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

Tawana Petty

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

April 5, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

Narrator

Tawana "Honeycomb" Petty is a social justice organizer, youth advocate, poet, and author born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. She is active in data justice organizing, water rights advocacy, and youth organizing through poetry in Detroit. Tawana Petty is the Director of Data Justice Programming for the Detroit Community Technology Project and a board member at the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center. She is a Detroit Equity Action Lab II cohort fellow as well as a Detroit Digital Justice Coalition member. She is a founding member and editorial board member of Riverwise Magazine as well as the founder of Petty Propolis, which is an organization that focuses on social justice through art and education workshops and teaches the use of poetry and art as an avenue for visionary resistance. She is the author of *Introducing Honeycomb*, *Coming Out My Box*, *Petty Propolis Reader: My Personal and Political Evolution*, and *Towards Humanity: Shifting the Culture of Anti-Racism Organizing*.

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.

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Abstract

In this interview, Tawana Petty details her and her comrades' work for water justice, data rights advocacy, and visionary resistance. She discusses the work of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management and the transition from that project into other organizing. She describes her work and her relationships with Grace Lee Boggs, Lila Cabbil, and Charity Hicks. She outlines the struggles of Detroiters and how they intersect with other struggles with a focus on the ties between Palestinians and Detroiters working toward freedom. Some organizations discussed in the interview are: the Boggs Center, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management, Detroit Community Technology Project, Next Gen Apps Youth Program, Petty Propolis, Detroit Digital Justice Coalition, We the People Detroit,

Detroit Summer, Allied Media Projects, and Detroit Independent Freedom Schools.

Keywords

Allied Media Projects; Arts; Boggs Center; Charity Hicks; Detroit Independent Freedom Schools; Detroit Summer; Detroit, Michigan; Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management; Education; Emergency management; Grace Lee Boggs; Lila Cabbil; Monica Lewis-Patrick; Palestine; Poetry; Privatization; Technology; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted April 5, 2019 with:

Tawana Petty [TP]

Detroit, Michigan

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

TP: Okay. My name is Tawana Petty. I'm also known as Honeycomb. That's my artist/poetry stage name. And, I live on the East Side of Detroit [Michigan], and I am a board member of the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, AKA the Boggs Center, as well as Director of Data Justice Programming for Detroit Community Technology Project. I run an art organization called Petty Propolis, and I am a DEAL [Detroit Equity Action Lab] II cohort fellow as well as Detroit Digital Justice Coalition member.

[0:00:47]

OY: So, could you describe your neighborhood growing up?

TP: I grew up in a lot of neighborhoods in Detroit. We pretty much moved around. My mom had me pretty young, 16, so--and her mom died three months later. So, we kind of moved until we got...until things got better. So, I lived from west to east, north to south, essentially. But, I got most of my teenage years on the West Side of Detroit, like West Seven Mile.

[0:01:22]

OY: So, how has the city changed since then?

TP: Ooph! You know, it's interesting because, you know, when you're growing up in Detroit, you're taught a lot of--at least for me. I'm 42, so when I was growing up in Detroit, I was taught a lot of negativity about Detroit. And so, even though I was having a pretty decent experience living here, you know, you have neighborhood issues and things, but a lot of it was like propagandized. And so, I was kind of trying to figure out why I wasn't feeling about the city the way everyone else seemed to feel about the city. So when I think about change now, I'm always thinking about, like, the narrative. Like, what has changed? Like, how are people talking about Detroit? 'Cause I really love--I've pretty much loved everywhere I lived, and I honestly didn't know that we didn't have money until my mother got some, and we moved to quote unquote "better neighborhoods," and that's when like neighbors would start telling us that we didn't--that we were poor, and we never knew that until, you know, until she was making, you know, kind of middle class living. And so, I think my experience before I was thinking about money was so much better, honestly. Even though we were moving a lot, I still was enjoying my childhood.

[0:02:47]

OY: So, how did you first become active in social movements in Detroit?

TP: It's funny because when I was really little, I was pretty conscious. Like, I was writing like poems like about crooked politicians and being yanked off stage at that age in elementary school. But then as I got older--and like I said, you internalize like folks telling you like you need to move out of Detroit to make something better for yourself. Then, I got kind of sucked into like corporate America and trying to move upwardly, you know, be upwardly mobile, and I got disconnected from movements. I would say I got back connected--shoot, there was intervals. Like, things happened with Hurricane Katrina, Jena Six, Malice Green, Rodney King, just different moments throughout my adulthood that connected me to start thinking about like what's happening in society. But when I was in corporate and I was trying to move and bring my son into like not being

into poverty, I wasn't really thinking about social movements, to be honest with you. So, I would just say that I dipped in and dipped out into these moments of consciousness, but I became more consistently involved somewhere around maybe 2007. So, maybe about a solid 12 years now.

[0:04:14]

PB: So, what happened in 2007 that got you back engaged?

TP: Mm... I think...I think I got back engaged because like, first of all, I was in my job, and I wanna say it was around the time that Barack Obama started like talking about--either people started talking about him as a candidate or either he was talking about being a candidate. I don't remember the exact moment, but it was somewhere around this...this period of like realizing that coworkers were splitting. Like, you know, I was in management. I'm 60 plus hours a week, you know. I'm not really--I'm trying to maintain--I'm running a law firm, you know. I'm doing like a lot of things where I'm not really connected. But then, I started to notice like there's a lot of tension, you know, there's a lot of racial tension. And, I'd had a couple of moments of realizing that--and this might sound weird. Like, I'm like probably as like pro-Black, but you know which pro-Black isn't anything, but like I'm very like in tune now. But at that time, I was learning that... I was learning that it was really like a real thing, you know, that folks were still looking at you as, you know, inferior based on your race. I was disconnected from that. And when he started talking about being a president, the office split. I started to hear commentary that I hadn't heard from folks that I was really close with. And so, that was like a rude awakening for me. And also during that time, my son had experienced a racial incident. I had tried to put him in a school, you know, where he could experience quote unquote a "better education," and he had experienced an incident. So yeah, it was a rude awakening, and I had to reevaluate my life and what I was paying attention to and how I needed to be connected to movement.

[0:06:18]

PB: So, what I'm hearing is you...you kind of having this like reckoning with your consciousness.

TP: Yeah.

PB: So, how did you then take a step from witnessing and thinking about these bigger issues to then getting involved in a more hands-on way?

TP: So, it is something--like, growing pains are really painful, and there was something about like coming into that consciousness where you start to feel like the implicit bias, the explicit bias, things you didn't notice before. I started to realize I was being tokenized, and that is a painful--like, once you recognize that, even if you earn your merits, there's another layer to it, like you're being like put up against other Black folks as like, "Oh, you're an exception," you know, and those sorts of things. So, I started to recognize that, and I made a decision to walk off my job. I was making...I was making somewhere around 70 plus thousand dollars a year, plus like major benefits, three weeks travel, everything, and...and I...I had a little bit of a nest egg, and I walked off my job. Everybody thought I was crazy. [laughs] And, I just...I couldn't go back anymore, and so I threw myself into figuring out who I am. That was pain. That was tough. That nest egg went away pretty quickly.

