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Participants:
FRANCESCA 'FRAHN' KOERNER
LIZZY SMITH
MELISSA LEE
PETER WILLIAMS
CHRISTINA MOLINA
WEENTA GIRMAY
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Preface

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

Readers should keep in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word and are encouraged to refer directly to the original audio if possible as some interactions and utterances may not have been transcribed due to the nature of unscripted group conversations. The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the roundtable participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of Black Lunch Table.

START OF RECORDING

[Background noise and laughter]

JINA VALENTINE: Okay so we are recording. This is table three. New Orleans. Testing the levels. If you guys want to go around and introduce yourself first and then get started on looking at the cards. They're here to ().

FRANCESCA KOERNER: Are they like playing cards?

JV: Yeah, so they have little afros on them.

[Laughter]

PETER WILLIAMS: I'm Peter Williams here today at Black Lunch Table.

CHRISTINA MOLINA: I'm Christina Molina. I'm an artist living in New Orleans and I'm a member of The Front. An artist-run gallery on St. Claude.

WEENTA GIRMAY: My name is Weenta Girmay. I'm a videographer living here in New Orleans.

FK: I'm Francesca Koerner. Nickname "Frah" Koerner. And I'm a New Orleans artist, contemporary visual artist.

MELISSA LEE: I'm Melissa Lee. I'm an urban planner here in New Orleans.

ELIZABETH SMITH: Um, and I'm Elizabeth. I am teacher out here in New Orleans too.

PW: Should we try the cards?

[Sounds as recorder is moved or knocked]

PW: I'm Peter and our first question is: *How is NOLA unique in regards to activism? Who or what organizations are chief mobilizers?*

[Pause]

PW: Well Christina I think that's in your ballpark.

CM: I can answer a little bit. I've only been here for four years, but I'm part of an organization that started post-Katrina out of a necessity for contemporary artists to have a place to show their work outside of the big institutions, who they found weren't being

very supportive. Or there was really no system in place for young contemporary artists at that time. So post-Katrina, a series of people came down from different places, namely New York. So people like Paul Chan, who you all may or may not be familiar with. He's an artist part of his year and an activist another part of his year. He came down to New Orleans post-Katrina and was willing to teach at Xavier University for free, as long as, the deal was he would teach for free as long as anyone from the community could go. So he was really trying to figure out, you know, what the role of artists were in New Orleans, what they wanted, and he was a really big motivator for getting people to start their own initiatives. He was the one who said if nothing exists, then you need to make it exist. You need to take charge and make yourself. So, I think that's an example of a form of activism where there's a necessity, there's a gap, or a void, or an absence and artists are putting that infrastructure into the present. And now along St. Claude Avenue all of the organizations that are there are run, owned, and operated, well not all of them are owned, but all of them are operated by artists. It's really special. It hasn't really been that long, ten years and there's like this vibrant scene there.

ES: Have you, Dancing Grounds is on St. Claude and it's owned by women of color and it's really incredible. There's a lot of youth. A lot of my students are involved with dance shows there. Dance collectives there, spoken word there. And it's really incredible to see like how, how they came about. They really have, They just moved into that space and within a few years they have done so much with the community. And (they) really focus on minority populations within the community too, without compromising on like how large they've become.

ML: Right. I find it hard to kind of answer that question because at what point in time do you start identifying how New Orleans has been unique in mobilizing and () organizations? Because this is a city where inequities always existed. Disinvestment in the sixties was rampant. And then folks who stayed, right, had to be pretty much self-sufficient in the face of population decline, city services decline, federal and state monies on the decline, and then the storm happening. And struggling right, but then the city's resilience. So there's organizations. Whether you're looking at the Pleasure Aid and Social Clubs [Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs] that certainly have helped certain communities because this was the segregated South so you couldn't get insurance. You couldn't () property. You couldn't do all these things because you weren't served or you weren't allowed access to those services. You're looking at the Mardi Gras Indians who provided an amazing space for art and leadership and community and culture. I don't know that's a hard question to answer. Tons of nonprofits that are working on behalf of communities and neighborhoods, partnerships with foundations and cities and, I find that for me a very hard question to answer.

PW: Well, I wonder how difficult it is for the people who've been here all these years. I saw an article in one of the alternative dailies and they talked about the creatives and the whites taking over the city. And I was surprised by the term creatives. And whites. Taking over the...

WG: When was this written?

PW: This must have been when I got, the first week I was here. I can't remember the name of the daily or weekly, but it was one of those alternatives that was looking at

the city and the way the population distribution was changing and so forth. But that headline stuck out to me as reflective of maybe a general kind of malaise that people have about the kind of changes that are affecting their lives. I taught in Detroit for twenty years. So I have a little bit of a history of living in the inner city and on the east side of Detroit, which is the real inner city. But it was very difficult for projects that I hear about that are going on in New Orleans, where local artists are bringing in young kids to learn photography or to be involved in projects where the parents aren't involved, you know. They felt like their kids somehow in Detroit were going down, doing something completely different and new that they weren't invited to join in on as well. So there was always conflict. We had a project called The Heidelberg Project in Detroit.

ML: Oh I know of that yeah.

PW: Right. Tyree Guyton and his wife, whose name slips my mind. She's just as important to the project. Organized it. A small neighborhood with sculptures and installations in abandoned homes. So they might hang empty dresses in a crack house to drive the crack heads away and the spirits away and so forth. Or he might line a street with ten thousand shoes or soles of shoes, and he called it The Soles of Black Folks. So he's done this amazing, but he also had conflict with the city in terms of dealing with how do they handle that project. As an urban planner do you find that you get a lot of feedback from people about what's going on in their neighborhoods and such?

ML: All the time, all the time. There are a lot of forces pushing against each other. So you have the, you know, the folks who are new to the city, moving in. You have folks

who are the indigenous community, who've been there generations. And then trying to find a way to live together. Your home prices, we're talking about earlier, the values of homes are skyrocketing in large pockets of the city and then others are dormant. So that's either an opportunity or a disadvantage depending on if you have resources to move in. And to take over five homes at a quarter of a million dollars and flip them.

