Damon A. Williams: An Interview by Bri'Yon Watts
Conducted on September 15, 2021 via Zoom

Damon A. Williams is African-American Chicago based youth activist, MC, creator, teacher, organizer, strategist as well as several other things. Williams' activism for social justice work and education extends but is not limited to the liberation of black and indigenous individuals in America and the dismantling of police brutality and mass incarceration alike. Through his restorative outlets, Williams continues to educate and help navigate the youth in fighting the power.

BRI'YON WATTS (0:00:03)
Ok, so I am now recording so first Damon I wanna ask you how you doing today?

DAMON A. WILLIAMS (0:00:10)
I'm doing pretty good all things considered. I'm happy to be in conversation with you.

WATTS (0:00:15)
That's good I just want to start off by saying thank you for number one being with, being here with me virtually , through this setting and allowing me to interview you for this. It's going to be a very fun thing for me and I think I'm really going to enjoy this. So I'll start off with the first question which is when did your desire to become an activist start and kind of what stimulated your activism?

WILLIAMS (0:00:44)
Word, word so I'm going to give you a tricky answer, the long answer, and then try to give the short answer at the end. So first you know even though I obviously am in the way that the world sees me and stuff that I do but I even the language activism or activists is never been like a title that I hold or cherish and so I try to go very much beyond what people imagine when they think of that word and also like knowing that some of the norms of what people think of activism don't really align with just my makeup as a person but also I think it's limited in terms of the larger liberatory work that we want to do. So that's my little precursor, but for the sake of the question obviously in many ways I am that so the long version is before I recognized it, was doing it a form of socioeconomic facing activism under work that my mother had done that started when I was like five or six years old. So my mother started a youth financial literacy investment club for black children on the south side of Chicago in 1999 and so I was like six turning seven when that was started and it was geared towards middle school and high school age children so in many ways I was the mascot but also was absorbing the language at a younger age. And so by the time I was seven or eight I was pretty proficient and talking about financial literacy socioeconomic inequality even for using that word and like market investments in the stock market and so by age nine I started doing a speech where I would go to different conferences or seminars or you

know as it developed and like my preteen and teenage years when I really had ownership over the content, in a lot of schools so while I was in school I would like leave often and like go to another school to make a speech. And that whole message was about just an understanding of our community and so through trying to look at wealth building or formal and informal market analysis there was always this prompt to look at what's in my neighborhood. And so with that I had at a very young age a crisp understanding of how industry, how investment, how institutionality was different on the north and south side of Chicago and that that was a racial divide and a racialized divide. And so from that from that background from age seven-eightish-nine, through high school I was seen and saw myself as this change agent and so similar to kind of the time you were now I went to a school called Grinnell College where they have a very...in the liberal arts model are very free curriculum where there's no requirements outside fulfilling your major and all of it is inquiry based. There's not like a lot of tests or exams it's a lot of like deep research training work and so with that I will basically able to use the product of what is, why do the North and South side of Chicago look so differently as kind of like an emblem of socioeconomic inequality throughout America and what entity what form of knowledge can I grab, what company, what program can I start and bring back home to begin to address that. And so with that as a question I very quickly, well maybe not very quickly, but I learned for that inquiry that there is no business that could be created to address what I was concern with, there is no discrete program and that's when I began to learn much more about institutional racism, white supremacy, and go deeper beyond the very traditional moderate civil rights messaging that you get taught of what the black liberation tradition was, and starting to see myself as a part of that tradition or coming from that lineage. And so in my schooling, not only was I, you could call it radicalized but it's probably little bit outside of the classroom and that was happening but I was able to think structurally, while also same time coming back home to Chicago and the cornfields of Iowa and was becoming culturally engaged and so I began this hybrid hip hop poetics and rapping that really took hold in a partnership with my sister who's older than I am and is and was an established artist in city as a playwright and poet and so we created a hip hop group together which really then activated me in terms of understanding community. So not only did it like (indiscernible) just my internal process of humanity, and I'm getting to (indiscernible). So not only did artistry grow me as a person but it also connected me to my city and community in ways that I might not have been.

(Zoom issues continue and cuts out audio a bit and leads to a bit of overlapping dialogue)

Did I lose you?

WATTS (0:06:47)

I didn't wanna interrupt, but you cut out for a second.

WILLIAMS (0:06:52)

And so that journey was really 2011 through 2014, one of our authors...you lost me?

WATTS (0:07:01)

Yeah, yeah.

WILLIAMS (0:07:02)

Do you know where I cut? I can go back.

WATTS (0:07:03)

It cut out for a second, it was...just the last part I heard that was kind of like a full statement was kind of the part where you mentioned your sister and her being a writer and a poet.

WILLIAMS (0:07:16)

So yeah, her and I formed that kind of artistic partnership which not only grew me and my voice but also connected me to community, and so really the space that was at the center of our community was called (technical disruption). Sorry about that, it's called Young Chicago Authors. And so that's really where a lot of the relationships were able to activate or live more in alignment with these ideas of learning about how do we be in resistance to oppression, which is what a lot of my study is about. And so, while being apart of that community in 2014, me and my sister, right after I graduated from college created a stage show and did a reading of it in a theater in Chicago and got on the cover of the daily newspaper The Red Eye which felt like a real culminating moment and it was a very family centered narrative that we used to talk about the intersections of race, class, and gender and how privilege and oppression is connected through the notions of abundance and scarcity and so all of that is coming from deep study of black power movement and my two seminar courses I was mentored my last year, the last few years by former Black Panther in Detroit who was mentored by this amazing, these amazing, some of the greatest thinkers of liberation in 20th century named James and Grace Lee Boggs.[1] And so she introduced me to their work and also just like in her class I studied revolution, just like you study microeconomics or study literature. I was able to go really in depth and so that informed the stage show, the stage show felt good, and a few weeks later, Mike Brown was killed in Ferguson—was murdered—and there was an uprising in August. And so it was kind of a test of our humanity because we had just been for all these years, naming these pseudo-revolutionary, rebellious, things poetically or metaphorically or performatively and then our people were in uprising five hours away from our city. And so my sister, some other artists, and folks and myself began doubt, mobilizing not knowing nothing about organizing yet at the time up but really touching down in Ferguson in 2014 and connecting with a lot of the folks on the front line there changed my life, was really the birth of the Let Us Breathe Collective and I've

[1] A couple who became extremely influential figures in the black freedom struggle. Refer to the novel *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs*.

basically been in a post Ferguson existence for the last seven years. So that's the short, long, and medium version put together of how I got into this work.