And then, I reconnected with my roots in Detroit--'cause I had moved out temporarily. I reconnected with my roots in the city, got involved in the poetry community. I've been a poet since I was seven, but when you're in corporate, you don't really write poems, right? So, I got reconnected to the poetry community. I got reconnected to my neighborhoods and community organizers, and it really did--it really was like an on-the-ground, in-your-face education. A lot of painful moments, but I think it's the best decision I've ever made, honestly.

[0:08:36]

PB: So, as you're going through that process of coming to this awareness and starting to think more critically about structures and institutions, ...

TP: Mmhmm.

PB: ...who were some of your greatest influences in that development?

TP: I lucked up and got connected with the Boggs Center. At this time, James Boggs had already passed away--he died in 1993--but Grace Boggs was still very active and moving forward, and one of the Boggs members, Rich Feldman, Richard Feldman, he saw me perform. And so in a classic Boggs Center way, he brought me like ten books, I think [laughs], and a lot of pamphlets and literature to read. So, I took that home, and I was just intrigued like, "People bring you books and literature to read?" You know? So, I was intrigued by them. I started to go to community meetings and things that they were organizing. And then, I joined their team and helped them organize a conference, and I've kind of been glued to their hip ever since. And throughout that trajectory, I've met a lot of other people in the community, social justice warriors and things, but I would say that my first really deep dive into political education was through the Boggs Center.

[0:09:58]

PB: Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with Grace Lee Boggs? Like, maybe any particular stories that come to mind that were particularly impactful on your life?

TP: Yeah, well, Grace was tough on me. [laughs] She was really tough on me, and she used to always say when we would like--so, I lived--I still live on the property of the Boggs Center. And at some point during her period of transition, I served on her hospice team. But before that, you know, I was just bright-eyed and not--you know, I thought I knew everything, and...and Grace would challenge. She would really challenge you and push you, and if you were writing and she didn't think it was strong enough, she would give it back to you. She would say, "You need to go

back through this," and in those moments, you know, ego, your...your ego can be, you know, a thing that gets in the way of your growth, but...but I really started to appreciate those challenges.

She would always say when you come into a meeting, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" and I would be so irritated. Like, why does she say that every time we start a meeting? Like, why does she say what time is it on the clock of the world? Like, I don't get it. And then, one day I got it. And so, it's kind of been a mantra. It's kind of been how I navigate the world. It's not just about me as an individual, it's not just about my city, but it's about the global experience. How are the things that I'm doing impacting people all over the world? And so, she's just had--through all the toughness, through all the push, through all the challenge--she's had a tremendous, tremendous impact on how I see the world, how I see social movements, how I navigate all of those things.

[0:11:46]

PB: So, speaking more broadly, just being in the city, I think I can always see and feel the legacies of James and Grace Lee Boggs. So, I am wondering, as someone who was so close to Grace Lee Boggs, ...

TP: Yeah.

PB: ...where do you see the reverberations of her legacy, of James Boggs's legacy in the city where you're doing your work today?

TP: Wow. I see both of their legacies everywhere. First of all, James, AKA Jimmy Boggs, even though I didn't have the honor of meeting him, he's had a tremendous impact. I'll use myself as an example first. He called himself an organic intellectual, and I self-identify as that as well, and I would say that Grace and Jimmy--Detroit Summer is a youth organization that's 20, somewhere around 23 years old, and young people are still organizing Detroit Summer. The Boggs School is ran by Julia Putnam, who was the first volunteer for Detroit Summer

Youth Org when she was 16. We're the same age, you know. So, Allied Media Projects, you know, which is a 20-year-old media justice organization is ran by a person, Jenny Lee, who was part of Detroit Summer. I could think about so many--there are environmental justice movements that Grace and Jimmy were instrumental in starting. So, I can...I can, pretty much...you can touch pretty much anywhere in the city and find some kind of impact that they've had. Even if folks don't know it, you know? They were instrumental in helping to organize Dr. [Martin Luther] King's first I Have a Dream speech, which happened in Detroit, Malcolm X's Message to the Grassroots movement, things that took place in Detroit that they organized. And so, it's just so much...so many ripples of impact that they've had.

You know, they say a prophet...a prophet isn't honored in their own home. You might go into a lot of areas in the city that don't know about their impact, but once folks get connected to the history, they may be standing in a building that served in the community that they didn't even know that came out of their direct organizing. Avalon Bakery, as an example, started as a conversation in Grace and Jimmy's living room. So, you know, there's so many moments that--and places in the city that folks just don't...they don't know the roots, but they've had a lot of impact over 60 years in Detroit, so yeah.

[0:14:38]

PB: So, what I'm hearing is those roots are really important to you...

TP: Absolutely.

PB: ...in terms of like recognizing your place within this historical trajectory. Could you talk a little bit about that in terms of why--and it's kind of a broad question--why it's important for this city to--for people in this city to--understand the historical roots of folks like James and Grace Lee Boggs, their legacy in the city?

TP: I think it's really difficult to sustain any movement if you don't know what it's rooted in. One of my comrades would always say, "It's better to be thinking an inch wide and a mile deep than be thinking a mile wide and an inch deep." And for me, that's always stuck with me because it meant you're rooted. It's like the mycelium under the earth, you know, that everything is connected to, and that's how you sustain a movement. If it's just surface and you jump in for a protest maybe once or you jump into something because it's like a feel good moment, you're not going to continue forward, you're not gonna pass that legacy on, you're not going to--we're going to repeat things every 50 years.

I mean, if I look at the moment that we're in in this country right now, I see a lot of ties to folks not knowing history, and I think that the more you know about history--and you know there are quotes around this, right. There's so many quotes around you're doomed to repeat it and those things, but it's had a really tremendous impact on me to think about not only how much history I absorb knowing that there's nothing new under the sun, that there are folks whose shoulders I stand on. And then, transferring that knowledge to my son who then if he chooses to have children or even interacts with children that he will transfer that knowledge. Because I think a lot of times we see movements fizzle and fade because it's just a moment, you know. It's not a movement, it's a moment. And so, I'd like to see us create the world that we all deserve, and I think we can't do that without knowing all the movements that came before us, you know. History is so important. I didn't realize that when I was in school, but now I do [laughs], you know. So important.

[0:17:05]

PB: How do you see that kind of analysis being implemented into movement work in the city? Like, do you see that as being prevalent in the organizations you've been a part of or engaged with, in terms of not just the historical analysis being a part of the movement but in terms of being proactive in terms of political education along with that?

TP: Yeah. I mean, I have the honor and benefit to serve on the Boggs Center board, and that is a priority for us. We study every week, every Tuesday morning

at nine in the morning. When Grace was alive, it was earlier, but... [laughs] But every Tuesday morning, we are, “What time is it on the clock of the world? What’s happening in the world? What should we be reading? What should we be watching?,” and we do that every week. And then, we do it also during our board meeting. So, we aren't even a traditional board. Like, we’re studying, we’re writing, we’re co-creating, we’re trying to figure out what social justice orgs we should be connected to, what movements we should be intervening in, what’s our responsibility.