PW: Wow.

ML: So it's a struggle.

PW: I also heard people were concerned about the rental situation because of tourists coming in for three days...

ES: Airbnb.

PW: and leaving.

ML: What we're finding is that a lot of folks who for generations rented, and that was sufficient and that was fine because nobody was interested in that community or that neighborhood or that home. So that's how people lived, so there was never this push or education or goal to become homeowners. You're working class. So why put that burden on you? And then all of a sudden folks are now coming back into the city who aren't necessarily from here. I mean I'm part of that myself. And so renters are getting pushed out. They're moving out to the East.

PW: Why the East?

ML: Because that's still an up and coming area where, neighborhoods here are more, like Treme where we are sitting is very desirable.

PW: Wow, wow.

ES: And I can speak to the East. Working there it is absolutely not only a food desert but a food swamp. All you have out there is a Popeye's and a Winn-Dixie next to my school and those are the primary sources of food for not only the teachers but also the students. Also I know a lot of my students face heightened crime after being pushed out from New Orleans proper to the East because you have these students that are so proud of their neighborhoods, right, and then everyone pushed out to the East where like after the storm they didn't even want to turn the water and the lights back on. They were going to leave New Orleans East without any electricity until honestly outsiders unfortunately come in and forced them to put the energy back on in the East. The roads are falling apart. You know it's horrible and now you have these kids who used to be in different neighborhoods coming in together and we have a heightened violence because everyone's been forced into these new neighborhoods. It's literally like planned Black genocide. And it's, I don't know, it's just really unfortunate to see the ways in which my school's treated out in the east versus schools in the same charter network uptown. And the resources that are given to them, the amount of support. Like no one ever comes to my school to like check in on my students. But uptown all the schools, you know, on Magazine, they got people every day. It's really unfortunate. That's why I think about activism and who has access to that activism. Who can afford to get across the water? Who has () provided for them? It's really like heartbreaking sometimes. The lack of access my students have because () south.

ML: Right, right. And then you have neighborhoods like Treme for example that's so historic, so amazing, the first black neighborhood in the country to be founded. The

birthplace of jazz. It's why it makes New Orleans so unique and why people want to come here, but then you build your home here and you're like it's too noisy. I hear music 24/7.

ES: It's New Orleans.

ML: Musicians are playing down the street. So let's create a noise ordinance to stop that.

PW: Wow, yeah.

ML: It's multilayered

PW: So how do you reconcile racism with progress? How do you recognize gentrification versus development? I mean those must be, you live in the neighborhood. Do you, Weena, Weenta, have thoughts about those enterprises and how they're affecting your neighborhood?

WG: Oh I feel like [Inaudible] looking for a new place for probably (at) least six months now. I...

ML: What are the price points that you're seeing?

WG: So I feel like, I'm in a three bedroom right now, which is cheap for the neighborhood, for the area around me. And I want to have one less roommate.

ML: Yeah.

WG: Have like very close friends with my only roommate. And really have a grown up apartment. So the difference between...

ML: Makes sense.

WG: ...just an okay place where everything works, everything's alright, but nothing's quite updated or feels like () [Background noise]. The difference between that and what I'm looking for, I may not be able to afford. So I probably could pay, my roommate and I (). It's \$1400 for our three-person situation. But the starting price for a two bedroom is \$1400.

PW: Mhmm.

WG: And honestly a lot of times, \$1600. I think it's pretty outrageous for a two bedroom for sixteen or seventeen hundred.

FK: Wow that is high.

WG: So I'm beginning to feel like the neighborhood and the city is telling me, "Oh, actually the amenities you have are not for you."

ML: Mhmm.

WG: So it's pretty frustrating. I'm really optimistic. If you desire something hard enough, the universe provides for you. I mean I really do. I feel like I've seen that happen in my life a lot. So I'm not worried but it does feel, it's disheartening and it does make me ().

ML: That's your reality. That's the reality you're working in.

WG: Because I might get lucky or have gotten lucky in the past but I just feel like for that to be the structure of that ()'s operating in, it's just like I don't know. It just feels really unsustainable.

ML: Mhmm.

[Loud background conversation]

WG: Outside forces controlling, like the market forces are really taking everything, without any () pushback. So I don't know if () will stop that because honestly it's not a city ordinance issue. It's the city (). It's happening everywhere. And I feel like New Orleans is at a point where it's like happening to the city. It really like could go one way or the other. But I feel like no other city has figured out how to stop gentrification and displacing people. So I don't know. I don't know if New Orleans will have the () to figure it out.

PW: Hmm.

[Laughter]

WG: I hope so but I don't know what activism is going on to really change that. Especially here it seems like the city, I don't know much about the deep inner workings of the politics here, but generally speaking this city feels backwards. That there could be a lack of resources and infrastructure for people who live here and it's not for instance like a Rust Belt city where I came from, where, you know, not (). You move there for a specific reason. You heard about it and you moved there for a job or whatever.

PW: What city did you come from?

WG: I came from Pittsburgh. I'm not originally from there but that's where I moved from.

PW: Mhmm.

WG: And it's like one of those places where there's really amazing people moving there and lots of innovative things happening there. That's a very specific place to relate to and not everyone can relate to that. Here it's like people from all over the world are coming here and enjoying the city. And there's like part of the city that look like a Third World country. For all the money that comes into New Orleans to be coming into it, for that to be unchanging is pretty remarkable.

ES: Absolutely.

ML: Should we do another card? Well said.

PW: *Discuss the privatization of public education, literacy rates, and access to college education.*

ES: Oh lord.

ML: Wow.

PW: That's a big one.

ML: Should we start with now this new wave trying to deprivatize schools and return them? I don't know.

