of them national. Like it was in--not big things, but--in Truth Out and it was in...it was republished in Huffington Post and in other more local, Michigan Citizen, local

venues. And I also got five radio interviews, including Mildred Gaddis, you know, the queen of talk in Detroit. And to Mildred's great credit when she had me on, she read--so when I published it on my own website, I put at the bottom a note where I described that process of trying to get it published and how it was blockaded. She read that live over the air and said, "I've always known that the Free Press was in bed with the emergency managers and they don't care about our kids."

Within about an hour, I get a phone call from Jewel Gopwani from the Free Press and she says, "We'd like to run your story after all, at least part of your story." And so what I did was I sat back. I was like, "Hmmm," you know. So I said, "You know, Jewel, it's been kind of a trying week for me with that, so let me take the weekend to think about it, and then I'll get back to you on Monday." She said okay. So what I did was rather than giving her the same story to Monday, I wrote an entirely new story that didn't just take the emergency manager to account on the academic test score discrepancy but also took the emergency manager to account on finance--again, not my area, but based on actual analysis of finance available on the Michigan Department of Education website and on DPS stuff and on the enrollment issues--and called it "Who Grades the Emergency Manager?" and then said to Jewel Gopwani on Monday, "You know what, I've decided to write a different piece. Why don't you publish this one instead, and it'll be fresh?" And then at that point, she couldn't say no, really. Right? And she ended up publishing a story that was at least three times as forceful as the original one that they refused to.

But, I mean, that it would take someone who is a professor, an educational researcher, that much to get an op ed published because--and the argument like--and I heard this from another Free Press reporter later, too. The argument was made that you're making Detrorit look bad if you're publishing things that are negative about the emergency managers. And I'm like, excuse me, the emergency managers are there because the elected school board officials were blamed and trashed over and over again in the press and people came to believe that the state, the great white father, needed to intervene to save Black kids from their parents' electoral choices, you know, and I went even farther. So...so, you know, so to publish the truth of the damage of being done to our district is...is bad mouthing Detroit? You know, to bad mouth, to expose truth about an emergency

manager imposed by Governor Snyder under the same law that then did that in Flint, that's speaking poorly on Detroit?

So, you know, this to me was amazing that, you know, that there was this record of you just can't say anything bad about the emergency managers, you know. I mean, what a dangerous, dangerous statement to be made, you know? And since then, it's become--it's a shame that we can't use the regular channels, but I've become increasingly aware that projects like that, and you really can get the word out. It's not enough. We should have access to the regular channels, but...but it is possible to begin to make cracks, you know.

And, you know, the fact of the matter is--and I'm kind of jumping ahead because of the time--but we did shut down the EAA. They were--in the summer of 2013, 72 million dollars was poured into the EAA by a variety of foundations. Arne Duncan came to the EAA at that time and said it was the future of American education. And with no money and just community activism and building networks and relationships and doing just easy exposés, we were able to get the EAA shut down completely. So to me, that's really encouraging. You know, we were also able to stop more recently 24 DPS schools in Detroit from being shut down, you know, that were on the chopping block under Snyder's school reform officer. So, you know, what I always get from that is yes, there are tremendous power and money and political relationships aligned against people and in the interest of privatization and accumulation through dispossession, the urban growth industry, but it's surprising how much power we can actually have, you know. You know, just people are nothing who are able to stop some of this stuff. I don't want to romanticise it, but there is possibility there.

[1:29:35]

PB: So, also in the interest of time, just to get an idea about this in the wind down, would you be open to doing a part two of this?

TP: Sure. Yeah.

PB: Because I'd also like some of your insights on some of the recent lawsuits.

TP: I just met with Mark Rosenbaum. He's the lead attorney on the literacy case. I just, just rolled right out of there 15 minutes before I came here.

PB: Peter Hammer and I were doing some work on one of the amicus briefs for one of those cases.

TP: Right, right.

PB: So, I mean, I could like nerd out with you over this.

TP: For sure, it's very fresh in my mind!

PB: But I'm wondering... I don't want to waste it being fresh in your mind.

TP: No, no. I mean, whatever.