Being part of--I said I’m the director of Data Justice programming for Detroit Community Technology Project, which is rooted in Allied Media Projects, and we always--anyone who comes into that space knows the history of that space, knows how folks got connected to Allied Media, knows how they came into the trajectory of media justice. As an example, Detroit Community Technology Project put out a book called *Teaching Community Technology*, and it talks about the pedagogy that started with the Highlander Center and citizenship schools and Myles Horton and those sorts of things. And so, we’re not just looking at things, how to create, you know, great media, but like what’s the roots of coming into even thinking about media justice? And then, what’s the next thing for that? Like, how are we responsible stewards to information? How can we think beyond access? And those sorts of things. How do we think about consentful technology?

And so, we’re just always thinking about, like, what came before, what’s gonna come after, what’s the vision ahead, and trying to study so that we can continue to sustain the work and not just hold it but transfer it and let it ripple out to others, other organizations. As an example, the Boggs Center and Allied Media Projects, we produce--anything we do, we try to produce documentation to show other folks how to do it. And so, I think that’s really important ‘cause it takes away this self-centered ownership of movement that tends to permeate social justice.

[0:19:55]

PB: This is kind of pivoting, but I’m wondering if you could speak a little bit about how your different identities as you understand them influence your political, your organizing work?

TP: I...I wake up super Black [laughs] every morning. Black mother, I have a Black son, I'm in the Blackest city, one of the last remaining Black meccas in the country. I think it's tremendously important to protect that. It doesn't mean that we don't welcome in new residents, but I think that keeping Detroit a predominantly Black city is for the benefit of the world. And so, I...I think, organize, create from that trajectory, and I don't believe in allyship, I believe in co-liberation and folks thinking about their liberation tied up with one another. I think that like allyship in any movement, whether you're white with Black, or Black with brown, or brown with Indigenous, or, you know, cisgender with LGBTQ, etc., I think that if you don't see your liberation tied up into the liberation of folks that are being oppressed all over the world, then it's a pet project, and it's really just something you're checking off to say, you know, "I did this thing in support of those people." We have to see our humanity tied up as one, and I think that this country hasn't.

And so, I preference and prioritize Black leadership and organizing against anti-Black racism because I feel like globally we haven't dealt with that. And so, I think that protecting Detroit as a predominantly Black city is one way to make some gains in that arena. If we can get the world to say that it's important that this city, this last remaining city, is successful in treating, like, seven hundred plus thousand Black people like human beings, then we will make a tremendous impact. And so, I organize, write, create, think from that perspective, while not downplaying other folks' oppression. And so, yeah. So, that's...that's how I navigate.

[0:22:30]

PB: Could you speak a little bit about any kind of difficulties that you might have experienced in movement spaces as a Black woman in Detroit?

TP: Well, [sigh] because Detroit has suffered under the literal weight of a half century of propaganda--I mean, literally for 50 plus years, the whole world has had one particular perspective of the city I was born, raised, educated, and raised my son and educated him in. It's no surprise that there's sometimes a kind of

crabs-in-a-barrel type experience in some movements. And by that, I mean folks are grasping and fighting for...for peanuts a lot of times, and...and Black women in particular have had like a foot on their neck for so long, and it's super prevalent in Detroit just because the city itself has...has had the whole world's foot on its neck. So then, you have to go to what the hierarchies are after that. And so, I think that sometimes I find my space--myself in spaces where folks are still fighting to be seen. And because they're fighting to be seen, there are fractures, and it's less about ownership and more about invisibility.

And so, right now, I live in a city where we've gone from being invisible to hypervisible, or we move between those two--hypervisible, invisible, hypervisible, invisible. And so, we're either--either no one wants to care what's happening with us, or everybody cares what's happening with us, but it's never...neither side has been positive. And so, I try not to internalize, like, what I've experienced because I'm connected to where I am and I understand what the city as a whole has experienced. It doesn't mean that it's easy, but once you're back to the root, once you understand the root of things, it makes it a little bit easier to navigate, you know.

I mean, I always tell people, imagine being raised and growing up somewhere where everywhere you travel in the world has one narrative about you for your whole life. A lot of people don't escape that, you know? And sometimes, they internalize it and then replicate it because what else do you have, you know? You have folks that aren't investing in you, businesses that aren't coming to your city, schools that are closed--excuse me, schools that are closing, rec centers that are closing, etc. And then, you fend for yourself, no grocery stores. And now within the last five years, we are the comeback city. We're the place where business can thrive. We're the place that the world is looking at like the top destination spot. Only one thing has changed: white leadership and white residents. And so, that's like one of those pills to swallow where, you know, I stop to think about all the young people behind me that feel like they're not valued. So, I try not to internalize like the little issues that I think I experience. I think that the kids in Detroit are on the front lines of so much. 57 Detroit Public Schools with no water--*57*. Where else could that happen without a massive uproar, you know? Yeah, like I said, once you understand the root, you can navigate better.

[0:27:04]

PB: I want to come back to what you said about crabs in a bucket, that analogy. What I'm hearing when you say that is the prevalence of individualism. So, I'm wondering, from your experiences, whether inside organizations or in communities, what you've found effective in kind of reaching people to shift that away from the individual mentality that we're all socialized into to more a collective like co-liberation framework?

TP: Well, I mean, besides the fact that I've written four books [laughs] trying to get people to be thinking differently. But...but, I would say that, honestly, like the individualism in Detroit--I'm not...I'm not glorifying or glamorizing the city, but, you know, I...I give us a little bit more slack than I give a lot of places. It's different than having like--you know, I don't even use one percent language, but I'll use it for this clarity. But, you know, it's different than having like the one percent, you know, fighting over billions, right? We're looking at a city where like the median income is like under 20 k [20,000], you know, where like low-income housing is...is somewhere around 40,000, right, and we're looking at a city where, you know, foundations that invest in the city are doing just way more harm. Like, you know, they might drop a few million for like good projects, but they're dropping trillions in like the harm, right, and you're looking at a city where, like I said, for five decades, nobody wanted to even stop and pee in here, in this city.

And now--so...so once you start to see the glimmer of sunshine, you're gonna run to the sunshine, and sometimes you might trip over folks or kick folks on the way, but you haven't seen sunshine. So, you know, it's the first--we're only in the first few years of like folks giving a damn about Detroit. So, I think...I think I can give them another 40-something years to realize that we shouldn't be fighting over peanuts, you know. Yeah, so I'm trying. I try--I'm very slow and patient with Detroit just because I grew up through it, and I know what a number they did on us, you know, and I want for young people--and I see what a number they did on them and the adults and the folks that are fighting to be seen, and I understand it. Like I said, I'm not glorifying it. I'm not absolving us of any wrongdoing, but I just think that anyone who has experienced it can understand a little better.

[0:30:13]

PB: I was hoping to raise this question later, but it's a logical segue. One of the things I'm particularly interested in is--in this conversation that's emerged--is how do you as an organizer, how do we collectively do this work when people are faced with crisis situations, survival situations? We talk about this when we talk about water, but in your organizing work, how are you communicating and messaging in ways that moves from a person's scope focusing just on survival to locating that crisis and that survival within a broader structural framework or analysis?