PW: I think that's something that I, the privatization of public education is a difficult question to answer because in the public education it's so much. My biggest

shock in Detroit was that sixty percent of high school graduates weren't graduating, you know, had never heard of such a thing. It seems to me that somehow we've got to take back the education system. I see it at the university level and it's not just poor, Black people, but young white kids as well are unprepared to have a regular education. You sort of find that the other world that's coming over to the university system from other countries are more invigorated, more asset-driven, and more able to adapt in some ways, but for the -isms that are against them in some ways. And that's something that I think as we become a less literate place to live, is gonna be more and more impacting everyone. And the kinds of things that we need to do to provide, but at the same time you have these charter schools which I don't know, it's like a return to, you know, some kind of authoritarian figure...

ES: Absolutely.

PW: ...kind of thing. Is there a place in between all that?

ML: By 2000 the New Orleans public school system started divesting in schools because the population decrease was such that it was under, I want to say, 300,000 people. And so you have these beautiful large historic schools but there weren't enough kids to fill them. So they started disinvesting and then the storm happened. And so then as a result the recovery school system came in to take over the New Orleans public school system and the recovery system turned it over to the charter schools.

PW: Wow.

ML: So all these charter schools came in to take over and to--.

PW: Build [Laughs]. Ostensibly, right?

ML: So then you have the charter schools and then you have private schools. So the private, all boys schools, all girls schools. The Catholic schools. And then you have all these charter schools.

ES: And it's fascinating because all the principals of all the charter schools send their kids to the private schools. So my principal's students would never touch my school. Never. It wouldn't, I would cry if my child went there. And that's so heartbreaking to say when I teach there. So many parts of my school are formed after prisons. They're just modeled directly after prisons. The black lines that we walk on. Because as eighth graders, and I'll know you're an eighth grader who's you've been held back three times so you're actually sixteen in the eighth grade. And you're still walking on black lines? And you still have to be pin-drop silent while you're in the school. We still have alternative behavioral programs, which means you're in a room all day looking out at like a coach. And someone is going in to teach you apparently, but I never see anyone go in or out of that room. We still where, Thirty-five High, where most of my kids go to afterwards has a holding cell in the school for behavioral (punishments). It's obscene in the violence I've seen. Two schools in the past year have been shut down because there has been actual physical violence against children. The amount of violence that I've seen inside these schools. Couple that with like uncertified teachers. Couple that with, and I'll be completely honest I'm a TFA, I'm a Teach For America. Couple that with unprepared teachers. I have such issues with the organization I chose to join. And it's an organization that was built for young white saviors to come in and teach these students who have no understanding of their background. And then...

ML: Ill prepared.

ES: Ill prepared. Even as a Black woman who had access to a college education, still is very culturally disparate from my students. Not seeing enough representation. Like most of the schools are white-run, white teachers, white everything. It's just, it's absurd. And because they are privatized, I don't have a principal. I have a principal but above her is a CEO. We have CEOs, not principals. And everything. And we take tests because a test, we take tests every week for two hours because the test companies make money off of our students taking these tests. We have enough money to pay for those tests, but we don't have enough money, I've had one book, my entire, I've been teaching for nine months, six, seven months now. I've only had one book that I've taught from.

Yeah so we use paper from the worksheets but often times we don't have the money to buy paper. But I have enough money to buy this test that tortures my students. Every two weeks. And now makes them hate English. I can't tell you how much my kids hate to read because I'm not allowed to teach them texts that reflect who they look like.

ML: You're not even allowed to teach Toni Morrison?

ES: I, I tried. But then, I tried one day and then, but because of the ways in which, I think my students always complain, "Ms. Smith, I feel like a prisoner." Because they're aware that this is not the way school is supposed to be. Which is I think fascinating, that they've grown up in this system their entire lives, but they're aware that this is not the way school is supposed to be. But it's so hard because I can't change it.

Because in many ways I feel I'm a prisoner too because we are so monitored. The one day I brought in Baldwin, I had four white people in my classroom the next day. All monitoring, looking at what I was doing. Like heaven forbid the Negro stopped being so docile. You know, heaven forbid like we teach them what looks like our students. The monitoring that I've seen that's allowed to happen because we are privatized is oooh, ooh! I could go on for hours so I'm gonna stop.

[Laughter]

PW: I have a strange question. Frahn how do you feel about hearing all of this reflecting on the dominant culture, whiteness and so forth [Frahn laughs], playing a significant role or an underpinning of that? Or can you step aside and not be, and if you don't want to answer it's okay.

FK: Well, I, My mother came from Wales. Her family was all, my mother's family, my mother's from Wales. She's Welsh. That's Europe. So when she came over to New Orleans she was ostracized as well. So I kind of relate.

PW: Ok.

FK: I went to a private school and I hated it so much that I never finished high school.

PW: Oh.

FK: Yeah, I quit. I quit high school. But then I was able to graduate, go to Tulane University, get a degree, and get a graduate degree as well. Um, I, you know. It's really confusing. I feel powerless. I'm really curious to hear. I have three sons. And I sent them

to private schools. So that they could get a good foundation when they were young, and then I sent them to a public school because I wanted them to have...

PW: A real...

FK:...upbringing. And they got a good education. That was a...

ES: That's the difference.

FK: Well that was the education that you had.

ES: Yeah.

FK: Well they had a good public school education. I can't remember the, Ben Franklin!

ES: Oh! Yeah. My kids would kill...

FK: They tested to get in.

ES: Yeah.

FK: But I'm really frustrated by what's going on and I've been trying to understand like what charter schools. At first they said well that's really a good thing but you know I hear that it's not. It's more about (). It's more about making money.

ES: Absolutely.

FK: Yeah, like you said Teach For America, the white warriors...

ES: Savors yeah.

FK: Yeah a lot of those kids, they don't know what the culture's like. They don't know how to teach. They're young and I heard the schools got rid of the teachers who had been there a long time. So that they didn't have to pay them as much [Loud background noise]. I'm a believer in education is one of the best things that can help people.