WATTS (0:10:32)

Wow, thank you. You touched on a lot of great things that I do want to kind of bring up, but I'll let that sit for a minute then go back to that. So I want to kind of ask you, just for the record, can you elaborate on the activism that you do or if you were to explain the semantics of it, of what you actually are doing.

WILLIAMS (0:11:11)

So the language I use the most intentionally, so my activism I call it movement building and so under that there are a lot of slashes of the type of work that I do so you know I am an organizer and strategist which is like the thing that I think people like to latch on the most. I'm also a performer and MC so in addition to the artistry remove that that I still work on in many of the events and the gatherings and spaces, I am the you know the public facilitator so whether if that's teaching, it could be like open mic, it can be a panel it can be a rally it could be a concert so there are many cultural and political events that I am either like the host, the opener, the facilitator, a public communicator for. I also do media work, so I'm a co-creator of Air Go media which hosts podcast that me and my working partner Danny Kissinger produced but it's also (inaudible noise on WILLIAMS's end) sorry about that sound, we also publish and produce audio that is movement and community centered with really Chicago being the focus but our reaching platforms are certainly national and global. So there's the organizing strategy that's around like building programs and campaigns there's MC'ing, public facilitation, there's the media work, and then also an internal facilitator so when there's conflict, when there's harm, when there is grief, when there's distress, you know I have been a part of and lead putting together different restorative transformative responsive processes to address relationship, power dynamics, harm, healing. So those are like the main buckets and there's like rather a few other things outside of that but (WILLIAMS cuts himself off) and then the teaching! Teaching artist, teacher. So I have taught after school programs, have taught—you know I'm not a classroom teacher—but you know I did different spaces from middle school through college level so whether that can be a one week class, a ten week program or something in between. So an educator, artist, facilitator, medium maker, MC, organizers, strategists is kind of the different buckets of semantics of the work.

WATTS (0:13:57)

OK! Talk about multifaceted OK! You brought up several great things, but really the thing that I kind of focused on as you were talking is you mentioned towards the end, like an internal facilitator, and you mentioned assisting people when there's grief or distress. Could you speak more to that or explain?

WILLIAMS (0:14:25)

Yeah, absolutely. So I want to...I'm going to name the three greatest living thinkers of the tradition that I'm in to kind of give context to what I'm discussing. So there's Angela Davis, who is Angela Davis, there's an organizer who was rooted in California named Ruth Wilson Gilmore who did a lot of anti-prison work, and then there was a woman from New York who lives there now but was based in Chicago for about twenty to twenty-five years, her name is Mariame Kaba. And so I bring up Mariame because she recently published a book *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* but it's unspeakable how phenomenally impactful she is, but she's really been my greatest example or thought role model or around thinking around abolition and how to practice actually. So not just being theoretical but being in practice, so making sure theory meets practice. So with that, the primary political platform that we have is that we wanted a world beyond carceral system. So we want to see an end to policing and prison. And so to not be liberal about that claim or demand that means we also need to be first acknowledging that there is an absence of systems and process that allows an perpetuates harm, and that there is a need to create innovate, and experiment on how we build new human relationships and and reestablish communal infrastructure so that we can one, make the world much less harmful but also have new paradigms in terms of how we respond. So from the most structural, or even the most formal structural, so the judicial system to the most interpersonal just like people's opinion, we are a very punitive violent society. So we internalize a lot of notions of competition, antagonism and anti-communal ways to respond to harm that actually don't enable healing. So within that, in these last seven years or saying we want to wear without police what do we do when sexual violence occurs? What do we do when there are abuses of power if the answer is not to incarcerate or to harm or to take someone's life, right? And so in that, it's also a recognition that there's a lot of harm that's not necessarily illegal, so there's a lot of conflict, there's a lot of tension, there's a lot of disagreement and disalignment that happens, in particularly our spaces that are are aiming towards creating a new world and being liberatory that need new process. So add basic level, to be more tangible to your question, it looks like the process of facilitating circles is usually the language we use not only because it's not only best for the room, for everybody to be in a circle for it to be in a close space, but it also comes from a tradition of you know different indigenous cultures throughout the world particularly African indigenous cultures as well as native indigenous cultures in this space of having communal council like structures that a collectivize responses to harm and realizing that there is a larger communal responsibility. So for me as someone who has a lot to offer in terms of the theory of how we critique the state and the projection of the world that we want, and also all these kind of being skilled in understanding social psychology through communication, that is something that I have found value or comfort in. So it's not always best for me but it could look like for example, an organization having real issues of an employee with sexual violence and figuring out how do we try to respond accountably to that. Or it has looked like a progressive older person, City Councilperson, is having patriarchal conflict within their staff who from outside that understands and a has trusting relationship, can sit down have eight to nine hours of phone calls with people, get folks in a group discussion, and then try to build agreements moving forward. Or it can just

look like you know in the space that that you know co-created the Breathing Room are somebody who's on them in the space and another one of the stewards are just having friction and tension and that's informed...patriarchy is going to come up a lot that's informed by patriarchy, and so taking the responsibility to try to reconcile. And so that's what it often looks like, I also, I forget I work with the Chicago Torture Justice Center which is an organization birthed out of the historic 2015 Reparations Ordinance.[2] So even though it's it is inadequate in terms of the harm that that was committed Chicago is historic in the first ever and only formal reparations for state harm particularly police harm against black people, was one and that was part of one of the things our movement fought for and so out of that was a center that is designed to offer healing services as well as a politicized approach so within that right like dealing with conflict with folks who have been tortured by the Chicago Police Department and most of them spent twenty to thirty years incarcerated, and so the compounded trauma on top of just the trauma that exists for everybody, and so you know that might not look formal. That might look like you know getting three or four guys on a Zoom or you know having a circle in our garden, or being on a phone call and just like working through folks through this politicized healing framework. So yeah it's another, or like an organization like Black Lives Matter Chicago, they may be having issues I can come in and like hold a circle with folks, so I hope that's clear or that answers.