TP: Well, with water, it's particularly recognizing that it's not just a Detroit thing. You know, water, you know, a lot of people say things like, "Water is the new oil," and those sorts of things, but I'm not connected to the oil movement, but I don't think folks are running out of oil. I think that water--we're sitting on a third of the world's fresh water. I'm seeing fences go up around Belle Isle, the island, and when I see, like, privatization of a resource that we all need to live, literally need to live, it sends off some bells and whistles. Aquifers all over the world being dried up, folks coming here and sucking up the water here because you can do it. You can do it here. Like, who's gonna fight...who's gonna fight for us? I'm looking at Nestle just literally drilling like millions and millions of gallons of water and paying something like 200 dollars a year while they sell it back to us at however many dollars a bottle, you know. And so, I think like once you understand like roots, again, like corporations like Veolia who...who have wreaked havoc all over the world, New Orleans [Louisiana], all over the world, Palestine, you know, and you see those same corporations come to Detroit and they're in trash, they're in water, they're in transportation.

Once you connect those dots, then you know that you have to have a conversation with somebody outside of your city. And so, we've talked to folks in Cochabamba [Bolivia], we've talked to folks in West Virginia, we've talked to folks in Palestine. When the water shut off, prices first really ramped up in Detroit. There were hundreds of Palestinian mothers who sent a letter to Detroit mothers saying, "We understand,"--to Detroit and Flint [Michigan] mothers--and they were in like the height of fighting in the Gaza Strip, you know. So once you connect the battles to, like, what's happening globally, then you know it's larger than yourself, it's larger than where you come from. And, water is one of those things that there

isn't a living resource on this earth that doesn't need it to survive. So, it's in everybody's best interest to be in that struggle.

[0:33:33]

PB: Could you talk--I know you...you traveled to Palestine--could you talk a little bit about... As you see it, could you put your analyses on the connections on what's taking place in Detroit and what's taking place in Palestine or elsewhere?

TP: It's so funny because even when you're--consider yourself--I consider myself, you know, part of an oppressed demographic, but privileged in a sense, right? I traveled to Palestine, as an example. I have Palestinian friends who can never go. But, I got there and knew--there's this kind of American exceptionalism that creeps into you when you go to other places, even if you don't even agree with America's politics and ways of being. But, I remember getting there and saying, "What can I do to help?" Oh my God, what a rude awakening. I was...I had become that person that I don't like [laughs] to deal with most times. And...and, our--one of our hosts, Palestinian hosts, said, "Liberate Black people in America," and I went, "Whoa." He said, "If you do that, we're next."

So, I had to sit with that, you know, that I'm in Palestine and Palestinians are looking like, if you can get Black folks to be recognized as fully human in the United States, the sky is the limit for everybody else. So, that's pretty much--I mean, I haven't thought beyond that moment since, you know. And, like I said, getting those mothers who literally sent a letter to Detroit in the heat of their battle, it lets me know that folks recognize that global anti-Black racism is probably one of the hardest things to struggle with, and if...if you can...if you can get the world to see us as fully human, it feels like every other struggle would be a little bit easier to fight.

[0:35:58]

PB: This seems...this seems like a pretty big moment. That...that story that you shared is really profound. Can you talk a little bit about the way that you brought that analysis back and any solidarity work that you did between Black Americans and Palestinians?

TP: Yeah. So, I came back with that. Of course I wrote, but I also organized. I'm part of Blacks for Palestine and Black solidarity work, and I organized a panel discussion on--so, let's be honest. In Palestine, I experienced blatant racism. I was called a slave, and, I mean, I experienced that in Israel and Palestine, right? So, but back to roots, when you understand the root of things, you organize from a particular perspective. I didn't come back and say, "I'm not gonna struggle for these oppressed communities because they called me outright a name." I understood that they were getting the same media about me that I was getting about me, and I knew that there was a point in my life where I had internalized those same images.

And so, I called together a panel with Black and Arab and Palestinian organizers called Palest--it was something like Fighting for Palestine in a World of Anti-Black Racism, and I organized that at the Charles H. Wright Museum during the African World Festival, and we had a very deep dialogue about what it means to live in a city where most of like the gas stations are Arab-owned, and a lot of Arab owners don't respect Black residents that enter the space. We had very deep dialogue about what it means to travel across the world in solidarity and be called a racist name. We had a lot of dialogue about the roots of white supremacy and what it means to organize against that. We had Jewish folks who are Palestinian solidarty folks joining in the discussion. We had Black, brown, white, you name it.

And so, the last several years of my life essentially has been doing anti-racism organizing in addition to technology work and those other things. But...but, I...I have been very focused on understanding root causes, tapping into folks' humanity, drawing forth the impact that white supremacy has had on every identity, no matter who you are, the inability to see yourselves. As an example, I'm always taught that as a Black person, it's not my responsibility to teach white people, you know, about racism, right? I'm of the mindset that there's no person better to teach people how to treat me than me, right, and I'm also of the mindset that white supremacy does this thing where it prevents folks from seeing

themselves as fully human. In order to dehumanize someone, you have to not fully be connected to your own humanity, right? And so... So, I've been pretty strategic in how I engage those conversations with all identities because I feel like anti-Black racism permeates every identity, even Black identity. And so, yeah. I could go on and on about that for days, but it didn't stop me from doing the organizing. It didn't stop me from recognizing the value of co-liberation. It just made me take a pause and reevaluate how I went about it.

[0:40:05]

PB: If it's okay, I want to shift us back to Detroit and speak a little bit about emergency management. You were affiliated with DREM [Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management]?

TP: Yep.

PB: Could you speak a little bit about what the view from, say, your neighborhood was while all these...while news was circulating, media, that emergency management was coming in? Could you just talk about what it was like on the ground when all this was building up?

TP: Yeah. So, I was a part of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. You'll probably find a whole lot of pictures of like, "No to emergency management," "Not my governor," and everything else ugly online. But, yeah, it was another example of emergency management basically being a thing that was leveraged against Black cities. There were cities that weren't Black that were in way worse financial situations that were not taken over. And if we think about emergency management in our school systems as an example, Detroit Public Schools had 100 million dollar surplus when emergency management took over the school system--100 million dollar surplus! Our graduation rates were up, you know, our average, our schools were thriving. That was over 20 years ago. Emergency management essentially took the Detroit Public School system into the dumps, and they leveraged that same ideology to take over the city, the financial--the whole financial infrastructure of the city. Worse than that, they used the same

emergency managers in Flint. There are so many ties to the downfalls in Black cities to emergency management that a lot of folks just don't think about.

But when you have done such a number, a propaganda number, on a community, it makes it easy for folks to just go along with what they say. You know, nobody was jumping up and saying like, "Why would that city go into bankruptcy? That's something we need to reevaluate." Folks were looking like, "Oh, they're going to rescue Detroit," you know, "from themselves," and let this person come over and literally disenfranchise more than 50 percent of Black voters. And so, you know, our elected officials had no power, as constituents we had no power, and they...they...they basically just took over the entire city and made decisions that...that took our democracy from us, and any person who claims to be for democracy should have been in an uproar about us not having control over our...our city as voters at the very least.

