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Participants:

PETER WILLIAMS

KAISAS PEGUERO

LANA MEYON

CHLOE ST. ETIENNE

ERICA CHRISTMAS

LYDIA NICHOLS

Length: 00:59:03

Preface

The following conversation was hosted at the Joni Mitchell Center. Consent was given by the participants to have their conversation recorded and transcribed.

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START OF RECORDING

PETER WILLIAMS: I'm Peter Williams from Delaware. I teach at the University of Delaware and I'm here for three months on an artist residency.

KAISAS PEGUERO: I'm Kaisas Peguero and I am actually a teacher in the city. I teach () and ().

LANA MEYON: My name is Lana Meyon. I am a native of New Orleans. I am an art curator and an educator in New Orleans.

CHLOE ST. ETIENNE: My name is Chloe St. Etienne. I am an emerging artist in residence in the city. New Orleans local.

ERICA CHRISTMAS: My name's Erica Christmas. I've been in the city for about a year now and I run a small public press (I know that's ()).

CS: Ok, so we have these cards with questions and discussion points. Most of them are about Black issues, local issues, post-Katrina issues, and art-related issues.

CS: So... I mean, this is an easy one: discuss the impact of the tourist economy on the cultural economy.

CS: Maybe it's not so easy.

PW: That's for you guys because you all live here.

LM: Well, I would say not enough tourists get to actually experience the culture of New Orleans. For example, I have several friends that are--one here in the room at another table--he wants to start his own tour company as it relates to the African American/African history of New Orleans that is not told the way it's supposed to be told. There are a couple of African American tours here and if you've ever been on it, or if you've ever researched it, they are very much so watered down. So certain things are needed. As well as in the CVB, they don't reach out to most of the cultures and institutions. You have to literally stumble upon a native that will tell you where to go for you to visit The McKenna Museum, (), or Mardi Gras Indian Museum, and I think it's called the House of Golden Feather. Now I see our culture being assimilated a lot more and it bothers me. I was driving, picking up prints from uptown, and they had these men in kilts, but then they had all kinds of second-line regalia and I was absolutely confused by how that is a connection. And also, I was offended because it's not your culture just to play with. You're not connected with this spiritually. I mean, I am very much so--. I am thinking of the proper word, but if any of you share any type of culture--. I am very close

to it and I am a protector of it and I don't like to see it used in any kind of way. So now the "others", for lack of a better word, are having their own second lines and their own Mardi Gras Indians and their own marching bands and it does not belong to them and it is very much so bothersome to me. So... Yeah, I feel like those people who are already in a position making the money, they are assimilating our culture so the money can stay with them. Those who recommend them to something that's supposed to be cultural, but it's not really cultural.

CS: Were you referring to the Irish Parade last night? When did you say you saw it?

LM: No, this is today. Like two hours ago I went to pick up art prints and I'm driving and I was like--.

CS: Because there was a little parade in the French Quarter last night and there were people in like straw skirts, green and orange--. Green and orange colors with straw skirts and sweatshirts that said Irish Zulu.

EC: Oh my God.

KP: Ohhhh!

CS: Yeah.

LM: I would've died.

EC: That's so horrible. Oh my God.

LM: For instance, the second line for what's his name?

EC: David Bowie?

CS: Oh, yeah.

EC: That wasn't really a second line, it was just people walking.

CS: Well, I mean, just growing up here the first impact that I sensed of the tourist economy on the cultural economy--. Mardi Gras has always been PG, like if it's the family--. I grew up--. As a child I never saw boobs everywhere, it was a family event.

LM: Where are you from? Charles?

CS: Yeah.

LM: That's why.

CS: Well, I mean my family we grew up in Algiers so we're very suburban and, I don't know, whenever I traveled and people...

LM: What about NOMTOC [New Orleans Most Talked Of Club]?

CS: Yeah, NOMTOC got a little turnt, but I don't know.

KP: NOMTOC didn't get very turnt. It was nice, though.

LM: I marched it with my school, so...

CS: Yeah. But, I don't know, just talking to other relatives from out of town about where I lived and they just have certain stereotypes about it as having--.

LM: As it relates to just Algiers or New Orleans?

CS: Just New Orleans, like Mardi Gras and--.

LM: Yeah, the stereotypes are definitely there. I feel like now, post-Katrina, people are obviously--. The lens is on New Orleans now, post-Katrina. But before, being a child spending half my year in New Orleans and half my year in California, I hated California because no one could relate to me. My hair, the way I looked, the way I spoke, the way I talked, you know? *Who are you? What is New Orleans? What are*

you? You look this way, but you look that way. I was tortured in California because I wasn't quite, you know, Latina and I wasn't mixed, Black and white. And they're like, ok, we really can't pinpoint you. And at the time I didn't really know what I was. I know now, but--.

PW: Was this from the general community, or...

LM: School.

PW: ...or other African Americans students?

LM: School. So the African American students were Black and white. I didn't go to school with not one completely African American child. I was the completely African American child. I know more about my history and my ancestry now, but in my mind I'm Black.

PW: Right.

KP: Right.

LM: I'm Black. *But you don't really look Black. You don't look this. And why do you sound like that?*

KP: That's so bizarre to me.

LM: *Why--.* And it's just a lot and--.