PW: Absolutely.

FK: I've traveled to Europe a lot. I have a lot of European friends and I see that they're much better prepared. And you know, I'm always drawn to Europeans wherever I go. Like I end of being friends with them just because, I don't know. But when I was at school at UNO and there were a lot of Europeans. They had a much better education. And it's frustrating because I think that's the way out of poverty, is to have a good education. Oh and I'm really angry at Bobby Jindal our governor...

PW: Oh.

FK:...who took money from the public schools, gave it to certain kids to go to private schools? I mean that just didn't make any sense to me at all. I mean why not put that money directly into the public schools. So I don't know. It's actually something I think about a lot. And I don't know what to do.

PW: Is there much discussion amongst your peer group?

FK: Um, well it's always, it's something I always pick up. My mother used to volunteer and read at the public schools. You know. It's just something that I grew up with trying to make things better.

PW: Sure.

FK: I don't know if I ever have a chance. I'm the one who says, 'We need to get the public schools better because that's...'

PW: The future.

FK: And then also better jobs in the city other than the service industry. That's also, I'm personally very frustrated with New Orleans.

PW: It's interesting to hear.

FK: That's my feedback. [Laughs]

PW: As an outsider. I mean my experiences, I was in grad school in Baltimore during the height of the crack epidemic. And Detroit during that epidemic that went on. I left just as the resurgence was beginning its possibilities. Then it crashed and now it's starting to, but it's all becoming gentrified. And the neighborhoods are really still in disrepair and disarray to a large degree in there. And I found myself, I quit. It was too threatening to stay in the city as a handicap person. People knew my name and would ask me for money because I lived in the neighborhood, in the big house. It was the only neighborhood I could afford to move into. And the big houses were going for dirt cheap. But it scared me. What was going to become of the city. And I think that's one thing that made me realize I couldn't move to the suburbs because that would have just been, oh can't do that. Too shameful. So I decided to go and explore what life on a white planet was like by going to Delaware.

[Laughter]

ES: Dull and unaware.

PW: Dell-unaware. And it's been good in some ways because it's forced me to focus on the conditions of race and identity and I incorporate that into my artwork. That I do. I try to deal with narrative imagery and painting, autobiography, and portraiture. As a condition in the work itself. Do you find that it reflects, any of these conditions reflect in the kind of work that you do?

FK: I did a, after Katrina I had an idea to fill a house that had been flooded and gutted with hand-folded paper boats. So I collaborated with two women from my graduate school and we did The Apostolic Project, which was in the Lower Ninth Ward. We, you know, asked, we invited the neighbors and we went to the churches and asked people if they wanted to help us with boats to put in there.

PW: Community together.

FK: My idea was to bring the community together because we were so bereft after Katrina. So that's one thing I've done. What about you all?

CM: I don't think it, I haven't been here long enough to claim that experience yet. But I do feel like on the flip side, there's a lot of momentum and energy to keep supporting new projects and keep supporting positive aspects of change that are happening here.

PW: Right.

CM: And I feel like as a collective that I'm a part of, of course I'm sensitive to, artists are the first gentrifiers. Kind of like lay the...

PW: The groundwork.

CM:...foundation because we move into neighborhoods that are cheap.

PW: Right.

CM: That we can afford and then make it, not to conflate the role of the artist or glamorize it but it's true that people are attracted to projects where things have become aesthetic. And our programming is creative. It's public. So it attracts attention and now suddenly Solange wants to buy a house...

[Laughter]

CM: ...in the same neighborhood, you know, and so I think it doesn't influence my personal work, my independent artwork, but it does influence my perspective. How do we make sure? How are we sensitive to the impacts, both positive and negative impacts, we could potentially have as artists? How are we being sensitive to our community? How are we being inclusive? How are we outreaching and making sure that people feel welcome? You know, we have neighbors around the gallery who probably have never set foot in the gallery. So how do you tell them to actually come in? You know? If you want to. () I have had interactions with, like I tell them, come in and I explain what we do and I say, 'the door's always open.' 'We have these things every second Saturdays of month, you should come' and then like more people have been coming in and checking it out. And they're like, 'This is very nice.' But I think that's a problem where people see a gallery as this establishment and there's some kind of unspoken, you know, idea of oh that's not for me. I don't get it or I'm not in that crowd. I don't know what it is because I don't have the flip side so...

PW: I think it's culture is a very scary thing. Because I remember the first time I went into a museum. Everybody was whispering [Whispers].

[Laughter]

PW: And I thought I was back in church again and I'm sure I wasn't really permitted to look at or touch or whatever. I mean I think that one thing I saw in Detroit was that you really gotta reach out to kids and they have to grow up in a milieu where there's a possibility of exchange of information and experiences and such. Should we try another one?

ES: Quick question. Do you have any relationship with the Axiom Art Gallery art collective on Freret?

CM: No, I've heard of them.

ES: They do incredible work. I think like they would be. They're on Freret and they do incredible outreach work and I think they've done an amazing job of like () because Freret is the most gentrified spot now in the world. And they've done amazing work in terms of really keeping it still very community-centric. I think that'd be an awesome () place.

FK: That's good to know. That's more of my neighborhood.

ES: Oh, that's where we stay too. Yeah.

PW: I should pass the deck around.

ML: Okay.

PW: That way everyone could take a look at what might be the next discussion.
I'll get more juice here.

ES: I'll pick two so you can pick one. Um, I'll pick three so we can pick. [Laughs]
All right so we have: *Mardi Gras Krewes are historically race, gender, and class specific. Discuss this and other forms of self-segregation that exist today. Or Food and Desserts. Or Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, Baby Dolls, Skull and Bone Gangs, and the Mardi Gras Indians are a visible manifestation of this city's history. Discuss the public and private culture.* Do you have a preference?

ES: I do enjoy the first one because I saw some really racist, just flatout racist, Mardi Gras floats this year.

FK: Oh really?