And so, we did a lot of organizing, we did a lot of teach-ins, we did a lot of protests, we did press conferences, we did...we did a lot of court actions, and they literally ran during a lame duck session and snuck in that bankruptcy filing while we're in another court case. And so, all of it was just violent and underhanded, and it's just, you know. It's still unfathomable that Detroit was allowed to go into bankruptcy. Like, I can't even. Some stuff is just, you know, but I'll talk about the fact that the space that we're sitting in was...was where DREM started, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. I spent so many nights and days in Detroit Freedom Schools, started--we organized out of the space. It's where Charity Hicks, who is an ancestor now, told us to wage love in the struggle just a month before she was killed in New York as an environmental justice activist going to talk to the United Nations about water. Then, this space--so, I'm feeling like kind of like some ancestral connection right now.

But, I'll say that just back to the bankruptcy, any other city that was asking for financial support that was not Black was not given it. They were not given emergency management. So, we just have to think about like why they would allow for these Black cities to be taken over, to have voters further disenfranchised, to wrap up our financial system in a bankruptcy to further endebt us to government regulation and control. And, look at the school system, what emergency management did to the school system. Look at what emergency

management did to Flint. There's so many examples, you know. There's so many examples.

And so, I just hope, at the very least, that folks just look beyond what they've heard and do the research and look at the history and see what the impact has been on us as a city and as residents. Yeah. Let's...let's just think about--say bankruptcy was a good idea. Let's just pretend that it was a good idea. We have--like our tax foreclosures alone, there's a map you can find that shows you tax foreclosures in Detroit as an example, and it is literally covered all across the map with red dots. That means like essentially every neighborhood in the city has been touched by tax foreclosures even though they proved that the city has been mistaxed for years, for many many years. And so, if you're gonna file a bankruptcy, right, who should it--shouldn't it protect the folks that are losing their homes? Shouldn't it protect residents, you know, from water shutoffs? Like, what's the purpose of a bankruptcy if it's not gonna bail out the residents, you know? So, I just… For the life of me, the fact that there hasn't been more questions, you know, it really bothers me.

[0:47:14]

PB: I want to put a question to you because we've been asking everybody, just to get it on the record. This could--I mean, you could answer it from a gut instinct, or you could answer it from your political analysis, but why was Detroit enlisted in emergency management? Why was bankruptcy declared?

TP: 'Cause there's 700,000 plus Black people here that the whole world was convinced couldn't take care of themselves. Flat out, you know. But, I keep going back to like, you know, Coleman Young. For all the--mayor, former mayor Coleman Young, for all the--you know, he wasn't perfect, but he's...he warned against a lot of things. "Don't let them take your water," you know, "Don't let them take control of your city," all those things. But the minute that he became mayor, it's like the...the...it's like the world parted, you know. It was like, "Oh, this arrogant Black dude thinks he's gonna tell us what to do or what we can and cannot do with Detroit. Then, we'll just disinvest. We'll just stop bringing our business there. We'll just move all our residents. We'll just level neighborhoods for freeways. We'll, you

know, we'll just take our toys and go." Meanwhile, a lot of those millionaires still held onto land in the city and let it dilapidate because they knew that the narrative would be that Detroiters did it, you know.

So, I think that, like I said, once you...any... With anything, if I were to come in every day for a year and say negative things about you to everybody around, right, at some point even folks who know you will start to believe, 'cause like why are they saying it every day if it's not true, you know? And so, when they said we're gonna save the city--I mean, that's why stuff like Shinola is gonna save the city can...can exist, you know? Once you...once you continue to bombard with music, with movies, with media a particular narrative, then it's really easy to sell whatever you wanna do to fix it, right? I'll never forget. There was this old movie where the running theme in it was the guy was being tortured, right--you probably even know about it--and they go, "Take him to Detroit!" you know, and it's like that was a joke, you know. Cleveland [Ohio], at least we're not Detroit. That was a joke. Like, we've been the joke of the world for my entire life. So, it's really easy for them to pretty much experiment with us. You know, I always tell people whenever I hear Detroit is coming back, I hear make America great again. It's the same thing to me. 'Cause where is it coming back from? Where is it going to, you know, and for whom?

[0:50:33]

PB: Can you talk a little bit about--I want us to go into the water struggle, too. But before we move into that area, could you speak a little bit about what you--you know, if we're looking back at DREM, could you share some of the lessons that you learned about organizing or about power structures in the city, about coalition building, about any of that from that struggle? So, lessons learned and what you see as some of the successes or impacts of DREM.

TP: Well, I learned coalition building is hard [laughs], even though I'm committed to it. I'm in so many coalitions. And, I also learned that it's kind of like the same folks in every coalition trying to do work on every end of social justice. Like, I was, you know, I was probably in six meetings a week in addition to work and trying to be a poet and a mom. So, those...those are the hard lessons, but the...

I learned to connect the dots. I learned that if...if you read it, research it. If you hear it, research it. Talk to somebody other than--don't be...also don't be caught in a vacuum, right? Hear it from different perspectives, analyze it, think critically, stay the course. I learned--you know, this is one of Grace's quotes, but--don't get stuck in old ideas. If your ideas are stuck, they're already dead. So, we have to keep coming back to the table, keep reevaluating, keep thinking about a new strategy, evolve into how we educate the community on what's happening. That's how Detroit Independent Freedom Schools came out of DREM, you know. We're doing teach-ins, we're doing political ed, we're studying, but then how do we transfer this knowledge to young people? Maybe our meetings aren't the best [laughs] method for bringing young people into the space.

I learned that we needed an inside-outside strategy. We needed attorneys who are in the city council buildings. We needed former city council members. We needed folks who were interested in water justice, folks who are interested in education, folks who are interested in welfare rights, housing justice. So when you're thinking about like resisting emergency management, you have to think about all of the aspects that it's gonna touch, all the types of people it's gonna touch. We needed multiracial resistance, co-liberation, yeah, and that's it. It needs to keep evolving, and DREM isn't like a regular meeting space now, but every single member in DREM is connected to some aspect of the struggle, even now. Whether they've gone on to start organizations, whether they've gone on to volunteer in the Freedom School, no matter what, folks were politicized deeper around the systems and are actively engaged in some level.

[0:54:01]

PB: That's what I keep hearing across interviews, that that was kind of a jumping off point for so many folks and so many movements that have come out of DREM.

TP: Yeah.

PB: To kind of bring us into the water, could you speak to the connections--or how...what impacts did emergency management, the bankruptcy have on the city's water system? And then, I guess if you could take us into how you first got involved with the water struggle.

TP: So, the water...the water struggle is...it predates me by a long shot. I mean, Coleman Young, like I said, was talking about, "They're coming. They're gonna try to take the water," way back when, right? Decades ago. And so, I would say that there's always been interest in this water, right? As far as my connection--and I...you should see...I did a storytelling event called Wage Love. It was like Water Love. I think that's what it was called. But the ancestor I mentioned earlier, Charity Hicks, she was trying to get everyone engaged in the water struggle. She was part of the founding of the People's Water Board, and she would constantly say that we need to be fighting for water, we need to be fighting for water. Well, you know, I had all these other aspects of struggles that I was prioritizing at the time.