KP: What do you mean I don't look Black?

CS: Because appearance here is not that--.

LM: Here, we're all Black.

CS: Here, it's so fluid.

EC: Right.

LM: Right. We have to tell people, *you Black baby*. We tell people that they're Black. In California they were really confused about high cheekbones. When I was little, I mean, I had big curly hair (right now it's straightened), but I had thick curly hair. Of course I had a strong New Orleanean accent as a child because I went and came back and forth and I didn't really "kick it". I mean, if I'm around my family here then usually this is not the way I speak most of the time, certain words, yes, but that's not the way I speak. So yeah, I saw that a lot going back and forth.

PW: Well you also maintain a strong presence, I sense?

LM: Yeah.

PW: Because the vibe I pickup...

LM: I've always been--.

PW: ...this is a serious person.

LM: Yeah, but I've always had a very strong spiritual presence with the two. And I think it comes from being here.

PW: Right.

KP: Oh, absolutely.

LM: So I was never just a surface child...

CS: That's a good segue to this.

LM: ...but I did build me as an artist.

KP: Can I just comment one thing about the--. There's this--. I was looking online at these images of this one white woman had--she was like a hipster--and she had this

shirt that said “no gentrification, but instead regeneration”. So there’s this new--. It’s like, oh there’s a new word for this thing now.

EC: Yeah.

KP: Oh, it’s the flip side of gentrification?

EC: They’re just flipping it, yeah.

KP: So now they’re just flipping it. We’re going to give it this brand new word and discuss it. It was like, *respect locals, regeneration*.

PW: But it’s code.

KP: But it’s code. But it’s for the same thing.

EC: It’s for the same thing, just a different name.

KP: This idea of like, I can be Irish and come to town and I’m going to have an Irish Zulu. And it’s like this idea of () in this place of privilege. Where it’s like, *oh, I’m going to tell myself that I’m paying homage*.

EC: You’re really not, you’re just taking it. Yeah.

KP: When you’re taking it.

PW: How can you afford to be offended by that because they’re bringing in tourist dollars, they’re recontextualizing--.

EC: But what is that money going towards, though?

CS: Yeah, it’s always been about milling people into the city to bring in money, but the money is going to--.

LM: It’s not going towards--.

PW: But that's the obligation of the city people: to find the avenues and the funding to make those kinds of changes. You don't want to get rid of the funding or the money.

LM: That would be another discussion.

CS: I think the problem, though, is that the lens focus is on infrastructure, rebuilding the city. There are certain parts of the city that are completely ignored. Streets aren't being paved and it's because that's not where they're bringing the tourists.

PW: But what are people doing to make that happen? I mean, I'm afraid to sort of say it because I'm an outsider, but it seems to me that some of the empowerment is going to be on the backs of local people, you know? And they've got to find a way to make that work for them in a positive way and also to build up an identity.

LM: It's a financial situation as well. For instance, I was having dinner by myself at a bar and there was a white gentleman that stared at me (and I don't have to say why). But then he ended up walking--. Coming to sit with me, asking me to buy a drink, that whole setup. Long story short he said, oh, I just bought two houses, two shotgun houses near the fairgrounds. I already have two houses at Bayou St. John. What is like to have such a French culture? Blasphemous!

EC: Woooow.

KP: What's it like to have such a French--?

LM: French culture.

EC: That is so bold.

LM: So after I chewed him out about this “French culture”, we then talked about gentrification. And he said, but the real estate is so cheap! You know, we just come from up North with all our money and buy up everything. It’s a financial thing. Because in my mom’s neighborhood--she lives in the 7th Ward down the street--and she rents. And now within those two blocks before you hit Paris Avenue there’s probably like seven white people. Not even families, it looks what looks like a single man or a single woman or a couple and they buy them and they renovate these homes so now it’s a very mixed neighborhood. And a lot of people are moving out and they can’t afford it anymore, because if they rent it they’re going to jack up the price.

KP: And it’s not the choice of the community members. Those are literally real estate people who are choosing not to make an informed (). It’s like, that’s not the people.

EC: Yeah, and we were talking about this in the earlier group, about how you have some of these people who are persons of color, African Americans, who lived there for years and are being constantly accosted by these hedge fund people to sell their homes. Like, oh I’ll give you \$5 million for a house that you bought for less than that. It’s like a gray area--. Yeah, it’s kind of like a gray area. It’s like, what do you do? You want financial stability, you want to get out of your position, you want to kind of move up and ascend, but also, too, it’s like if you do that, not only are you leaving your presence, your presence is leaving the neighborhood and then God knows who else is going to come in to replace that. And usually it’s going to be Airbnb or, you know--.

LM: He told me this. He said, it’s not that, you know, we’re taking your culture or we are assimilating your culture, we’re just making our own.

LM: Another. I'm like, it can't be yours. That does not belong to you.

KP: You don't get it. It's not yours. You cannot take someone's culture. That's the thing it's like ().

LM: In their minds they think they're coming in--.

PW: () isn't it? Cultural assimilation taking all the way back? And then expanding--.

LM: There are two sides. There were kind of two sides. There was multiple. Because there were white people building--. Yeah, they did their thing, but the Africans, we always did our thing. And the great thing about New Orleans is that they--. () Africans were still able to practice that culture and that's why our culture is so rich.