ES: Extraordinary. And sexist. And classist. And [Laughs]

PW: In what form did they...

ES: In Krewe of Tucks. We just happened to stop by it and Tucks goes to the hood. And it was all of these white people. And I don't think I saw any Black face. It was all these white people, I don't know, it was blackface, with curly fro, with curly wigs and traditionally African American associated clothing, all running around drunk. And it just was really uncomfortable. And then there was another parade actually. Another one of Muses. Where it was Hillary Clinton being a puppet of Bill Clinton and like, that was intentionally made very recently, it had to be, you know. It's not like there's sexism and racism, and who's on these floats? Traditionally, white men. And sometimes white

women. It was fascinating. I don't know. Did anyone else notice that? It was my first Mardi Gras. So...

FK: I hate Mardi Gras [Laughter]. I don't go unless I have people coming in from out of town.

ES: Okay.

FK: Because of all of that.

ML: I have a love hate relationship with Mardi Gras. You know. I think, you know for a long time, The first Mardi Gras I think was in the 1700s and it was particularly wealthy white families who would, I guess it's a French tradition. They would throw coins and bread out to the masses.

ES:Mhmm. Oh.

ML: And that was kind of the first Mardi Gras. And there needed to be someone to light the way. So enslaved Africans would carry torches.

ES: Wow.

ML: And that's the tradition of the flamebeauxs.

ES: Okay.

ML: And then over time these Krewes developed and they're you know the wealthy old school white families who basically that's how they connect socially, politically, culturally. These Krewes started. And I think at about 1910. And they were all obviously segregated, all white. In 1910, Zulu formed. And Zulu was basically attuned to

all of these [Laughter] We want to have our own Krewe. We want to participate. So it was like okay well we're going to be the caricatures of how you portray us everyday. And we're going to do it in a way that we can afford. So okay, there's some dirt here. We'll make ourselves even blacker and do black face.

ES: We're gonna throw coconuts. [Laughs]

ML: And you know, that's what we can do so that's how Zulu formed. And ever since then there were these two separate Krewes that rolled during Mardi Gras. And then in the 1980s the City Council said it's ridiculous we need to be integrated. So I think in the '80s or '90s they...

FK: Yeah I can't remember when.

ML: Yeah they had some ordinances.

FK: () did a performance about that at the museum.

ML: Yeah. I think the late '80s. The City Council said no more. You can no longer be segregated as Mardi Gras Krewes. So some of the Krewes still exist but they stopped riding.

FK: Years they refused to march because of that.

ML: They refused to integrate. So the only ones that really do are Rex. There's maybe two black people. I don't think any Latinos. I don't think any Asians. And then there's, particularly after the storm other Krewes started. So you had all women who started one after the storm. So they're integrated enough. You have one or two representatives. And Zulu has, they'll allow anyone to ride. So with that comes a lot of

tradition, you're talking centuries of tradition. So it's really hard to negotiate that. The rule for all Krewes are that you have to be masked. Your identity has to be masked in some ways. So that's why you have some folks wearing white masks, other folks wearing black face, other folks wearing, so it's centuries of tradition. People love tradition, the good, bad, and ugly of it. So I think for us as outsiders it's such a startling experience because you're like this is so blatant, clear, and look at that.

ES: Absolutely.

ML: But it's from that a lot of, Yeah it's hard to negotiate.

PW: Yeah.

ML: Because people just say, "It's tradition!"

FK: Well, New Orleans, they're big into tradition and history and you have to be here for 150 years before you've really been accepted.

[Laughter]

FK: It's weird because my family, I'm from an Uptown family and we weren't accepted for a long time. 150 years. And then actually, my (). Which was like wow. I mean I was shocked because I always felt (). But after 150 years it changed.

ML: Most New Orleanians, the average New Orleanian can trace their family in New Orleans back seven to eight generations.

PW: Wow.

FK: Yeah.

ML: So that's what we're talking about. Seven to eight generations in the city.

FK: And I always feel...

ML: Black or white.

FK: ...lucky because my mother was from Wales. So it like broke that. Otherwise I don't know who I'd be. You know? I got a less provincial experience and perspective.

PW: Well it's interesting that there's so much racial mixing in the history of the city yet there isn't a greater cohesiveness amongst different groups. And I don't know if that plays whether you're light-skinned or dark-skinned or white-skinned.

ML: That's a whole other conversation.

ES: The Creole population.

PW: That's a big monster?

ML: That's a whole other...

CM: Oh absolutely.

FK: Yeah I mean I always try to have, [Laughs] like to be more inte(rested), I mean I really do I try to have friends who are Black. You know. And I really try but it's gotta be a two-way street.

PW: How so? You find people are not reflecting your invitation?

FK: I reach out to people and say let's get together. Let's have coffee whatever and it doesn't really happen. [Background noise]

PW: Oh.

FK: I'd like to have it happen more. I mean really. But I think it's on both sides.

CM: There's a strange sense of comfortability that comes with knowing someone's family history for 150 years and knowing every single family member, cousins, and second aunts removed. 'Oh I remember you lived on this street. I can name the address.' There's this comfortability that a lot of us don't represent.

PW: That allows you a guideline.

ML: Yeah. So that's hard.

PW: I would imagine so. Especially moving here means that you don't have the connections that you can make to find the kinds of affordable things that you need, to a large degree.

ML: And then vice versa. You're kind of kept at bay. Right? Because you don't have that history. So you form, we form our own, you know, support groups set in.

PW: Well even within the culture, because I know when I lived in Detroit, I was the outsider. You know. And even amongst the community I was the outsider. And because I taught at a university, I was doubly the outsider. And then it was a majority white university, I was triply the outsider. Everything I seemed to be was constantly causing conflict within the, even the way I spoke created a kind of conflict. As I became aware of my history, meaning that I had a more subtle history with whites than I did with Blacks, to a large degree because of my education and it reflected also my upbringing, the way I grew up in a kind of first generation, second generation immigrants who were

white and there wasn't the kind of racial division amongst us as kids. But going to Detroit, I finally had settled into a place where I had to deal with my place being kind of called into question because of what I didn't represent. I didn't have seven generations in the same city and so forth. That made it extremely difficult.