And one particular day, she invited everyone to St. Peter's [Episcopal Church], where we are, and she wanted to talk about what had happened. She had been arrested for trying to stop water shutoffs on her block on her street, and she had tried to help a pregnant woman fill her tub up with water. She had tried to stop the trucks, Homrich trucks, from shutting water off. She was ultimately arrested after she called police to get support. She was taken to, like, this correctional center where they just threw somewhere like 50 to 60 women in like one big room and they weren't getting, like, medical treatment. She cut her foot, you know. She's bleeding on the floor, all kinds of things. And...and so when she was...when some activist attorneys got her out, she convened here.

And the day that she convened, it was pretty historic because--I don't know if you're familiar with Dr. Vincent Harding, a speech writer for Dr. King--and he was a comrade--but we had just left Grace's house, Grace Boggs's house, and we were singing over the phone to Dr. Harding 'cause he liked singing, but he was terminally ill. And so, Joyce [Johnson]--Mama Joyce--and Nelson [Johnson] were here from Greensboro, North Carolina, and they were really good friends with Dr. Harding as well. So, we all came over here because they were visiting, Joyce and Nelson--Nelson Johnson, I'm sorry--of Greensboro, North Carolina Truth and Reconciliation. So anyway, we came over to St. Peter's, and we were having a

convening, and Charity was telling us about what had happened with her being locked up. Somewhere during that...somewhere during that, we had gotten a call that Dr. Harding had passed away.

So, that was a real emotional event, and Charity at some point during that told us that we needed to wage love in the struggle. We need to wage love, you know. The struggle needs us. We gotta get involved. We all have to become part of the water struggle. You know, waging love on each other but also meant we like really have to strengthen our resistance and those sorts of things. And so--and that was the last time I...I saw her alive, actually. But...so after that, I went on a trip out of town to speak at Freedom...Freedom Dreams event, and Charity went to the United Nations and the Left Forum to talk about water, and she was run down by a motorist. She was standing at a bus stop, and the driver drove up on the curb and hit her, and he turned out later to be like the son of--he was just off parole or just on parole, just released, and he had turned out to be like the son of like a former chief of police or something in New York. His family had lots of connections to like the mayor and those sorts of things. He...he hit her, and he went on the run for like a month. And then, he ultimately got a slap on the wrist after that.

But, she went into a coma for like thirty days. And somewhere in between her being in a coma, like, folks that were working on solely housing justice, folks that were working on solely education, folks that were working solely in art, in different aspects of the movement, all came together on water. You know, we all came together on water. We the People of Detroit is the perfect example. They were working on so many different aspects, like, of city organizing, but they made water their primary focus. They actually have a water station, an emergency water station, here. They have an emergency water station here in this space. And, that was my catalyst, you know, prioritizing water because Charity said so, and she went on. She transitioned. She passed away, and that was like the fire, the fuel, that many folks felt that they needed to prioritize water and carry on her legacy essentially.

[1:00:43]

PB: Can you talk a little bit about--from being in movement spaces, from hearing folks talk about Charity Hicks, it's so clear that she continues to play a pivotal role in organizing work in the city.

TP: Yeah. [nods]

PB: Could you speak a little bit about maybe what you've learned as an organizer from her work and maybe what lessons aspiring organizers or current organizers could draw from or could learn from her style of organizing, what she did?

TP: Charity prioritized children. She felt like we should listen to young people. She really was not a fan of any form of ageism at all. She was so approachable. You could...you could show up and talk to her for hours even though she was super busy, super super busy. Really brilliant, well-studied. She was fighting policy. She was educating children. She was working on environmental justice. She was working on water.

And, I just learned from her that if the young people don't feel human, engaged, important, prioritized, that we are failing as a movement. I think that's the biggest lesson I got from her was that those are your voices that are on the frontlines of the struggle, and if you wanna know what's happening in the streets, if you wanna know...if you wanna...if you wanna see vision, right, you're gonna be missing out, totally, if you don't connect with the young people in the streets. And, it's so funny because I'm 42--I've got a lot of white hair, but I'm 42--but it's so funny. I enter a lot of spaces where people are still looking at me like a youth, you know, and I didn't always have a red flag with that, and Charity brought that consciousness to me. It's like if you walking in a space and you're the youth, you need to be figuring out either how you tap the young people or how you--and you might not always bring them into that particular space because some of these spaces can be too violent to engage young people, but maybe you wanna see if they wanna advise, maybe you want to resource them to do their own organizing, or maybe you wanna just transfer the knowledge, something, but you have to make sure their voices are included. And so, I think that that was one of the biggest lessons I got from her.

[1:03:49]

PB: Could you walk a little about what your role is--as a person, as an organizer, as a poet, however you want to take it--what your roles have been in the water struggle?

TP: Mmm. So, I write poems about water, but...but I also--I've been deputized by Monica Lewis-Patrick. Hopefully you'll meet her, We the People of Detroit. And so, she...she's kind of like this person that I think kind of took the Charity banner and ran the furthest with it, if you ask me. But, I think that, for me, it's been educating folks on what's happening in water. It's been writing about water. It's been performing about water. It's been telling folks, you know, whenever you can avoid it, don't drink bottled water. That's Mama Lila [Cabbil], Mama Lila on my shoulder every time I grab a bottle of water. I'm like, "But, Mama Lila," even when she's not in the space. Now, she's always in the space as an ancestor. But...but yeah, I mostly been--I have volunteered with We the People many times. Actually, at the height of the water crisis, I was the media team, most of the media team. I was taking on average 20 calls a day from reporters and just different folks interested in like how to get involved. I used to volunteer with the Water Rights Hotline, emergency hotline for water delivery. I've delivered water numerous times to my neighborhood as well as other neighborhoods and canvassed, done workshops with the We the People youth.

And so, pretty much every aspect of my work is somehow still tied to water even though I'm not actively--I'm kind of like an honorary We the People of Detroit member, but every aspect of my work is thinking about that struggle. And so, I'm still available and on call. Like, if...if the water gets shut off on my street, I'm still gonna run down the street and take water and those sorts of things. But mostly, performative art, poetry, writing, those sorts of things.

[1:06:17]

OY: So, as far as that goes along with the fact that you work a lot with technology and mentioning working in a way that involved youth, how do you see technology advancing community, community involvement, and activism, and how do you think it could continue to in the future?

TP: Yeah. So, one of the initiatives and Detroit Community Technology Project is what's called the equitable internet initiative, and...and what that does is brings communities that don't have access to the internet into the fold. And so, we train digital stewards--digital stewards, stewards that are responsible for community members' information essentially--and we want them to be good stewards of that information. We train community members in neighborhoods, their own neighborhoods, to be like technologists, and then they train other technologists in their neighborhoods. And throughout that program, we also call--have what's called Next Gen Youth Program, and those are young people that have designed apps to respond to particular issues in their neighborhoods. So as an example, in Southwest Detroit, which has one of the most polluted zipcodes, the young people there wanted to design an app that monitors air quality. So, they were able to design an app through our program that monitors air quality so they could leverage it for policy. So...so, those are kind of the ways that we involve young people and see the future.