CS: And there's a history, unlike the rest of the U.S., where free people color were living and owning land...

EC: They owned houses, yeah.

CS: ...and miscegenating legally because--.

LM: That's most of our family stories.

CS: Yeah.

EC: And it's crazy to me because I used to live on St. Ferdinand and North Roman, like past the overpass. It's kind of far out. And when I first moved there everybody was like, *oh what are you doing, you're crazy, that area is really, really sketchy, it's dangerous*. And I was like, whatever. And actually I really grew to love the neighborhood. I knew all my neighbors, talked to them frequently--everyday--and then right around when I moved out it was like people were part of the numerity. I saw--. The

numerity. People we're jogging, people were pushing baby strollers, fuckin' walking their dogs. Being really rude...

KP: The German Shepherds.

CS: Yeah, exactly! Being rude, not saying hi to you when they walk past you, not saying hi to you, looking at you like you're crazy! And I was like whaaat? And then I was talking to a friend of mine and they're like oh yeah, they're planning to redo that area over completely because it's so close to St. Claude. And so like--. It just broke my heart. And then like five--. Five of my neighbors ended up actually selling their houses because they got offers and all the houses on the street are being flipped.

KP: ()

EC: Yeah. Yeah.

CS: Just to keep the questions rolling, I think these are two good segues. What keeps you in New Orleans? Are you from here? Why do you stay? And I think also we should think about this one, which is: Is Beyoncé's use of Katrina and Messy Mya...

EC: Yeah. Oh, Lord.

CS: ...problematic? Intellectual and cultural copyrights of the city? Yeah.

EC: I've already talked about Beyoncé.

LM: I'm so over Beyoncé.

CS: I'm from here. I'm not always going to stay, but I know I want to grow old here. And I'm always going to come back. And I think her use--. It was just random to me.

KP: So random!

EC: It was just problematic. It was just disrespectful. Yeah.

KP: I was like--. To me it was like Beyoncé as an artist is just infatuated with New Orleans. Solange is here. Solange is here. Solange is fuckin' here. And so of course Beyoncé is like, *oh my god you're right, Solange, you're so right.*

EC: Let's buy a house! Yeah.

KP: All of the sudden I'm like, you're creole?

LM: We're creole and Negro.

KP: Where did you come from? You're from Louisiana now? How did you make that connection?

EC: I thought you were from Houston, yeah.

KP: We thought you were from Houston. And this whole flooding it was clearly artistically (). She's here in New Orleans and loves it, so it's like I'm going to be this creative person and showcase how, you know, maybe more pro-black I am and incorporate this new love that I have () the city and I'm going to bring back this image of a flood. I was just like--.

LM: Very insensitive.

CS: My friend Maris wrote an article about the video how it really should've had a warning at the beginning for people who experienced it because it was really--.

EC: Like a trigger warning.

CS: Yeah.

KP: I'm like, I don't want to see that.

LM: Yeah. I think the song is terrible. And the song is terrible.

EC: Yeah. And listen to the lyrics. They use footage--the people eating the crawfish, and the 504 boys on the horse--that's from another documentary called The Beat, which is about Bounce music, which came out about 2 or 3 years ago. So they didn't even film their own footage. They were so lazy that they just compiled. Yeah.

CS: People were saying that 'Formation' is like her first Black song, but I mean 'Yonce, that whole album was--. She was still--. Like, she wasn't taking anyone else's identity, but this was a point where she just played up an image. I don't know if it was a creative team decision or--.

LM: I can't speak to that because I don't listen to Beyoncé. I probably like five total Beyoncé songs of her whole entire career. I'm just not really connected to her in any kind of way. But, I was offended by the flood scene. I lived in Atlanta at the time so I was not here, but my family came to me and I had nine people in a two-bedroom apartment. So yeah, my brother was missing with his children for a few days, so yeah we all went through it. But I was talking to my friend, someone that works with us at Studio B, and he said, you know what I never--he was a senior in high school--he said, I never thought about what we went through during Katrina until I saw that video. And he was in New Orleans East. His auntie had three levels. So they were at the third level. Like you know how sometimes the third floor is smaller? And he and his whole family and extended family were up there stuck because his great aunt was very ill and she could not--. She couldn't leave. So I didn't think about it until I saw that video.

KP: How dare you just use this image of like--. It's not--. First of all, it was ten years ago and has nothing to do with you. It's not yours. You can't take ownership of that image and just--.

LM: Mind you, Creole and Negro, there is no separation. So, I just--. I really I don't have a problem with her loving our city. I mean it's a spiritual place so many people come here and just fall in love. I get it. This is a city you actually can fall for. But, at least do your research. That's the least you can do.

CS: She's a--. She's a global figure and so like--.

EC: She has the money to do the research and get those, you know...

LM: Hire some people!

KP: Did no one feel that maybe that was insensitive? Maybe this image and using that is insensitive. I know a lot of people that are like, first of all, why are you bringing that up ten years later? It's been ten years. This is ten years ago. Like, what is--. What's the purpose of it?

CS: And just the visual of her on the car. It's so romanticized.

EC: Yeah. Like a movie? Yeah.