[1:30:18]

PB: Could we do a part two of this, and in the part two we could go through that crash course of state takeovers? Because I don't want to short change that because we could spend some serious time in breaking these immensely complex topics down. So I guess, I want to leave us with two questions that we've been asking everyone because I think this is important too in terms of, in some sense being a survey of grassroots organizers in the city, is one being, what's your vision for Detroit, for the future of Detroit? And that could be through education or more holistically, like wherever you want to take that.

TP: Okay. Well, I think that I'm a very strong believer in participatory democracy or participatory governance, and that's one of the things I love so much about the We the People of Detroit research collective because it's actually about how do you take the tools of knowledge building and put them in the hands of everyday people? To both build knowledge according to their own questions and fight back against--you know I'm not exaggerating--incredible forces that are aligned against you. I mean, the real estate industry and the finance industry, they don't mess around, and they will use the train of white supremacicst discourse to achieve their ends. They have and they will continue to do it, and they have a very clear vision of dispossession that is not good (laughs) to put it mildly to many of the folks who have hung on in Detroit, who are not among the elites. And so, you know, my vision is the more that you get people activated, the easier it is to repel those sorts of things, to expose them.

So, to increase what is already a considerable sort of political literacy, I guess, of understanding what...what is being done, what's at stake, does what happen--what is happening in Detroit. It looks a little different in every city, but it's basically the same pattern as Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], Chicago [Illinois], Newark [New Jersey], wherever, it's happening the same everywhere. And...and we can learn lessons from each other. That's been one of the great things. You know, Mother Helen Moore has been in touch--this didn't exist 20 years ago, these sort of networks. In some ways, the internet has allowed them to build--in Chicago, with activists in New Orleans, in Newark, all these places. It's very easy to talk with each other. We've been able to expose like [John] Covington, who was the EAA Chancellor, will probably never be able to work again because we have been able to bring truth about him wherever he has applied for a job. There's been at least two or three instances where once we got information into the hands of the board that was going to hire him, he was gone as a candidate.

So anyway, I believe in that sort of spirit of grassroots research justice. I think knowledge is an important part of the component, and I'm deeply interested in democratizing knowledge, you know, along the lines of someone like Paulo Freire, you know, say look, you know. And, it's not to say that I have the knowledge and everyday folks don't. It's not true. We have different knowledge based on our positionality, and it's the accumulation of that knowledge and that analysis that becomes really dangerous to powerful people, right? So, I want to further that as

much as possible. I want rank and file everyday people to become knowledgeable about what is being done and to think about the tools of pushing back against that. I mean, ultimately, you know, I think a city should serve all of its people, and I think that a city should be--not just serve all of its people, but it should be imagined... The vision for it, the vision-building should be done by the people who live in a city in their interests. Because it's in developers' interests, right?

And, you know, Detroit could be an amazing place. It is an amazing place, but it could be an amazing place that's not under assault the way it is, you know, and that's a tough prospect because there's a lot of money to be made in Detroit by the wrong people doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons. But it could be... I mean, I don't know. I love Detroit so much. I sensed it--I know it sounds kind of flakey or something, but when I first came to Detroit, I never spent time here ever because I've never lived near here until about 2005. And when I did, I know because I emailed someone like there's just something I feel there when I'm there that's nothing I've ever felt before. I don't know, it's just this feeling of love and energy, and I've never felt it before, and it was just very clear in my vision.

And so, I want that to be nurtured because I know that was already here. So, it's not really a case of deficit, of bringing something there isn't here. I mean, there's a lot of injustice that happens, but I want what is the heart of Detroit, which I see as something amazingly powerful--like I, for me, J Dilla's work, I always think of that as sort of the core that represents it in my own mind. You know, I want that to be celebrated. I want that to be front and center. I want that Detroit love to be, you know, the kinds of things that Grace Lee Boggs talked about, you know, the beloved community, and I'm sure Shea [Howell] talked about. I want those things to grow and be nurtured, and I think that is the way to do it is by activating people, to realize that there's a lot to be fought against but people can...the struggle is worth engaging in, and that there are victories.

[1:36:17]

PB: And then lastly, do you...did you know Mama Lila Cabbil?