I teach consentful technology, which is not consensual because consensual is kind of like--is almost often seen as this: once I say yes, I'm always saying yes. Consentful means that you're going to check back in. It means that you tag me in, you know, a photo yesterday, well, that doesn't mean I wanna be tagged today. You know, check in, those sorts of things. That's very minimal, but we teach our stewards to constantly check in so if they come to a neighbor's house on Friday to do whatever, right, you don't just show up on Saturday, you check back in. And so, teaching consent in every aspect of technology. So, I teach those trainings. I teach safety versus security trainings, drawing a distinction between safety and security. A lot of times when folks are thinking about safety, they're really thinking security. And most times when we have a security mindset, it's not safe because folks think of safety and then they do surveillance [laughs] or militarization. Safety is knowing who your neighbors are, resourcing your community. Security is surveillance and technology. So, I teach those workshops, and we bring young people into the fold of all aspects of that. And so, they become responsible stewards of information in their community as well.

[1:09:28]

PB: You mentioned that some of your roles in the water struggle have a performative aspect, and I want to make sure we provide space for getting into that because poetry is a part of your work and who you are. Could you share with us a little bit about how you see the role of poets and artists within social movements?

TP: Okay, let's see. Hold on. My voice may crack, okay. I don't know. Let's see. [begins singing] I hail from a city where the water is off. 45 from Flintstones where they picking us off. They thought they had us cornered, but they pissed us off. Now we done come together, who would've thought. [transitions to poetry recitation] I witnessed her soul slither violently away from her body. Denial pursed tightly upon her lips, she fixed her face to tell me she wasn't thirsty, that her babies weren't 30 days away from being ripped from her custody. I could sense deception in her teardrops. She was lying to me about water, fibbing to keep her babies near. She almost let me leave them waterless. And I wanted to hug her, but I knew that her pride was the only ounce of protection she had left to muster. Barely hanging on, as if the reaper had granted her another chance if she could just pull herself together. Why do folks gotta beg for water? Hiding behind scarlet letters spray painted to mark their negligence. I wondered what she thought of me standing there, with the fate of her family stuffed inside my trunk. I left three gallons of water and walked away. There'd be ten more mothers for me to hydrate that day. [begins singing] I hailed from a city where the water is off. 45 from Flintstones where they picking us off. They thought they had us cornered, but they pissed us off. Now we done come together, who would've thought. [shrugs, begins speaking] That's how I see it.

[1:12:29]

PB: I wonder if you could speak a little bit about how you see your work as a poet, as an artist resonating in organizational space or in the neighborhoods. Obviously,

that's an important part of your work. I'm wondering where you see the reverberations for yourself.

TP: Yeah. It's much easier to communicate it in a minute and a half than it is politics all the time, you know? And so, I try to mix it up. Some spaces it's a leaflet. Other spaces it's a poem. Some spaces it's storytelling. Some spaces it's all of it. And, I think when you're trying to do narrative shift work, like you all, you have to use all avenues, right, and you have to be in tune with the space you're in. You have to connect with the people in the space you're in. If I go into a school and I'm talking before a class, I'm not about to preach to them, you know? I'm gonna connect with art first and then bring young people into poetry or hip hop, and then maybe we can do politics, you know. If I go into a church, I might just go right in. It just depends on the space. If I'm on the street corner, we don't have to talk about my strategies there, [laughs] but there's just different...

You have to connect with the space you're in, and you have to--you know, people like to say, "Take it to where folks are at." But like, I'm at all those spaces that folks are in. It's not like I'm going in there like, "Oh, I gotta go in there and like dumb down or something." No. All of those aspects are aspects of who I am. And so--and I think we're all multifaceted. And so, it's really just tapping into the versatility that we each have as human beings. And so if you're in tune, you connect based on that, you know. So, they--one of the things that I learned early on was that silent and listen have the same letters for a reason, you know? And so, listen. And if you listen, then you know how to...how to engage, and sometimes you don't...you don't engage because with the streets or with the venue or the space is telling you to just listen, you know. And so, sometimes all folks wanna do is be heard, too, you know. So, yeah. It just depends.

[1:15:23]

PB: So, your strategy in the street corner or in the neighborhood, like, how are you communicating the big ideas that you're working with, these analytical, these philosophical, theoretical spheres that you're stepping in? How are you bringing those into or out to the block?

TP: You sneaky. [Peter laughs] I see you came back to that question I skipped over. But, no, you know. It's just a matter of--the streets are brilliant. I mean, half the stuff that's been innovated came from the streets. They just don't get credit for it. So...so, I don't go in thinking like--like I said, I'm an organic intellectual. Most of the stuff I know of has been self taught. So, I'm from the streets. I grew up all over Detroit. I've lived in every neighborhood that they claim is bad. I still live in the neighborhood. So, I just think that it's just a matter of going in and knowing that the experts are there already. I might just have some information that they didn't have access to. So, I don't, you know. Yeah, I approach it like that. Hey, I know you know--can I curse? I know you know shit's fucked up, but let me tell you why, you know? I know you know, and this church has experienced all that language just so, you know, organizing space. But, I know you know, like, your neighbor's gone, right. You haven't seen them. Well, they...they've been taxing the hell out of us wrong, and this is what happened. This is how many people got evicted.

So yeah, it's just a matter of, like, since I took the time to study those things or I've been exposed to spaces with that information, I just bring that information to the community. And sometimes, they know more than I know. They're like, "Girl, of course. I went to the city council meeting, and I saw this," you know. And so, I'm like, "Oh, I didn't even know that." So, you gotta be willing to learn as much as you're willing to offer. Like, don't go in a space thinking you know everything or that you are somehow smarter or that you have more knowledge. They're the folks living over there so they know what's happening in their neighborhood. They just might not know how to connect whatever resource to change it or what or how they got there. They might not have that information. But yeah, nah, the experts are on the...on the street. They know what's going on.

[1:17:59]

PB: I had to come back to it because those are stories, those are narratives that are never recorded in history.

TP: Right, right.

PB: We don't get those. So, that's something I'm trying to be conscious of in these conversations is making sure that we have space for that so that next generations know what those conversations looked like, or else we're just gonna be left with narratives that that's invisible.

TP: Yeah, no, you're right. I appreciated it. I was being silly [laughs].

PB: [laughs] I'm not trying to be like, you know. I wasn't trying to be sly.

TP: I was being silly. That's great, nah, uh-uh.

PB: I appreciate it. Can you talk a little about any resistance or repression you have encountered over the course of your organizing work?

TP: I mean, I'm in technology, so there isn't a narrative of Black women in technology. Period. Or, Black women in technology--or I mean--I'm sorry--Black Detroit, Detroiters period in technology, particularly women. And so, you know, I find myself...I've been--I guess I'll go back into--like I said, I'm an organic intellectual. I did not graduate college. I went to it at some point for a little while. I'm not downing it. I raised a son who graduated college with zero debt on academic scholarship and is now at University of Chicago Law. I've taught half the people that are younger than me in my family to read before they went to school. So, I'm not--I'm a person who knows the difference between schooling and education, as an example.