CS: I just thought about all the violence that happened. And the Super Dome. And that's a stark contrast from what you're showing us. And the water was clear. That was the worst part for me. Like the water was murky, it was not clean water. I don't know...

LM: Yeah. Visage. All of it.

PW: Well are people producing their own document of that year?

CS: I mean there was the--. Right after Katrina Spike Lee did--.

PW: And why isn't that being publicized or making an attempt to take ownership more of one's own identity?

LM: We do have cultural workers here in the city, cultural producers who are working to tell our own story. But it's a finance issue as well. So we only can go so far. I mean, this is a great way to segue in Lydia, and she can introduce herself and tell about some of the stuff she does, even though she's eating.

LYDIA NICHOLS: Well, hello. My name is Lydia Nichols. I work with Lana. I went to middle school with Chloe. I don't know y'all, but, in ten years we might be sitting at another table acting laughing like, I knew them that one time. Anyway, I'm from here as well. The work that I do, I never knew how to talk about it.

LM: I'm speaking of Katrina babies.

LK: Oh, the Katrina baby stuff. So yeah, a friend of mine is producing a documentary film about the children of Katrina, the people who were young at the time and their experiences. I am working on sort of a more scholarly, less just documentary book that is an anthology of work--I'm going to say it in terms I use in grant writing and grant proposals--an anthology of work by emerging black scholars and cultural producers who were under sixteen and living in New Orleans at the time of Katrina about how we relate to the idea of home given our dual displacement as diasporic Africans and, yeah, as refugees. That's some of the work I do and I also do some curatorial stuff and I write for Pelican Mob, which is a local art review publication. I'm a critic.

CS: This is sort of going with what you're talking about right now. Discuss support systems for your work: commercial, community, institutional, governmental. If there are any?

EC: I don't know. I mean, that's what I'm struggling with right now.

LM: Sometimes it's just... you know. In New Orleans it's, you know. It's just--.

PW: It's dry territory, I guess.

EC: Yeah, it really is.

PW: I know for myself--. I mean, I'm here at residency so I feel like I've got some support and I also teach, so I've got some support there to a degree. I also apply for grants and various kinds of things in Detroit that dealt with community activity projects with the auto companies and so forth to find different pathways to getting money or funding or things of that sort for the projects that I tried to initiate. And some were successful, some weren't. I think, again, part of it is sort of recognizing that if you don't ask, you don't get and that you've really got to be prepared to ask again and again and not let that interference sort of get in the way of your production and then find alternative kinds of methods to expedite that. Like I use my artwork as a kind of tool or function for my ideas and questions about race and identity rather than just making decorative kinds of things. Which, there's nothing wrong with that, but for myself, I think one of the tasks I define to myself was bearing witness and that gave me a model to apply for grants and things of that sort as I went out into the world. So I think self-initiation. I know it's impossible in art, but it's something that you can't give up on.

EC: Well to speak on that, I agree with you in a lot of senses. Taking the initiative and reaching out to people, emailing people is really good and I do that myself. I run a pretty small publishing press. I put out prints and zines and other kind of artist objects and I work with other artists as well collaboratively and then for my day job I usually either do nannyng or assistant work. But I don't know, I find that it can still be pretty hard even if you are reaching out to people because I feel like it's all about the capital

these days. It's all about the money. It's all about can you put down to produce these many objects in this much amount of time. And I feel like that's just my frustration right now is that I've been emailing people--. Luckily being in New Orleans--. Being in New Orleans has introduced me to so many lovely people who have connected me to really great resources and have given me an opportunity to show my work in different types of spaces, but I don't know. I mean, it might just be because I am kind of used to that New York flow of things. How things sort of come really, really fast and here it's more kind of a simmering fire type of thing. But I don't know, I mean I guess--. I don't know maybe that's just my frustrations, but I feel like it's just a little bit more than just emailing people. I feel like this is what I'm trying to figure out right now.

LM: Lydia's gotten a few grants, so...

LK: I'll talk about that when I talk about why I was missing. I feel like in New Orleans, because our culture is so sort of like... What's the word? To some extent I'd say fetishized. It's really hard to do things that are not the things we do. If you're not like--. Mardi Gras Indians will always have funding. Because there are certain things that will always have funding and if you're trying to do something that () and nontraditional, you're going to have difficulty getting funding. So my philosophy in the projects that I work on (and produced) has been I invest whatever I can and hope for the best. So with ExhibitBE we didn't have any money until the week before we opened. () paid everything. That like--. I was coming back and forth from Atlanta because I was living there at the time and it wasn't a thing. None of us got paid...

LM: Yeah, but it was also a private funder. It didn't come from any grant writing.

LK: Yeah.

LM: We had written a few grants too, but we didn't get them.

PW: But isn't some of that a byproduct of--and I don't mean this to sound condescending--but of you? You know, that--. I'm 64 and can think back to when I first started to originate projects with my friends, exhibitions, things of that sort. I didn't know exactly, and we didn't know exactly what kind of avenues we needed to travel, but in hindsight I think one of the assets that came out of it was that through trial and error, you can get in to succeed. We began to see that there was an opening. At least that made the attempt worthy of the time you were investing and so forth. Then I had to learn other tools, like computers and so forth, to make it more popular. (). But after looking back at over 40 years of doing this you start to begin to sort of see, wow there was a kind of productivity that came out of that knowledge that I didn't have because I didn't know better. If I had known better I wouldn't have done it. Though this experience what I embraced was my ignorance and allow that to push forward into other kinds of solutions.