ES: I think it's so, especially in New Orleans. I'm never gonna fault anybody who has lived here for years and years and years for not wanting me here. I'm never gonna fault you because you know what, when you're kicked out of your homes, when you see your neighborhoods changing, when you see these resources that were meant for you being used by me, I'm not gonna fault (you) for being mad at me, but, no 'but' and I think it's just so fascinating and a conversation that's not being had and with so many terms of gentrification, is like there are people of color who are gentrifiers you know. And I think sometimes gentrification like is seen as like a white person doing this and doing this and it's so much more nuanced when like, yes I'm from California, but my family's from Baton Rouge. And originally, originally from New Orleans. But what does it mean that I still have all this privilege given to me on the West Coast? And now I come back trying to help your children, you know? At schools I would not send my child to, you know? I think it's just so nuanced. And so I'm never gonna be mad at my co-teacher who hated me for the first like, probably the first four months of our working relationship because she's born and raised Gentilly. Born and raised. And then she hears a fast-talking California girl come in and hates me. Absolutely hates me. And we're good now, but...

ML: That's par for the course.

ES: It is and you know you're right. And it is so hard to not just go into our little niche community of newcomers. It's so difficult, you know? Especially because New Orleans is a different place. It is different, unique.

CM: There needs to be more opportunities where like, like this.

ES: Absolutely.

CM: Where people can organically meet each other, you know? Because it is a little bit weird to be like, you're different from me.

[Laughter]

CM: Let's be friends. It's not, it kind of sets off this (). It seems almost like exoticizing, you know? When you're in a position where you want diversity but you want it so much that it becomes another kind of fetish.

ES: Mhmm.

CM: We talk a lot about that at The Front because up until my membership cycle there wasn't, like everybody was in their thirties and white. And then when my group came in, we did have an artist who was African American, myself who's Latina, and now we have another artist who is of African descent. Not African African. He's from Algiers.

ES: Okay.

CM: So we have () but it had to happen. There was no way for us to be like, like it wasn't affirmative action. We didn't feel right about that. It wasn't like we're just gonna pick them because we want diversity. You had to be a good artist. Also part of another,

those conversations are really difficult because I think to just like pick somebody's who is different contributes to the problem.

ES: Absolutely. It's tokenizing.

CM: Yeah, yeah. I think this is like a healthy way where you just bring people from the community together. Let's just talk about it directly and see if there's natural chemistry. You know. () if we have same interests even or if we can at least share concerns or whatever.

ML: What's really telling for me, I belong to a book club of about, I don't know, twenty-five women.

ES: What's it called?

ML: The Drinking and Reading Society.

ES: I just wanted to know, sorry! [Laughs] Very cool.

ML: It's about twenty-five women and my friend was hosting the meeting so I said, "Oh I'll come early to help you set up."

ES: Mhmm.

ML: And I walked in the door and there was a woman there I had never seen before. So I said, "Oh hi my name is Melissa. What's your name?" I gave her a hug and I said, "Welcome to the book club." And one by one as they walked in, we did that with her. Because we hadn't seen her before, and before you knew it we were about twenty deep, we had gotten our food and drink and we had started, you know, talking about the

book, having a great time. And the whole time she was kind of quiet. Very nice but kind of just sat there. Kinda quiet. So then she was like, at the end, she was like I have to say something. She goes, "This is the first time I think ever in my life in New Orleans, I've walked into a room and I have not known more than one person." I've not known anybody actually because her friend hadn't come yet. Her friend that invited her, I'm sorry, hadn't come yet. "I've walked into a room in New Orleans and I've never not known anybody. And I'm a little freaked out."

PW: Wow.

ES: That's fascinating.

ML: She goes, "You guys are all lovely and I'm so happy to meet you and I'm so, like, I'm so curious by who each of you are. I'm curious by this group. This is exciting. But I'm freaked out because I've never not walked into a room and not known anybody in New Orleans ever. Is this setting the tone for what life is gonna be like? Is this the way things are? Is this what's gonna happen when I walk into my neighborhood establishment or my work or my school or what have you." She goes, "This is a little scary but also exciting." So I think she was like, she goes, "And I've taken that for granted. That I could walk anywhere down the street, in a room, my doctor's office, and know everybody. And this is the first time I've not known anybody ever. Is this my new New Orleans?"

ES: Wow.

FK: Well I can speak to that. See I'm like that, being a New Orleanian, I actually embrace the new people coming in because I think it's gonna help shake it up.

ML: She liked it but it was very scary for her. She was like, oh okay, let me gear up and brace for this because it is probably gonna shake things up. So she was like, wow. It kind of shook her.

PW: Does that speak to the history of the city at all? And other cities?

ML: Yeah, you go back seven, eight generations, you know everybody, that's how you operate, that's how things got done, that's how you get supported, that's...

PW: And that's partly because of segregation you think?

ML: ...how decisions are made.

FK: No, I don't think so.

ES: You think that's just the way?

FK: Yeah because it's across the cultures.

PW: Oh.

FK: I think it's across the cultures.

CM: I think moving here that's the first thing I noticed is that there's, I'd never been anywhere in the United States, where I felt people were so close.

ES: Absolutely.

CM: And wanted to be together. Like in community, you know? People go out to hang out. They plan events, like social things, to just shoot the shit, you know.

ES: Mhmm.

CM: But they like to get together. If you go to the bar, there's a trivia night and a this night and a that night. It's like a family and they have their little family units. And I think that's the appeal for like outsiders.

ES: Mhmm. [Snaps]

CM: For people who are already on the inside and have their family. They're like who are you? You know. We have our family. And then the outsider sees that and are like oh I want to be in this family.