WATTS (0:21:10)

It definitely does, thank you. OK, thank you that definitely was good. OK so I guess I can move on to my next question. And you kind of mentioned this, but I'll give you an opportunity to speak more about it, because I know there's like two kinds of like, I don't want to say projects, but I can't find a better word for it. I know that there's Let Us Breathe 773 and there's, you also mentioned AirGo, so I wanted to ask if you could talk to me a little bit about your overall focus or what you kind of talk about on your podcast radio show that you co-host, AirGo.

WILLIAMS (0:22:03)

So you want me to talk about both of those entities?

WATTS (0:22:07)

You can talk about the AirGo, you can do AirGo first or whichever one is fine.

WILLIAMS (0:22:11)

Yeah, so in many ways that they're correlated or you know AirGo and the partnership I built with Daniel Kissinger, we see ourselves in proximity is not a part of or an offshoot of what Let Us Breathe Collective initiates. But AirGo is a media entity that started in a community radio station here in Chicago and we would rip the audio and and release it as a podcast up and so it's really in a time of transition right now so I'll start a little bit about where it really started and then we can

[2] The Chicago City Council passed the Reparations for Burge Torture Victims Ordinance

kind of, we can muse about where it's going. The intention (WILLIAMS cuts off his initial statement) So what it is before I get into like the back story, what it is is a weekly podcast of long form conversations with different movement builders, cultural workers, organizers, activists, educators, creators who are, whose work or life or whose existing in a way to make Chicago in the world more creative from liberatory or we've used the language of equitable and so the intention of the of the entity or of the project actually goes back to kind of some of what I was talking about in my own college experience so we started it about a year year and a half after I graduated but but really throughout my college years as I was coming of age I was I was ravenous for content around the black radical tradition and particularly the black power movement of the 60s. And so you know I've every link, I could find every vivo thing, any documentary, and so one of the greatest tragedies was you know fifty years later I found myself in Chicago working to build movement and you know the greatest figure icon for us locally is Fred Hampton and if you know, it's kind of changed now but even still not really, it's really a lot of the same things but definitely at the time if you were to splice together all of the the first hand audio of his voice it was under an hour of content of like all of the clips put together and so that just felt like such a historical tragedy for such an amazing thinker, it's so documented how great his impact was through the generations. There's so much second hand sources about him, and then the clips that are available are so dynamic and impactful that you know you you wish you can engage more of his life and you know that he was always speaking or always public or always communicating and so with that kind of as this like historical analogue wanting to make sure because what we were building or what I felt I was a part of I was confident was of historical significance and not only are people interested in it now but I know forty and fifty years from now people will be will be wanting to know what was going on in those twenty teens early twenty 20s you know what was going on in Chicago and so for a lot of the people that were showing up to the cultural and political spaces wanting to make sure that there was least an hour of their you know their life documented in their work. So that's really what it start of was like creating an archive of our movement and defining movement in a really wide sense because it might not be to the even the thing I was projecting but I'm very much in it like the capital a activist you know with a bullhorn somewhere but there was an ecosystem that created the reason why Chicago was able to respond in such a unique way and why we're able to continue this political lineages of resistance and creativity and so really wanting to, for myself as somebody who was practitioner, but for the community itself for the community to hear itself and understand what are the overlapping patterns what are the conditions that we are responding to what were the inputs that created all of this ingenuity all of this like bold youthfulness even though you know most of the people were in our early twenties but late teens early twenty aged. How did this come about? And so that was really what AirGo started as and as we've grown and as it's grown particularly after you know pandemic we still are you know Chicago centered in our positionality but the conversational discourse we intentionally want to be much more wider than the city and much, and less of just getting people's individual stories to, treating it less as just an archive but more as a as a popular education tool. And so whether it's teaching people

about abolition, getting people to understand radical notions of education, or just something like the frontline workers that were responding to the pandemic, countering some of the false objectivity of traditional media to be able to like use subject positions of folks from their experience to be able to engage in some reciprocal education with with the audience that we've been growing. So that's what AirGo is in the medium version, I don't know if you have follow-ups on that or more curiosities.

WATTS (0:27:59)

No, that was great! Great, thank you. Now I kind of want to move over to, because I know you did kind of mention it. I presume there's some similarity or some things that are intertwined between both. I just want to ask what specifically is Let Us Breathe 773? Or like where that comes into play more with AirGo?

WILLIAMS (0:28:26)

Yeah so that's our social media handle, the name of the organization is the Let Us Breathe Collective and the history of that space was really it started in response to the Ferguson uprising so I'll go all the way back to the beginning. So that's summer of 2014, I was working on a song that I was titling "Let Me Breathe" and it was after the effect of Jay-Z's "Can I Live" even though it was nothing about that' song but that was the song that inspired the phrase or wanting to like kind of right after that piece. And so Let Me Breathe was intended to be a metaphor or a dual language to describe the boot of oppression that sits on our neck as well as like interpersonal conflict away basically like people are just in your face as though the way I would say it kind of without cursing. And so that like creative idea was existing for a few weeks and then the Ferguson uprising happened and my sister was really activated by and really upset by seeing the images that were viral on Twitter and wanted to participate and so at first you just gotta go but then she had a check in moment of like if I'm going to go, I shouldn't just come be a spectator or come bring my body from a different place and not have anything to contribute, let me you know check in with some people. And so after doing that was able to actually connect with a journalist or writer, editor Jamilah Lemieux. Who at the time I believe worked for Ebony. They went to Whitney Young together and so was able to inquire like what are the major needs on the ground and it was three request: water, because it was the middle of August and people were getting dehydrated from marching 24/7, first aid supplies, and then gas masks and it was almost on a nightly basis, Missouri State Police or the Ferguson Police Department or you know this coalition of military forces were tear gassing people and using chemical weapons on the people of Saint Louis, Ferguson up you know the United States so forth and so with those few things as need, my sister and some other folks and then I jumped in, like a few days later launched the Let Us Breathe initiatives, which was a GoFundMe. Which is the first time I had actually kind of heard or knew about GoFundMe just to kind of like talk about how old this was, and the goal was I think to raise $1500 to be able to take down I think, a certain about a gas mask. And the viral...this was like when people really just starting to learn Twitter and so Mike Brown Ferguson and the news coverage of it just made this viral storm and so we got like ten