LM: I think we--. All three of us, myself, Lydia, and Brandon, learned a lot during that process. I would say our biggest drawback was our short amount of time that we had to get this project done because we started in May and we opened in November. And we applied for like three or four grants in between. And I will also speak to the fact that they weren't--. They didn't see it. And with the success of ExhibitBE--.

LK: Even New Orleans, they didn't see it. I mean, like, the city--. I'm speaking specifically about the city. Even posters displaying this huge, huge arts event! Tens of thousands of people came over the course of three months. International visitors. And afterwards Brandon reached out to them about doing some murals along the levee. Like

along (). Because it's just these white (). And they were like no, unless it's going to be like some--. Well, the caveat was like, if it's going to be some second line--. A painting of a second line. So that's what I'm talking about when I say they do not--. They do not fund things are not in line with...

CS: Not traditional, yeah.

LK: ...what they promote for tourist purposes, because that's tourist stuff.

PW: Are these people of color in any control?

LK: Some of them, yeah.

LM: And they'll support you on a personal level, but once they--. It's a separation.

LK: So them funneling institutional support.

PW: So there's an educational process that they need to go through and how do you begin to sort of serve that to them...

LM: We've been trying to figure that out forever.

PW: ...in a way that's viable for long-term and short-term goals along the way.

KP: Well, it's hard because the city is already so very invested in the tourist industry.

LM: Yup. That's our money-maker.

KP: ...but the city's for decades. () a tourist, so how do you begin to change the minds of people who own these things who, at the end of the day, are literally the money. Is it these tourists and businesses that don't--. That literally are trying to () voices. So it's like the city--. It's like you have all the money and your concern is about all these other people who don't actually live here? Who are staying here because this

is--. That's who you're getting the money from. So, I feel like for me it turns into a very big discretion about how the city makes money. Public office is funded by parking tickets. That's how the DA is funded. Is through these parking tickets that we get like every so often. So there's--. It's just, the economy is ().

PW: Yeah, no I know from plenty in Detroit, you know, how the parking tickets fill in certain aspects of the thing. And how difficult it was to get programming--and that was from the bottom up into the system--and it took a lot of effort and coalitions between people of color and whites in that regard. But also, it was really a kind of education of a group of people over time. And you begin to sort of plan for down the road. It may not benefit you in the next year or two, or three, but you may begin to sort of see some progress over time as you begin to sort of look at a little longer term in terms of the growth of that idea and its possibilities. And there are all sorts of examples across the country. Wynwood in Miami, () in Philadelphia, you know, things of that sort. The () Project in Detroit is a good example of from bottom up working with the community using recycled materials and an insight into creativity that Tyree Guyton sort of used to put together to recreate his community. I mean it was confrontational and there were often battles between the city, the suburbs, and the artist because they were seen as interlopers in a way, but it began to bring national attention and international attention to the project in a way that people had to start to be motivated by the legitimacy of it. And so what you're doing now, it seems to me, is building that framework that things can operate under eventually.

KP: Right, potentially. So it's turning the conversation around to how we can make this also beneficial to the city. It seems like a big, a lot--.

PW: Right, a big deal.

KP: A lot of convincing, it seems like.

PW: No, I would imagine so. I think being creative and the kinds of alternative community programming that would create through where you have a kind of () that white suburbanites can grab onto and feel a part of. But you're using it for a specific purpose.

KP: And taking it to the city like, *look much money we made*. It's like you have to do it against the ().

EC: Why does it have to be that way, though? Like, why do we have to appease the city? When in actuality, most of the tourists who are looking at these works don't even know the context and don't care.

KP: I guess it was all just in an effort to, I guess, get funding from the city. But at the end of the day, it doesn't have to be that way. It doesn't have to be that way. Just like what you were saying about public funding, it doesn't-- () using the city. It may have to be that way until they're like, *oh, ok so if they're not going to do it with us, then they're going to do it against us*. And we do have the power to do that. It's just about finding funding.

PW: Well that's, you know, creating stakeholders.

KP: Exactly. Exactly.

PW: People who are invested, who have the passion, and who feel collectively that they want to empower themselves because that's a heavy load for any one individual...

KP: No, it is.

PW: ...to sort of carry on their own. But building that long term effort probably is going to mean sacrificing some of your youth in a way to sort of have that accomplishment that you can look back on and feel empowered by to a certain degree, or largely to a degree. But I do think that there are also--. You're going to have to do explanations ad infinitum because that's just the nature of the beast. To a degree you can either allow it to overwhelm you, or you can become a part of it and eat away from the inside.

LM: True.

LK: Yeah.

LM: That's what most people do.

KP: ...if it works.

PW: Huh?

KP: I told her, if it works.

LM: Yeah.

LK: You're not going to get inside. I mean, to clarify, I feel like I should say this because I didn't say it earlier. For the record, me and Brandon did get a \$50,000 grant for another project that is essentially a public art mural project but it's youth centered from--. Sort of from the city kind of? But we got that because we were working with Welcome Table, which is a city initiative that I do not really even fully support ideologically. I just explained to y'all, y'all might not know what Welcome Table is. Welcome Table is basically the city initiative to gather mixed race groups of people in each neighborhood and they convene on a regular basis to--. For racial reconciliation. So they just have conversations that really aren't even facilitated... or guided. They just

talk. So anyway, works for me because I got \$50,000 for a project (not for me, I wish).