[Laughter]

ES: That's so real.

CM: So I think that what a lot of, the people on the inside they want to keep it special. The people from the outside know that it's special. I think a lot of my older friends who have been here generations. They just see it as a disrespect or something. They had to, they had all these years to build a specialness of it, and then somebody from the outside just wants to penetrate it.

ES: Uh huh.

CM: You know, without, penetrate quickly without putting the dues.

ES: And earning that.

CM: Providing service to community and you hear that a lot.

ES: Yeah.

CM: Like, 'Oh okay, that person, yeah they're not a New Orleanian but they paid their dues, they've done a lot of service.'

ES: That's so real.

CM: It's not only about gentrification. It's about, yeah, like cultural appropriation.

ES: Absolutely.

CM: Like people who want to come here and have the fun and eat the food and dress the dress and talk the talk, but they haven't, They have no real connections.

ES: That's interesting.

PW: Yeah.

ES: And I feel like you can even hear that in the dialect. Like for the first month of me teaching I thought everybody was related because they were like, "Oh that's my cousin, that's my cousin, that's my cousin, that's my uncle." And I was like, "Oh okay, so everyone's literally blood related." And they were like, "Naw, naw Ms. Smith, naw. Bring it back." They'd known each other for maybe a year but they're like cousin, cousin. My co-teacher is every student's mom. Like everyone just calls her mom you know. And it was just, even in the dialect, if you just hear this family, kids who had just met each other all of a sudden now being cousins and brothers. I've never seen that. And back to the question of what makes New Orleans unique. And in terms of paying your dues, it took so long for a teacher to even call me, they called me mom. I was like, 'Nah, I'm not that much older than you.' But I was like, 'I'll be auntie'. But it really did take so long to

even sort of come close to that. And even then, I still haven't paid dues you know. It's still, you can tell there's such a big difference. And that's so insightful what you said about people just coming in and penetrating that. That is so alluring because so many different cities are so fragmented now. That hasn't happened, you know, within these small, they're holding on so tight.

ML: And I think looking back to that question, I think that's why that self-segregation still exists is because of that sense of cultural history that goes back centuries.

PW: Right to the Spanish and French origins, the Africans coming in at that time. That far back.

ES: Mhmm

ML: And tradition and culture and history are very important.

PW: Yeah.

ML: It was tradition. Well, that tradition's kind of, it doesn't sit right with me. So? It's tradition.

[Laughter]

ML: Get over it Melissa, it's tradition.

ES: It's racist.

PW: Where are you from?

ML: Pasadena, California.

PW: Pasadena?

FK: Oh, y'all are both from California?

ES: Yeah, Northern and Southern.

FK: Oh, I always want to move to California.

[Laughter]

ES: It's beautiful.

ML: How much longer...

PW: *Is the concept of Black Indians racist? Is masking Zulu racist? Why or why not.*

ML: Hmm.

PW: I don't know anything about Black Indians other than, Black Indians. But is that?

ML: I don't know how you would consider that racist.

ES: It's not racist at all. No. Black Indians became Black Indians because they're giving honor to the Seminole Native Americans who took in African American enslaved people and there's been a long term, like, amazing historical lines between these two groups of people. And I think that especially also because it's African Americans doing so, when you think about the spectrums of levels of oppression, like, indigenous people

are definitely (). But I think like this is much more a celebration of solidarity. Rather than African Americans appropriating Native culture because it was made in conjunction. And it's celebration mutual helping each other out. So no. In my personal opinion, no, but I don't know maybe people disagree.

CM: I think they formed families, you know?

ES: Yes.

CM: African Americans who were trying to escape slavery, like, went to the swamp. I mean at least that's the narrative. They went to these remote places and formed families together. And then came back. And I guess I could see why somebody would think it was cultural appropriation. Or that there was this othering, like exoticizing or whatever, but I think it's like a mash-up.

ES: It is.

CM: It evolved into this mash-up.

ML: And I think there's a lot of synergy between the African cultures and the Native cultures around storytelling.

ES: Absolutely.

ML: The regalia that's used, the drums.

ES: The tradition.

ML: The tradition, the dance. And then from that like you said, amazing communities were formed.

ES: Mhmm. I think we agree on this one.

PW: It seems like so much of what goes on here, you really have to know seven or eight generations worth of history.

ML: History. You do.

PW: In order to negotiate through the community and such.

CM: What do you think Frahn?

FK: I don't know that I agree with that.

PW: Well I don't know.

FK: It's interesting to hear your perspective.

PW: Well just from what I'm hearing because I haven't been here long enough to really know.

FK: I don't know maybe your overemphasizing the 150 years. I mean I was just throwing that out there. I don't know.

PW: I don't know. I've been reading *American Uprising: The Revolt of 1811* and the history, the backstory to that, that goes to the Louisiana Purchase, and the Haitian Uprising, and how all of that affected New Orleans and its development, with sugar plantations and so forth. But it seems to me that along the way this idea of families being constructed in the swamps and so forth, that they could be Black, white, Native people, etc seems somewhat authentic in that struggle and that once you begin to co-opt your situation and try to bring together kind of formally, since slaves rarely

married because of the, you're gonna be sold at some point. The relationships had to be somewhat institutional in a way that was workable. One would have to know that over many, many decades or years. That they were dealing with slavery and so forth, to know that history and to be able to communicate with one another without the fear of being sent to the overseer to deal with these kinds of things. So I guess that why I'm kind of curious about what I'm reading versus what I'm hearing. About how we negotiate our lives through all of this. I feel uncomfortable talking at times about whiteness but I do that back in my town, or city that I teach in and so forth, and in my university. Not to be provocative — sometimes to be provocative.

ES: To be provocative.

PW: But also to satisfy my need to be engaged in a dialogue, questioning authority a bit, since mine is often questioned as well.

ES: Absolutely.