But sometimes, I teach in interspaces where folks see me and you can see, you know, you can see the perception, what they think I'm gonna be about or whether they think I'm qualified or should be in that space. I've taught in masters data analytics classes. I've taught--I've been to Stanford [University] three times this year. You know, I've just presented at the New School last week. I'm all over the place. I'm in more universities than I ever wanted to be in [laughs] doing this work. But, what I'm saying is I can feel the energy when I enter the space. But, the

tools that I have, the ability to tune in, the ability to connect where people are, the ability to connect with the fear and the anxiety of feeling inferior, which most people have whether they have a graduate degree or a law degree or no degree, the ability to infuse art in a space, there are just these certain navigational ice breakers that you learn growing up in Detroit. I mean, I'm sure it happens in different spaces in different ways, but the way that you're kind of forced to survive and make a way out of no way in this city has equipped me in a particular way to pretty much go anywhere, I would say, and enter the space and know that I'm gonna survive it, whatever it is. Luckily for me, I end up getting everybody on my side before I go, but that, you know, that takes a lot of energy, you know.

But, one thing I don't do and refuse to do--haven't always. Once I got past that whole tokenizing thing and realizing that I was token and all that stuff, I'm not gonna show up anywhere and not be who I am. So, whoever I am is whoever I'm taking into whatever those spaces are, and if some kind of way when I'm done being who I am, if...if it's not acceptable to that space, then it's not a space for me. But, I'm going in 100 Tawana--or Honeycomb, whichever identity I choose to be in that moment--all Black woman, lifelong Detroiter, and that's who... Yeah, that's who I'm taking into the space. I just might use different strategies and tools in how I interject those identities into that space.

[1:22:12]

PB: Could you describe for us what visionary organizing is and share with us--this is something we're asking everybody--what is your vision for the future of Detroit?

TP: Ha, ha. Easy question. So... [laughs] So, visionary organizing is--and I teach a workshop called Poetry is Visionary Resistance, and like visionary is like, for me, it's not pretending that the harms and the issues don't exist, but it is connecting to ancestry, right, and thinking about--I'll use enslaved people as an example. They visioned freedom without even experiencing it, right? You had enslaved Africans who had a vision for their grandchildren while being shackled and owned. And so, everyday I wake up knowing that I wasn't supposed to make it, that I wasn't supposed to be here. And so, I wanna teach that type of imagination to young people particularly. Like, maybe you're not in a circumstance or the situation that

you wanna be in, but think generations ahead. Where do you want your grandchildren--if you have grandchildren--but where do you want two generations--seven generations, as Indigenous folks would say--but where do you want generations ahead to be? And how do you create it artistically, you know? 'Cause imagination is like half the battle.

And, I think if you're looking at a city like Detroit, as an example, the respiriting is paramount to liberation for us. If you turned on every media outlet and internalized--which many have--what folks think of us, it does this dehumanizing to you. It drains your spirit. And then sometimes, you become...you start to feel hopeless or helpless, or you start to feel like you can't transform your circumstance, right? That respiriting that like...it's almost like--I'll use a school here, Cass Tech[nical High School], as an example. It's one of the top-performing schools in the city. When you walk in, there's signs, and there's like folks on the PA system telling these young people, "You're number one, second to none," you know, and they hear that all of the time, right? If you did that in every school, right--'cause they have a lot of the similar issues of like resources and everything--but if you did that in every school and every time a child walked into that school and a teacher walked into that school and somebody told them, "You're number one, second to none. You're number one, second to none," you'll start to internalize that like, "I'm number one, I'm second to none!" You know? And, that school could be...could have one room where 800 folks are in, cramming into it every day. But psychologically, they're in the best room, you know, in the city or in the world. And, I think Detroit needs that. I think Detroit needs to constantly hear, "You're number one, second to none," or something of that nature.

And, I think that visionary organizing and visionary resistance is like this...it's like matching the pervasive dehumanization, like matching that level of spirit and imagination, you know, and I think, like, that's the counter, and like... So when you get a bunch of folks believing in themselves, or believing that they're in a brilliant, great city, or believing that they're fully human and loved and valued and appreciated, you'll start seeing a ripple effect in the things they do and contribute to, you know? So like, for me, that's like how you utilize art, organizing, storytelling, and those sorts of things.

[1:26:32]

PB: So in your mind, as you're exercising this radical imagination, what does Detroit look like?

TP: Detroit looks like a city full of folks that have shaken off the layers of propaganda, have shaken off the layers of disinvestment, shaken off the layers of dehumanization, and believe that they are contributing to the betterment of society and the world. It's a...it's a--Detroit that believes it's on the right side of history. And, I don't think that Detroit overall sees itself in that equation, you know. You can point to a lot of places all over the world that can probably say--even though Detroit has a long legacy of movement history, right, it's almost like that's been invisibilized, right? And so, you can point to a lot of places all over the world that you see them in a particular light, right? I want Detroit to see itself in the light that it deserves. I want Detroit to see itself as the mecca of make a way outta no way, as a city that wasn't supposed to be here, wasn't supposed to survive, that wasn't supposed to thrive, a last remaining Black mecca, a miracle, you know? And, I just think that the more visionary resistance that we can get folks to internalize, just the better off the world will be, honestly.

[1:28:28]

PB: So before we wrap up, would you like to offer memories or tributes to Mama Lila?

TP: First of all, rest in power, Mama Lila. Say what's up to Charity for me. [laughs] Similar to Grace, Mama Lila was tough on me, too. I teach anti-racism workshops. She's a longtime anti-racism organizer, and I've been through, like, a few of her trainings, and I have started talking about privilege and anti-racism in a different way, right, and she would always be in the audience. I don't care where I was organizing, I look out, and Mama Lila was in the audience ready to like say, "Say more!" you know, like, push me to strengthen my analysis, push me to be prepared to stand up to my argument, you know, and those sorts of things. And, I really, really, really, really, value and appreciate that because we all have to be

accountable to someone for--especially if we're putting stuff out there for folks to internalize and interpret.

And similar to Grace, similar to the Boggs Center, Mama Lila was accountability, and she was someone who believed in young people. She was someone who would walk up to me with like a check for 35 dollars and say, "Did your son get his books yet?" You know, for school, or those sorts of things. And so, I'm just really appreciative of all she gave to the movement to literally her very last breath, and she's just an example of perseverance, an example of being tough and honest, not going along to get along, and she's an example that I think that I will channel for the rest of my days, honestly. We didn't agree on everything, but that's one of the things that I valued, that she was honest about whether she agreed with you or not. And if you were coming with the political framework and she didn't feel like you studied the history, you knew the history, you were rooted in the right side of movement or analysis, she would...she would challenge you and redirect, and I think that we could use a lot more of that, yeah.

[1:31:14]

PB: Is there anything that you might've left out that you want to touch upon or include?

TP: I know you're gonna talk to more people, and I don't--I honestly want to say that I don't feel like I have all the answers. I'm...I'm hoping every day to wake up and know more and learn more. I'm hoping that anything I'm pessimistic about is proven...I'm proven wrong. [laughs] And, you know, infused with optimism. And, I will say--I'll leave you with, like, a Grace quote, and it is, "Sometimes the questions are more important than the answers." And so, like, if you finish this project and you're asking more questions, then that's gonna serve us good.

PB: Thank you.

TP: Thank you.