Wouldn't that be nice? If we were making like the right amount of money for the level of work that we do?

KP: Right.

EC: Yeah, it'd be great.

LK: For the level of excellence that we consistently meet, but you know. A girl can dream. Anyway, so yeah...

PW: Are there regional foundations?

LK: So, the Kellogg Foundation is funding Welcome Table. So, the city got \$500,000 from Kellogg and they invited Welcome Table to--. Each of them to pitch a project to them and so they reached out to us and I developed the curriculum and, yeah. So, it's \$50,000 of Kellogg money. And the city consistently gets money from Kellogg and Ford, specifically. But, you know, it doesn't really go to the people most times, you know? They have--. One of the things that really disturbs me, I feel like I have to mention this, its kind of non sequitur. But those--. You know those electrical things in the nutriground?

EC: Oh ,yeah.

CS: The boxes?

LK: Yeah. First of all, they're aesthetically terrible. On a technical level, they're terrible.

LM: That, oh my god.

LK: It's all funded by white people. A lot of who are not from here. No, in the Black neighborhoods too! They have them on MLK.

CS: Wasn't it an open call, though?

EC: Yeah, I thought it was open suggestion?

LM: I know some African American artists who--. I don't remember the open call, but I do know other African American artists who reached out, but didn't get chosen.

CS: Yeah, they're--. It was just based on proposals.

LM: Yeah.

LK: () because they look terrible. I mean they're not good.

LM: Yeah, they're aesthetically unpleasing.

LK: And they're also not responsive to the communities.

LK: No, they're not.

LM: No, there's so much history in all these neighborhoods. I live in Gentilly. I've been in Gentilly most of my life so when I see them painted--. And it's a pelican.

EC: Oh Lord.

LM: A magnolia. I'm like, do you even know the history of this particular neighborhood? Like, you didn't do any research, you just went up there and wanted to paint something pretty. Or what the Wikipedia says about New Orleans? Our bird is the pelican, our flower is magnolia, our tree is... And that was what I felt like was done. You never consulted the natives, people who have been in that community for years. I mean, the Milney family or the fact that it used to be a swamp, or... just nothing.

PW: Detroit had the highest rate of abandoned skyscrapers probably in the United States and then advocacy grew and people started posting and printing and buildings destroyed by neglect. And they started to get such a level of publicity that international people were photographing and participating in group actions.

Documenting us, humiliating the city fathers for not taking responsibility for those kinds of things. I wonder if one of the things that could be considered would be those kinds of act-up moments where people take back the night so to speak, you know? And reconfigure things like that that are offensive, don't really rally people around the history of the neighborhood, and just do it!

LM: We have so much. I live off of Robert E. Lee Blvd. We just have so much. At the end of the day, cleaning that mess up is... And changing our people--. You know, some of them aren't where we are with it, you know? They're... they don't really want to be involved in that and don't care as long as their family is taken care of. So it's just a lot. It's a lot. Not that we're not up for the fight because we're doing what we can when we can. It's just...

PW: No, I know. And that kind of advocacy is difficult to maintain. I know from trying to be, in my neighborhood, a community organizer so I could have a safe neighborhood to live in. So trying to get people to be involved on a regular basis was problematic. I had to do things like bar up my house to keep it safe and such, but...

KP: I read something here about antagonism and about, can locals or should locals be antagonistic about their culture and their property? And what does that do for building a safe space? You know, if we were to protest those signs by having some sort of ()?

LM: We already have people on the ground. What is it? Black, black something--.
B-Y-B.

KP: Yeah. Black Youth Project?

LM: Yeah.

KP: Yeah, they're doing something about--?

LM: Yeah, actually one of my coworkers, he's also poet in the community--Scribe
Called Quess, he leads that. And he ()....

LK: Are you talking about the monument stuff?

LM: Yeah, the monument stuff.

KP: Oh, I was talking about ().

LK: She's not talking about that.

LM: Oh, I'm sorry. I switched, I'm sorry.

KP: Just wondering if--. We were to put--. You know how they put up signs on
those skyscrapers? Like if we said something about those boxes, would that be Black
anger? And how would that be met?

PW: By being authentic, you know? I mean there's nothing wrong with Black
anger. We're taught that we're not allowed to be angry. I know from teaching at an
institution and the worst you can do is speak up as a black, authentic person and I have
emotions around that, but, you know, all those people who died from AIDS finally
pushed people to act up and to provide a kind of constituency for the kind of
revolutionary actions that they were doing that helped redefine what their goals were,
you know? And I think, maybe, to a certain degree, one doesn't have to violate the

neighborhood, but one could begin to find a methodology that would publicize what the concerns are. There's, again, that educational feature begins to play a role in allowing people, over time, to self-educate. *Oh, this group is doing this. Why are they doing that?* They're doing this because of x, x, and x, you know? Maybe that makes a little sense, maybe it doesn't. At least you're getting a discussion going underway.