times more than expected so like 1500 goal got like $10,000. And then also all of these kind donations and then people saw we were going down, so people were like here take this, take this box of supplies, take these t-shirts down, here's some water, here some food, here some pampers, and so we went down to Ferguson with this like goal mandate and then also these resources which was kind of unique. So usually to have over $5000 it's probably coming from some type of nonprofit structure, some type of grant, and with that there are different accountability mechanisms that will usually tie up your agency. So we were more or less accountable to ourselves and like the moral responsibility to the people that contributed to us and so we had these resources and this autonomy and we went down to Ferguson and met a group of young people who were mostly in their late tweens or early twenties but the range actually at the start was from age fifteen to forty-two and you know to be as accurate as possible they were self described as you know a group of inter-gendered group of hood n***** and street n***** right like it was mostly crips but this space was you know crips and bloods, dreads, face tats, gold fronts, which was a big surprise because we came down and went to this church to unload our car full load full of good samaritan resources and the church was actually overflowed at the time.[3] And so they said if you really want to know what's going on or you really want to help out you know there's a group of people on West Florissant that march every day, that are camping out there. And go look for a couple of folks, go look for Dante and them. And so we explored here, when we hear camping out, we didn't expect to see what we saw, we expected it to be you know white people to be honest. So like you know some post occupied type hips hippie granola bar crunching folks or church people but it was really surprising but also invigorating to see that it was the community and the folks that are impacted by the system that is being opposed and resisted. And so like I said was just coming out of this really deep study of the black power movement of Huey Newton's analysis of the Black Panther Party and so I knew the power of street organizations being engaged in political resistance I knew that that happened before and when that happened it had this historical significance, again and so you know we met them and the group ended up becoming lost voices. If we have time I would love to tell you more just about them, about Ferguson, but when we met them it was basically you know they had like the tent and like a few fold up chairs like cardboard table where people kind of just were like sleeping over 24/7 like this group that could be from a dozen to like twenty-five people that kind of circulated in and out in this one rest area where you weren't subject to arrest because they they instituted this illegal law that later got overturned the Supreme Court I think it was four-four-five? I think called the four second rule that said anybody who stood still for more than four seconds was subject to arrest which is unconstitutional, illegal, ableist, all type of shit but what happened was there is this parking lot and next to a furniture store that was designated the rest area and so the group that became lost voices basically activated or occupied the space and made it like home base and people would stay out all night for this protest moment. And so we met them and had resources like I said from the beginning that we had control over so it was like what do you need? And need always being like kind of the first political input, and so they

[3] Crips and Bloods are a set of rivalry gangs both developed in Los Angeles, California.

needed outdoor camping stuff and so we were able to like within a few hours triple the size of their campsite and so then we went back the next day was able to chill with them, was able to hang with them like smoke together which felt super communal. And so what we thought was going to be a weekend and one experience then became you know more or less our life and so you know basically every weekend or every other weekend from August through of 2014 for about April of 2015 was engaged for going down to Ferguson or in the Saint Louis area or in Missouri and so the first six or so they ended up occupying staying that campsite that moved down throughout this the that street for fifty-four days. And so coming out of that experience we were coming from Chicago and so you know this is 2014 again and so this is that the like the rise of drill and so for hood folks anywhere but particularly Saint Louis there was this light of Chicago right, you know Chief Keef, King Louie, Lil Durk was really popular.[4] And so not only just kind of see what was up wanted to be connected to Chicago, but also because they were from this experience of bloods and crips dropping their flags or uniting their flags and saying like the oppressor is an actual op. they had this spirit to like basically evangelize that message of we want to go through the hoods of the country but particularly to Chicago and have that type of impact and so from that relationship and the relationships we had in Chicago with artists and another organization that had just developed the year before called BYP100 we you know went from being the Let Us Breathe Initiative to the Let Us Breathe Collective, like OK we're about to keep doing this and we became like a bridge between Ferguson and Chicago.[5] And so many of the first which you would call...they used to call us Ferguson protesters before they would even call us Black Lives Matter protesters so this new style of resistance that was very hip-hop informed, anti-respectability, was sparked by poor and working class black people. We were ambassadors of this and also a (indiscernible) or a bridge of this new emergence and so that is really the origin is, organizing direct actions and cultural events and open space in resistance to police violence and incarceration in Chicago and so I can go into life some of the, I can go into the details story because that was just like the first two months, so I could like as you want to pull out, tell you more about the process of how our actions developed but they kind of hit a high point in 2016 where we did a forty-one day activation or occupation called Freedom Square across the street from a facility called Homan Square where the Chicago Police Department stores confiscated materials, military equipment, as well as has been documented thousands of cases of illegal detention and torture.[6] And so in 2016, out of an action in collaboration BYP100 Let Us Breathe Collective after this two years of this open air communal facing model of remixing direct action protests did this forty-one day activation very much in connection or in the legacy of the fifty-four day lost voices acting patient in Ferguson, and actually two members of Lost Voices Ferguson were able to be a part of that endeavour and so that was probably one of the highlights of our work and coming out of that that same year we began building the

[4] Famous Chicago native black rappers at the time.
[5] BYP100, Black Youth Project 100, is a black women and LGBTQ+ led organization working towards justice and freedom.
[6] Homan Square is a Chicago city neighborhood.