PW: And I feel that institutional pressure that comes from the kind of management of education and so forth that we've got to have some pushback as well. This circle may lead me to certain cultural differences and so forth that may exist, you know, in doing some of that. I think some of that is kind of interesting about the mask that we all wear.

FK: Right.

PW: In order to get through and negotiate our situations.

ES: Absolutely

FK: In general.

PW: In general.

ML: Everyday. [Laughs]

PW: Everyday.

FK: Right, right.

CM: We touched on this like the second question. Oh *masking*. I thought it was *is making you racist*. It's *masking*. I started as a parody and it is a Krewe that formed, again, because there wasn't these systems in place for African American communities to participate in Krewes. So they said to the hell with it, we're gonna form our own Krewe and we're gonna make a parody of what happens.

PW: So why is masking being brought up as a question?

CM: Because they, in the beginning when they formed they actually wore blackface.

PW: Oh.

ML: And they do now.

PW: They do now?

ES: It's like Black, blackface.

ML: I rode in Zulu.

FK: Oh did you?

CM: But it's from the position of being critical. Or that's how it started at least. I don't know if the people, I mean I'm pretty sure they still have a connection to the criticality, you know.

PW: Right.

ML: So I mean the rules were if you were going to ride in. If you rode in Mardi Gras you had to be masked.

ES: Mhmm.

ML: You had to have some sort of mask.

ES: Why? Do you know why that was?

ML: Why?

ES: Do you know why they had to be masked?

ML: Because it's a sense of mystery, ambiguity.

ES: Oh, okay.

ML: You're protecting who members of your Krewe are.

ES: Oh, okay.

ML: It's a secret society.

ES: Gotcha. Exclusivity.

ML: Right, exclusivity, yeah. So that's the rule. So then the thing was how are we gonna mask ourselves? We don't have a lot of resources. We're trying to form this. And they hate us.

[Laughter]

PW: Spell it out!

ES: That's fascinating.

ML: So now we're masked. We checked that requirement. And we're being critical and we're making a statement.

PW: How many years have you been here?

ML: Four.

PW: And you've learned!

FK: You've really done your research.

ES: Yeah I was like you are like knowledgeable. I've learned a lot.

JV: Just wanted to let you know we have like five minutes left.

ML: Okay.

JV: If you have any questions in the deck that you haven't gotten to.

ML: There's so many questions.

JV: I know ()

FK: Right.

ES: Did you make this deck? Or where did it come from? Oh it's beautiful. It's really well made. It's really well made.

[Group looks at cards]

FK: I just noticed that.

ES: This would be interesting in terms of Beyoncé's new video Formation. Black New Orleanians.

CM: That's a whole other thing.

ML: Go for it.

ES: I don't...

ML: Read the question.

ES: *Discuss media representations of Black New Orleanians.* I thought of Beyoncé's video that just dropped, Formation.

ML: That was fabulous.

FK: Well what'd you think?

ES: Yeah how'd you? What'd you think about it?

ML: I loved it. However, I'm trying to figure out, wow, I'm trying to figure out her true perspective for doing that.

ES: Absolutely.

CM: I was so like appalled by some of the scenes. Like her floating on this cop car glamorously. That scene that's...

FK: The one where...

ES: That's trauma, like, inducing. Like very triggering scene.

CM: Yeah. I mean I think that. You know, I'm sure that her intentions and the language that she's using is supposed to be empowering, but I also think it's aestheticizing somebody else's tragedy for your benefit.

FK and ES: Yeah.

CM: And for the sake of your own glamour.

ML: And then why did you choose to bring in Messy Mya and Big Freedia into that. I don't know, we should ask her.

ES: And also why is she not coming to New Orleans on the tour that she named after her video that made money off of this tragedy? The Formation Tour literally flies over us. You know?

CM: Yeah, yeah. I mean I think she was trying to outline a lot of issues, which is positive. You know like force, bring attention to these issues that are unjust or whatever. But she's like still participating in the language of oppression.

ES: Absolutely.

FK: Cliché and passé at the same time, but beautifully done.

ML: But are we surprised?

ES: [Laughs]

FK: You were surprised?

ES: She's a capitalist. She's a capitalist.

ML: Are we surprised? That's being rhetorical.

ES: [Laughs] you have to make it clear for the audio recording.

[Laughter]

WG: I don't know I watched the video and I showed it to a friend. I watched it once and I was just like recognized New Orleans. And I was excited about recognizing New Orleans in popular media. I showed it to a friend and just like watching with somebody else was like wow, what's considered radical is really, um, It's really like fluff.

ES: Mhmm.

WG: That that's what's considered radical.

ES: Absolutely.

WG: It's so I don't know.

ML: And let's be clear. Half of her video was filmed in Pasadena, California.

ES: Really was it? No it wasn't.

WG: They said that she wasn't in New Orleans. A lot of the imagery was taken from a...

ML: Cut and paste.

ES: A documentary. Yeah.

FK: Really?

ES: Yeah a documentary on bounce music which I guess ties in Big Freedia a little bit more. But my co-teacher who was born and raised in New Orleans was like why would you choose Messy Mya, who was a professional shit talker, and of course a part of this community and a testament to the violence in New Orleans, but like, and Big Freedia clearly representing bounce artists, (an) amazing person. But there's also just other representations you could have chosen. We have incredible families doing incredible things. You could have chosen more positive, more understandably readable to the average person, positive representations of New Orleans. You know, like why are you only showing the hood and people being shot? And you know? That was her. I'm not, this is her speaking through me, but that was her personal perspective on it.

CM: Yeah what does that mean, tragedy? It seems like sacrilegious to put a rhythm to like. It's like if I made a song and then chose to put it to Katrina, and like, put this really fun song...

ES: Sex...

CM: --put it to Katrina. Like that is like sacrilegious imagery, you know, because even in the ten year anniversary when artists were invited to do shows, remembering Katrina nobody wanted to see disaster porn anymore.

ES: Right.

CM: They were just sick of it.

END OF RECORDING

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To be copyedited.