LM: How do you make () ... you know?

PW: But if they're that offensive, you know?

LM: They're offensive... to those who are aware.

PW: Right. Right. How do you make people aware? Yeah.

CS: How do y'all feel about the artwork--. Like the painting of pillars of the underpass in Treme? Those painted pillars.

LK: Those were done by white people.

KP: Yeah.

LM: Their content is valid.

CS: Yeah, it's old, but--.

LM: Yeah, their content is valid. But then the history of that particular neighborhood, as well, is so rich so to see it in the condition that it's in. To know the history of it, it's heartbreaking.

LK: And the condition that it's in part, or largely, not even just a part, but largely because of the presence of the intersection.

KP: Yeah, exactly.

EC: But did you hear they're trying to tear it down and maybe put up trees?

LK: Yeah, that's because the white people are coming back and gentrifying it and they want a place to be able to jog, and push their strollers. So, like that was part of... Sixty years later, after you've destroyed this Black business corridor. From that gaze, but white people are moving here now--.

EC: Try to make it pretty, yeah.

KP: White people ().

EC: Okay, we're going to make it pretty.

LK: Yeah, so... I mean, my dad has a business, or had a business, it was really mine, but he still owns the building. So I grew up in sort of that neighborhood, I would go there every day after school and sell snacks to the students. It was like a vocational certificate program. Anyway, I like those. I like ().

EC: No, I think it works. I was just comparing the two.

LK: And I think its also people from that neighborhood. I think it might've been more community directed, and not...

CS: Random.

PW: That's a lot. That's a lot to have to deal with.

LM: We're literally fighting for our culture. That's literally what we're doing.

PW: Right.

LM: To keep it, to nurture it, to preserve it, to pass it on.

LK: And also to find ways to express it differently outside of () confines. If you don't do what's traditional (). If you're not doing what's already--. I mean they already

know (). Which I don't even fully--. It kind of bothers me. They used to make receipts and burn them, and now they put it in museums, it's just like...

LM: It's not the same thing.

LK: It's weird and makes my skin...

EC: They used to burn them?

CS: And they spent all year making them.

LK: So they burn them. And I was like (). And now that ().

KP: It sounds like it's still more for tourists.

EC: Yeah, exactly.

LK: () This is the confines and if you're doing something that exists outside of it we're not going to give you money. (). Hundreds to thousands of dollars of ().

[Inaudible talking]

PW: You guys need a secret society.

EC: Yeah.

PW: That acts.

KP: No, that's not--. That's (). I totally think that's ().

PW: Yeah.

KP: There has to be an alternative. There has to be ().

LK: Gia and I talk about this all the time. I mean, because ().

LM: Mardi Gras Indians. I remember going in their houses--middle of the year--and I had to step over feathers and beads, you know. And I mean, the whole entire living room was covered. Go upstairs.

LK: So there's a lot of power in that. I think a secret society would be great and...

PW: Well you could draw up on the history, too. Of the uprising in 1811 and other times in which they had a kind of covert activity going on in order to maintain a kind of inactivity with one another. I think that's part of the condition that we're sort of all faced with... figuring out the staple of who we are in a situation of that sort because there may very well be non-people of color who also feel ().

EC: Do y'all want to move on to the next question? I feel like this kind of ties in to what we're saying. It says discuss local exhibiting institutions and their engagement with the local creative community and economy.

KP: ().

Let's see.

LK: And their engagement with...?

EC: With the local creative community and economy.

LM: This is also a complicated question. Coming from the more museum side of things, from the lens of the museums and what I've seen? I see that sometimes they change a little bit more, but it's usually the same, the same artist. They give our exhibit the same artists they recognize over and over. It's just that recycling of those same people. Every now and again they'll let a new person in based on the institutions that we have that exhibits these people when they come, you know? It's just like anything else as it relates to entertainment, or mixtapes, or what have you. When you put yourself out there, and you're finally getting the recognition without them, then *oh, that () is so great!* How do you know? And there's an institution in particular that I am completely against and do not support. I won't pay to go in there for--. I just don't and I won't because--. I

won't say it on tape. However, you know which one. So I was an intern there and I was the only black person that worked in the office. And I'm getting my Master's degree and many of them didn't have one or weren't in their programs. They only had graduate student, so nobody had a Master's degree, but me. And I was finishing them. And to watch them talk about your culture, talk about your African American artists and the way they want to exhibit them it just--. It bothers me. It bothers me and it's problematic. And then when you walk in this space and you're looking at--. I literally--. Everything's mixed up, right? Unless it's a specific exhibition and I can't say anything about the photography, the curator photography. I think he's amazing as a curator, and I like all the images. He's an amazing curator. I was always impressed with his work, but everything else, the way its set? You're walking through it and you're like, oh this is great and all the sudden, two paintings down, you're largely offended. You're like how the hell does this fit next to this? I was up there one day and there was a--. It looked like, what is it? A fish tank? Yeah, like a fish tank. And it was a cotton field. It had the overseer white man on a horse. And little army men looking figures on this cotton field. Somebody made it and they had the gun over the slaves in the cotton field. It's just like, what made you...?

LK: This is going to defy that institution. But that's the problem we have when you're chief curator. Is a white man ().

LM: White--. Exactly.