Breathing Room space which is our movement building hub on the south side where we actually have four walls and are able to you know make space for all types of political and artistic events that I think reached its hot its value points in this 2020 uprising 'cause we were in many ways the home base of the headquarters for the Chicago movement and defund CPD campaign pretty much you know was created and launched out of our space. So we are an organization that is in an ecosystem or in partnership with you know five to a dozen other black lead POC, indigenous lead you know liberatores space (Zoom lag) and we've been really proud to.

WATTS (0:41:17)

OK it cut out.

(WILLIAMS continues talking, unaware he cut out then realizes) (0:41:26)

It is also, we have a farm and garden are very artistically (indiscernible) alliance of the...You got me? (WILLIAMS making sure WATTS can hear again) Can you hear me now?

WATTS (0:41:34)

OK I got you. I got you. I got you.

WILLIAMS (0:41:37)

I was ending there talking about defund CPD and we really launched that that's clear part of this ecosystem system (indiscernible because Zoom cuts out a bit more) but you know how we can as healers, educators, working to create a world beyond prisons and police here in Chicago, so. And so, again the way I I talked about earlier AirGo, right, was very much documenting what Let Us Breathe in our larger ecosystem was doing and so that is the relationship between the two.

WATTS (0:42:29)

OK thank you, you're killing it. Like so...I really appreciate how in-depth you go. It's really really helpful. I'm looking for a point that you mentioned, I'm kind of like trying to structure a question because I know you kind of like mentioned like your sister like her trying to like get into this and but she didn't want to just submerge herself into it not really knowing, she wanted to kind of get the idea—

WILLIAMS (0:43:05)

Empty handed.

WATTS (0:43:06)

I didn't hear you.

WILLIAMS (0:47:07)

I said empty handed. She didn't want to come empty handed.

WATTS (0:43:09)

Yeah yeah yeah she didn't want to go in like empty handed or anything like that and then it kind of it, once she did get things together like it was her, it was some other people, and then you mentioned it was you, what (WATTS interrupts himself) and then you also mentioned how once you all were there it did feel like really communal and kind of there was this bond. Can you explain more? What that felt like or basically yeah like what did that feel like?

WILLIAMS (0:43:44)

I think that the most appropriate answer to that is revolution in the truest sense of the word. I think a lot of people mistake or limit revolution to an event, so you know people think revolution is something that happens that starts and ends in a discrete time period. But the tradition, the grounding that I come from was revolution is a process and so what I saw was the organic emergence of revolutionary process in a particular space. Before the perverse thing about this reality now people understand it is, it's shocking how (indiscernible) this is, the problem, before Mike Brown the police were killing people at the same rate if not higher, but we just did not respond to it as a society plain and simple. So you know there may be names that folks remember or there may be specific activist communities that took part in you know focus fights to get an officer fired or to have a trial or something like that but popular consciousness being engaged and resisting the violence of the state did not happen before that in like a regular way and so one, in a part of why I think that that new path was created is because it did start in a rebellious uprising of the people it was not an organized effort and it also was not looking to be accommodated right that is the nature of rebellion, it is not making a demand to be appeased or asking for power to concede what it's willing to give it was saying we oppose this wholeheartedly (Freezes on WILLIAMS's end, no lost audio). You got me? OK I saw you freeze, so I just wanted to make sure. It was you know holistic opposition to the norms of our society so connecting consciously but which business works way in which education isn't the just regular stop and frisk policing that doesn't end in a death or even someone being locked up is all the part of our oppression and so...but it was also like again very communal, it felt like I don't know, like the last day high school when they have like a carnival I don't know if you like have that type of feel right, you know the grill is going almost all day, there's a basketball hoop, there's a fight that broke out between two sixteen year olds, people are laughing as well you know so it wasn't just everyday at seven there was a march, and anytime the police did anything. I remember one time probably that must have been October, so two months in you know one of the organizers just got pulled over pulling into the office where we were and then like seventy-five people came outside and surrounded the cop car, and chanted and then three or four cars left. And so to see something that you know what I'm saying, to come from living in fear and being subordinated to police to them seeing like the power of people not just being like a short video or like skit or protest chants, seeing real—I'm trying to keep it, keep it for the archive trying not to curse—but to see real folks come out and exert power. So yeah it was power, it was joy, it was

cultural, there was again a deep hip-hop element that was connected so like in the first couple months there was a few concerts for Talib Kweli and Dead Prez and a lot of the local artists and artists that are moving affiliated or putting together shows um yeah it felt like revolution itself and it felt like a transformation of all of our human dimensions and I think with the dimensions and I'm just going to say them out in order as: philosophical, ideological, social, or sociological, political, economic, and cultural. All of those realms were in shift, questioning homophobia in real time for folks who in it was practiced as normal. Seeing major streets get shut down, daily just when people want. Seems like, you may have seen the movie or have heard the chant "Whose Streets" and it's like I know the people one, that like man… (audio drops) Did you lose me?[7]

WATTS (0:49:07)

Oh yeah.

WILLIAMS (0:49:09)

Yeah yeah, so right. So knowing people that made that language up because when there was the choice, they would take over a major company. Did I lose you again?

WATTS (0:49:18)

No I heard you, I got you.

WILLIAMS (0:49:23)

You got me? OK, how much you get?

WATTS (0:49:31)

OK I think I'm losing you now.

WILLIAMS (0:49:34)

You got me?

WATTS (0:49:36)

OK I can hear you now.

WILLIAMS (0:49:38)

Alright so you know…think of, I don't know if you're familiar with Southwest Highway or like La Grange Road or like Lincoln Highway like those mid—they're not expressways but they're

[7] Whose Streets is a 2017 documentary narrated by protesters and activists about the Ferguson uprising.

like big ass big streets, right?[8] Just imagine a group of just, if the BD's somewhere saying alright we're taking this over everyday until the officers indicted right, without an example of that before so just bold courage lack of fear of.[9] Of one death with some people, but also lack of fear, of white supremacy, or lack of fear of violence of the state saying real stand also police but then also seeing tanks and seeing gas canisters thrown into a community, simply being, having automatic weapons pointed at us so we're also seeing the largest mobilization of the state power that you could imagine. I'm trying to think, would I say Lincoln Highway. Do you know Matteson?