TP: No.

PB: Okay. I just wanted to ask if you wanted to...had a relationship.

TP: Because she just passed recently. I mean, I met her, but I...I can't say... We spoke, but I can't say I know her well or knew her well.

PB: One thing we've been building into all the interviews is to provide some space for folks if they had any memories that they cared to share about her because she was part of building this project.

TP: She was? Okay, okay.

PB: So if, I mean.

TP: I'm aware of her. I'm aware of her work. I don't think I have anything to add. We'll leave that space to others.

PB: Okay. So, I mean, as long as you're open to part two for this, I'm okay with leaving it here? Do you have any further questions?

[1:37:10]

Herbert Taylor? [HT]: Today, you mentioned...you referred to a spiritual force a few times. I'm assuming it's related to your religious views or your spiritual views?

TP: Yeah.

HT: Just in my experience, in regards to religion or my faith, as far as the stuff we've been talking about, it's all aligned with injustice. How would you define injustice or what does injustice mean to you? So, what is injustice?

TP: Yeah. So, the first thing that I like...I think that what moved me so deeply when I was forced to sit in church when I was young was hearing--you know, I think this is in every religion. I'm just speaking about the one I grew up in. When I heard stories of it, I think there's a radicalism to Christ's life that is a radicalism that is different from the radicalism but complements the radicalism of, you know, leftist philosophies, for example, but is about welcoming the stranger. I think there's something about the notion that there's divinity in everyone that is incredibly radical, and the idea that you are harming Christ by any sort of harm or disrespect of another because everyone has Christ in them. That is extremely radical. But I think that, in some ways, it's less about being able to narrate it like that. I just think of where my voice gets...where I feel meaning and joy, and I feel meaning and joy out of community with other people. When I feel like...I think that I feel like I'm in touch with the divine the most when I'm using my abilities that I've been endowed with by God, or whoever you want to think of it, when I am able to use those to serve people or community, like that's that's life right there, right? Being able to use you at your best to do work for the people who have Christ in them who have been shat upon, I guess that's one way you could say it. So, to me, there's just that sense of communal struggle is the most spiritual valuable thing.

I didn't exactly use the words you used to answer the question because you were asking what I think is injustice. And, you know, I mean injustice is anything that gets in the way of people becoming the fullness of what they're able to become, you know. And like, I don't know. It sounds silly, but I'll say it anyway. For me, when I first came across the work of J Dilla, I listened to it like a thousand times because I felt something in there that I'm kind of alluding to now in all of his music. And I, you know, I was so much so I became friends with his mom and still talk to her to this day. I gave her flowers on Mother's Day for a number of years. Now, she doesn't live in Detroit anymore. But while she was here, because I thought her son can't give her flowers on Mother's Day, but I want her to know how thankful. So, I'd bring her flowers at her home. Yeah. So, I think about that gift that he had, that I don't believe it was just him. I think there's some people that have that gift who never are able to fully express it because of all the hindrances. I mean, he lucked out in some ways. I mean, he deserved it, but he

made the connections so we could know what he could produce, and my sense is that everybody can produce that. I mean, not necessarily music, but whatever gift they have, but that those gifts are blocked, and I want to unblock it. So to me, that's ultimately what it is. I mean, not everybody. It's not about everybody becoming wealthy or anything like that, but about unblocking people so they can become the fullest versions of themselves. I think there's some people who aren't able to do that, although they're compromised by materialistic definitions of what life is, I mean, they've got their own blocks. But--or by their fascination or fetishization of power, things like that--but I think other people are blocked because of oppression. And so, yeah, I want to hear some more great beats. That's what it comes down to.

HT: Thank you. My question was kind of off what we've been doing today, but I just felt that I should ask that.

TP: I imagine Bill would be...Bill Wylie-Kellermann also is able to speak about that pretty knowledgeable given his own location as a religious person.

PB: That's so cool that you bring--you brought flowers to J Dilla's mom.

TP: Yeah!

PB: Thank you so much for spending your Saturday afternoon with us. I really appreciate it.

TP: Absolutely, I look forward to doing it again.