LK: () if you want to be, but you're still a white man.

EC: You're still a white man from Mississippi.

LK: I like him as a person.

LM: He's cool. He's cool. I spend a lot of time in his office. Not like that, but a lot of time in his office working with his project administrator, but yeah they hired me because I was Black. Literally, I know that's the reason why they hired me. Because they say it in so many words. *Wow, we've never had anyone Southern, and oh my god, you're so intellectual. Oh my god, you're so knowledgeable.* It's just like, I have to do this for my grades, () do this and I have to literally do a project on my internship, we have to literally critique the museum and it's the book we have to create critiquing to museum. And I had a whole lot to say. And the only black people that worked there were the security guards, that I loved, and the janitor, that I always gave so much respect to. I wouldn't speak to nobody else. When I go there I still show them that exact amount of love.

PW: () a lot of cultural institutions.

LK: It's also--. They have a museum for Southern art.

LM: Well, I don't think it makes it (). That was another experience as well, but I feel like (). That doesn't even make sense. How are we even going to have that existing () because you're going from a specific time period where there were the lows and there were the highs. That's literally what you're showing and it's bringing trauma back to those people that (). I don't really frequent that particular ().

LK: It's important to have institution like that, if it's done correctly. But if it's not going to be done correctly...

PW: How do you feel about the work of Carol Walker? Do you know her work?

EC: Yeah. Uh...

PW: Is that offensive, or?

EC: I have my own issues with Cara...

PW: Because it's misogynistic, it's sexist...

LM: The shock value too.

PW: It's shock value.

CS: It has humor it's so truthful. That's why I find it so funny.

PW: I find it funny, too. But I kept hearing what you're saying about work that offends a person's taste.

LM: It wouldn't offend me if ().

PW: Right.

LM: But, I mean she's married to a white man, but she can still speak to those things. I'm offended by those who don't have a voice--. Who don't have a voice to speak to those things. So why are you talking? Are you saying that someone else said and you're interpreting it? I'm confused on your connections, especially as an artist. It's a part of us. It's a part of our being you're creating.

PW: Because I struggle with that question because of my own work. Trying to deal with race and representation through narrative storytelling and autobiography. I don't know if I go too far sometimes or not enough in regards to it because sometimes they take...

LM: I think you should go as far as you need to go because you never know what is supposed to come out of that, who it's supposed to reach. I mean art is so intuitive and it comes from a spiritual place, at least African Americans. So, I say keep going and that pushes you all the way? Go. Just go.

EC: I wanted to talk for a brief minute about the art galleries on St. Claude? And, well, I know. And how problematic they are, especially...

PW: Are these the ones downtown?

EC: Yeah, because they have an art walk today ironically. And especially to talk about the print shop. Do you know where the print shop is? Yeah. Yeah. And the lack of actual community involvement despite the fact that the print shop is in a predominantly Black neighborhood in the 9th Ward. The community shop, but they don't treat--. They don't like most of--. The print members don't really care about the kids, they could give a rat's ass. They feel like the kids are bothersome. There's only two people within that whole collective that actually want to work with the kids in the neighborhood. And (), but other galleries are just like the children, the front--. Like, how poisonous is it for these galleries to be mainly ran white galleries? With a white committee and with white members.

LM: () bill of attorney as an educator because that's how we feel about these white teachers coming in from elsewhere to teach our Black children.

EC: Yeah, I feel the same way!

KP: () telling me how to treat...

LM: And there's a white teacher at my school that--. She's just--. I know it--. She's just--. Something about my presence just bothers her because I wear my Blackness all over my shirts, all over everywhere. And the way I am with my children when I go to work in a particular section. I work with a group--I really don't want to say the name of it--but we work with the kids in the afternoon. And she spent so much time in Kenya she comes in an African garb and she's trying to teach me how to do this and

do that. And I have on my melanin shirt and she looks at me. (). Because what you think (), I can teach it better. And she just really--. She never speaks to me. I could say hey, how you doing? And she won't say anything to me. Now her boyfriend that she dates at the school is a different story. He's amazing. Everyone loves him. And he's talked to her. None of our Black teachers here are comfortable when you don't speak to them.

KP: What is that about? When you're clearly trying to...

LM: And you're teaching our children.

PW: Trying to provoke some questions and answers and ideas.

LM: () Kenya and we do this and we do that.

EC: Oh, Lord. Jeez.

PW: That's going to be an ongoing discussion.

LM: I work at a school where we don't have Teach for America teachers at our school.

EC: That's good. That's really good.

LM: () hire Black teachers. Very proud to be 70 percent--.

EC: What school do you work at?

LM: I don't want to say on here. I don't know it might come back.

EC: Keep in on the hush.

LM: I will tell you guys after. But we're in Algiers.

EC: Ok. I do some teaching too so I already know--. I do a lot of substitute teaching and so I'm not going to name the name of the school, but basically it was just

really horrible. It was a lower-income (), no renew school, and it was uptown. I know, I know, I know. And I don't know, they just treat those poor kids like crap, they were always bringing in supervision people to come and drag them out...

KP: Were they Black too?

EC: Yeah, they were Black. All white teachers. I was one of the only Black teachers out of the substitutes. I was like, there's something wrong with this.

END OF RECORDING

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To be copyedited.