WATTS (0:50:47)

Mhm, yeah.

WILLIAMS (0:50:49)

So you know like right when you get off I-57, right off Lincoln Highway, there's a big shopping center over there where everything is?[10] So imagine like a Target or something right not a strip mall, like basically a mall and the army has taken it over taken over that parking lot right so you're seeing hundreds of tanks you're saying it'll be like seeing Matteson Police, Country Club Hills Police, Chicago Police, the national guard the state police right I'm just using, trying to use Illinois parallels, so seeing this mass mobilization a state resources of a vibrant technology while also seeing a local community be poured into by a national and global community in the name of resistance, in the name of liberation. And seeing at the forefront that it wasn't to this day where I still don't like rock with it like it wasn't activists, it wasn't preachers even though they were preachers present, it was young black people standing up seeming like they were born to do something they were never prepared for and like all of that existing within contradiction it was not perfect and there was a lot of messiness and a lot of you know I'll just reiterate contradiction in this space but to come sum up the experience was that of seeing revolution, of seeing humanity transform of seeing new people come about, and so seeing people that within two weeks or within six weeks their whole worldview is different and changed and it happened to me as well even though I was looking for that type of change and transformation. But you can't get it in books, you can't get it in your head, or trying to look cute on Twitter and Instagram like you have to be...yeah transformation can only come through practice and so you have to be in community, in relationship with people accountable, experimenting, failing, to really actually be embodying the change instead of just being able to articulate it and that's what I saw as people struggling people dealing with addiction people who's lost multiple family members to violence from police and community folks you know pushed out of education system folks who've been incarcerated folks who do not practice cooperation before in a holistic sense struggling to be

[8] Lincoln Highway is a main highway for Chicago and neighboring suburbs.
[9] BD's are the Chicago native "Black Disciplines" gang that stemmed from the Black Gangster's Disciplines, has gained great notability, and still persists today.
[10] I-57 is an interstate highway that runs north-south through Missouri and Illinois.

more cooperative so yeah it was it was the, I would argue the most revolutionary thing that has occurred in our lifetime, even if I wasn't there but I'm able to say it because I saw it. I don't think anything, at least in the United States maybe the Arab Spring or something in the global south but nothing in this land has compared since since the 60s and 70s.[11]

WATTS (0:53:50)

Thank you, just trying to look back over some things, see if there's anything.

WILLIAMS (0:53:56)

Take your time.

WATTS (0:54:04)

OK, so this is another kind of question I'm going to try to structure based off what you said. So I know you mentioned that there is just a feeling of bold courage and like a lack of fear, and then there was seeing the tanks and actually seeing and witnessing and possibly experiencing them gassing people and all the other things they do. How do you...how do you think people get to that point of like you said bold courage or lack of fear? Do you think it's like something that developed within that kind of moment or because of the communal feeling that was there? Where do you think it comes from?

WILLIAMS (0:55:00)

Yeah yeah, I didn't think it was provoked by what was going on like that doesn't just come out of nowhere and also I don't want to, it's easier now to talk about Ferguson without talking about the death of Mike Brown and just how horrible and gruesome and traumatizing that was for our society but particularly the community where it happened so there was definitely a triggering for people that was unique and there was something so brazen and disrespectful about it, because usually the state and I'm going to keep using that language intentionally. But police usually are very tactful in public relations if you wanna call it that right and so they do a lot of dirt, but their job more than anything I feel is to perform the clean face and to cover up that there. But there was such an abusive power relationship in that space that there was a disregard for even making their violence look civil. So just to remind you, not only was he shot with his hands up, he was left in the sun laying on the street in a open neighborhood for four to five hours and then the police then came and antagonized the community and sicked their dogs on the community and allowed their dogs to pee on the the memorial people were building for him and calling people animals and antagonizing people right so you know that's what started the uprising and again, coming back to my study there's this relationship we usually use them interchangeably but there's this deep relationship between rebellion and revolution. So the fact that an uprising happened, it

[11] Arab Springs was a collection of protests and uprising against the government initiated in late 2010.

wasn't a protest. It was in protest but it wasn't a “hey we're marching on the sidewalk with our signs” that started happening later, it was a collective political response to we are going to create consequences for the capitalist space that these police are working to protect and bolster so that's really important but then there's also the socio-economic aspect of it. Chicago and Saint Louis have a lot of similarities, and one of them is they built their public housing infrastructure after the Chicago model so the history of like the projects run parallel and so similarly there was also a tearing down in the displacement of the thousands of people who were housed in public space and so through the divestment and destruction of the public there was this dispersal also a divestment in all social services of marginalized, vulnerable people throughout the greater Saint Louis area. So Ferguson historically was a white suburb, (indiscernible phrase) was a white suburb thatwhite flight was occurring but there was also this like kind of tale of two sides and there was a lot of folks being pushed out from the city limits into the you know all of these little municipalities so it kind of feels I'll do it anyway like Harvey and you know Bellwood and Maywood right like there's all these little towns that are Chicago but like aren’t and like they're technically suburbs. But if you know some of these spaces like Phoenix, Illinois or something right like there's no grocery store and you know so it's very much in that vein and so you know it was also then folks friendly like Chicago bed were in the street element right so folks who've been incarcerated folks that you know are in different ways affiliated with certain blood or crips sets who you know had to participate in survival economies and informal economies for survival (indiscernible phrase, audio went out) in an interesting way prepared people any there's a wide spectrum of so everybody by the time it was at height, everybody is out there but really at the forefront, you know it would be like 79th Street or Madison Avenue you know rising up and so again you know apologize for the transcript, but there already is an embedded passion of I don’t give no fuck in these spaces.[12] But then once there's purpose and meaning and politic, on top of that, there's a real combination of I'm here for my people, and I don't give no fuck. And so also people aren't aware of the history…people…there is this historical memory of just of all police violence of all white violence on black people of all, of the racial makeup of this country. And so, those things put together just had again, just some of the deepest courage I'd ever seen. And then I think people survived with things within the first week or two, there was horrible repression, that did not work. So if you've been tear gassed and shot with rubber bullets, and you've been locked up four or five times in the last week, and then you get out the next day, after a while, the seal was broken. And so there's only so much they can do within their processes to intimidate. So yeah, that's how I think I would name the courage or the lack of fear. And it definitely challenged and provoked me. And then informed I think, how our movement is because it's not…it didn't start from the Bernie Sanders campaign. I'm saying there's a lot of white progressives who kind of…particularly in our age group…oh I guess I'm older than you, I guess I'm ten years older than you (referring directly to WATTS) but in the younger generations, that got activated from a labor union, or an election, or a policy or something, or a workers

[12] 79th Street has been branded as one of the most dangerous in Chicago; Madison Avenue is one of the major streets in Chicago.

strike, and all those things are valuable, but that's much different from starting from not being a part of an organization and your political activation being I am in rebellious resistance of the US nation state. Like I see the president, the governor, and the mayor as my opp.[13] And I am going to work with people to be in opposition to that violence. And so, that's much different from people who are just trying to negotiate for better benefits or for marginal change. And so that's my understanding of it.

WATTS (1:02:40)

Thank you man. Oh my gosh. Like there's not much for me to say, just kind of go to make sure I soak everything in and really take a minute to just understand and digest everything. So yeah. Ok. (silence as WATTS tries to come up with a new question for WILLIAMS) I'm trying to think of a question that you kind of didn't hit on because I don't want to have you repeating? (elongated pause continues) Ok, I have this…so basically, I want to kind of re-mold this question. So the question was when looking at youth activists who do you want to do more? Or what would you say…or were…ok, I'll just restructure it. Basically, what is something, when you think of the work that you do, what is something that you kind of wish there was more of or wish you could do more of or something that you feel isn't given enough attention or you wish you had more time to focus on?

WILLIAMS (1:04:11)

Yeah, I mean, there's so many things I can answer within that. And I think they can maybe all fit within system building. So I'll start with what I probably think is most needed to what inspires me the most. So what I think, and this is kind of a big claim. What I think we need to be doing as people is, locally faced collective organizing and cooperative work in the tradition of mutual aid to build the relationship infrastructure for what our organization calls wellpro or wellness and protection. So at a basic level, how do we use any access or connectivity that we have as a greater society and as communities to address or start to meet material need beyond market exchange? So how do we make sure that people have their housing, food and healing resources, whether that be traditional medicine, or other healing or medical medicines? How do we make sure folks have what they need through networks of trust? So it's not about this capitalist notion of you need to be able to afford shelter to access it, but that all needs should be met, to go back to that thing of need being our political input. And so in our…just a tragic stat, I say kind of proved my point is that in our society, there are more vacant homes than there are homeless people. Which proves that it's not an issue of scarcity, as our society is geared around that scarcity of artificial engineer, it is about the decisions we make and how we distribute the resources that the planet provides us. And so with that I partic— and so, let's stop there. So mutual aid, as an approach so that then basically, you know your neighbors or people in your community, so that then folks can one, be proactive and have programs where we are in a relationship that prevent harm. So that they don't got to be super radical from no book or nothing. Like local basketball

[13] The word "opp" is a form of AAVE slang that means opposition.

tournaments, community gardens, dance classes, reading groups, elder care, child care, resources, so that people are in deep relationship, so that then once harm happens, we have communal structures to respond. So I believe that someone who actually is connected to you should be who…let's use domestic violence, for example. I think if there are trained people, or people with intentional frameworks, you will be in a much more healthy situation, for someone who knows the nuances of the dynamic and knows both of you to be able to counsel, facilitate, and then from (indiscernible, Zoom audio cut out) need to…do we need to relocate somebody? Does somebody need to be housed somewhere else? Does someone need counseling? That'd be the mechanism you can use that form of harm to all forms of harm. Sexual violence, gun violence, commercial dispute, whatever, that relationship is how we have notions of accountability, repair and restoration. And so that's what I think people need to do. And I think that can start with mutual aid work. And mutual aid, usually, for most people, doesn't look as ephemeral as I named it. It's usually like a table with resources that are being distributed. So let's give out food, pampers, and whatever else, and then that be connected with some type of political education that then drives us. So being able to do that deeper, so that we can create these almost block club type structures that actually are what state power facilitates through on a local level. So I think we need to be building that. Doing more mutual aid, doing more communal organizing, so that we can have new responses. And then, so in that ideal world, where we're able to do that, that actually builds up our capacity to resist and engage the state in a deeper level, because right now, there is so much power asymmetry. That's why we have to do all of this ridiculous spectacle. That's why folks are reduced to mass mobilization in the streets or some form of direct action or doing something on Twitter, is because we actually don't have the power organized to oppose the instituted power that controls this land. And then even if we did have the power to oppose it, we don't have the power to build what we need, because I actually don't believe that if Joe Biden and Lori Lightfoot and everybody in between, today said oh I hear you ok, I get it now, we'll try…I don't even think if they wanted to they could build what we need. I think we need to actually create a new structure and a new society. But in the meantime, the government and the state at large, has access to so many resources that can build up our capacity because right now our people are depleted and traumatized, and we need to be stronger, to actually create a new, I don't want to call it an eco-state, but a new human formation, you can't—I'll use a metaphor—you can't build a ship if you're hungry. And so, boom that's the big answer. Some of the work that I would like to do much more is be actually truer to my roots as a cultural worker and media maker. So one of the dream programs that we've incubated a little bit, but really hasn't got fully running, it's called free sessions. And so what would it look like to have recording studio time where folks can create music, record, other audio poetics and or build podcasts, as an entry point into movement building? And so, what if, as opposed to some 19 year old, trying to sell weed to be able to record and mix a master mixtape, right? What if that was, again, a free resource, as a way to invite folks into the creative community, where then you can question your reality, and try to project a new one. So that type of work is what I would like to spend more time doing and passionate about. I think another thing that Let Us Breathe does that

is really prominent in Chicago, but we need to go further on is…I guess I could put a bunch of things in the back basket of free the land, land sovereignty, land based work. So one, food. We need to build new food systems, it is really important. And so how do we model that at a local level? But even housing is a land struggle to go back to some of the original things I've said, and so how do we actually organize to acquire, repossess, take over unused housing, renovate it and live in it cooperatively. Create different land trust or trust entities. So that that local kind of wellness and protection model that I started with, is actually rooted in well, yeah, I'm actually being fed by this community, I am being housed by this community, I am getting access to medical care and mental health from this community and my children and my elders are being taken care of. And so therefore, I'm invested in the space if I'm not being exploited through capitalist labor, to only be able to barely meet, and now my humanity is being diminished. And I can't show up as a full, loving person, what if I'm grounded in a space that is caring for my needs, and therefore I'm able to invest in it, and create new models of protection. So I'll stop there, because I can kind of keep, like world vision for the whole…for two hours, but I think those are some of the most tangible things that, if all things were equal or perfect, we would be pushing much harder.

WATTS (1:13:20)

Ok, thank you, again. Ok, so he brought up a lot of super insightful and great points and things that even for me, I want to focus on and think about more. Things that I may have thought about, but haven't really sat down to understand more about. And I want to say thank you for that. And I want to kind of end by asking you, is there any final thing that you want to say or just have on the record that you want to just leave with us?

WILLIAMS (1:14:01)

Yeah. Yeah, what I'll do is I'll throw it to you, and see if you have curiosity or question for me to go into. But I think it's really important that we in some ways talk about abolition. Because I've been speaking towards it or naming it. But in terms of movement building activism, but particularly black youth movement, or if you want to call it the Black Lives Matter movement, or the Movement for Black Lives, there's this thing that's been existing for seven years, that mostly consists of people under 40. And many people were 18 to 25, when they really got involved. There is nothing more prominent or substantial than abolition in this work, and I think institutions and media want— they first try to escape past it. Last year, we saw the biggest uprising in human history and so it couldn't be ignored. But it was then obfuscated and muddied in a way that I think a lot of people are confused or don't have access to the actual people that have been building this thought. And so, in these last two years, I've taken on much more of the responsibility of being a thought leader, at least in my community, if not, across the…nationally. In thinking through what abolition means. And so yeah, I've talked kind of towards it or around it. I'm kind of curious where you at with it, but I would love to hear any curiosity you have or

anything I can go deeper in or any struggle, or if that can be a part of your project? I think that that will be important.

WATTS (1:15:52)

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I guess I'll kind of ask, I know you definitely did mention some of this earlier, but people kind of, or some people I'll say, kind of have an idea that when we bring up abolition, that it's not something that is tangible, or that it's just a really good idea or something that sounds good, but doesn't seem it can actually be done? How do you…what are some of the ways that you think that…what are your thoughts on how you can combat that idea for people who are interested in abolition, but don't really see it as happening?

WILLIAMS (1:16:40)

Yeah, that's beautiful. So once again, I want to direct you to those three black women who are, I call them…I don't know if you know basketball history, but I call them the Bill Russell and Michael Jordan, and LeBron James of abolitionists thought. Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson, Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba. So I really, really encourage you to consume every word they've ever spoken or written, and your life will be changed. And they can answer much better than I can. But going to the concrete or the tangible or can it be done thing, there's a philosophical…

(indescernible, WILLIAMS cuts out for an extensive period of time)

WATTS (1:17:33)

Oh, I think I lost you. I don't know if you're still there.

WILLIAMS (1:17:48)

Bri'Yon?

WATTS (1:17:49)

Ok, I can hear you.

WILLIAMS (1:17:51)

You got me? Yeah, I'm on my phone, I keep getting calls. So before I get into some of the politics, I really think it's important to start philosophically, because there's actually a new…we actually have to I think, rearrange our questioning and our thinking. And so I go back to an analogy I used to hear Ta-Nehisi Coates use. I mean, he was talking about chattel slavery. And it's important whenever we're talking about the carceral state and abolitionists movements to ground us in the history of chattel slavery. Because one, that's obviously where the actual language comes from. And then two, because the institutions that we are posing were birthed out of the institution of chattel slavery. And so one thing he said, that really struck me is that approximately that the 200 or so years, 246 or so years of chattel slavery equates to about seven

human generations. So that's a really tragic thing to think about, right? Seven generations existing in bondage. And so one thing he said was think about that fourth generation. So if we imagine somebody in this proverbial fourth generation, that means not only did they…not only were they born, lived, and died in bondage, their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, born, lived and died in bondage, and their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren were also going to live and die in bondage. So one, that prompts us to have a little bit of humility about what we want and what we think liberation means. But secondly, if we honor and revere our ancestors in the way that we should, we know that throughout the entire history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and chattel slavery, resistance was always present. It was never passively accepted from the shores through the Civil War. And so that means people in that fourth generation, everyday lived wanting freedom. Rebelled, sabotaged their plantations, disregarded orders, used trickster methods and or escaped, ran away, or took their life in their own hands. And all of that resistance made the ending of that institution possible. So whenever I teach people about abolition, I try to use that analogy to say we should think of ourselves as the fourth generation. So it's also, it's almost arrogant, when thinking about society building, or the oppression of your people, to want the results in your lifetime. And actually, some of the biggest anti-heroes of the Black Power Movement, of the black liberation struggle, I think one of the biggest mistakes folks made was say, I want revolution, I want to see it. And then there are a lot of irresponsible acts and a lot of self centered selfish acts, because it was about their own gratification or their own sense of success, as opposed to a collective project. And so, again, so one, I bring that in politically, but I'm saying it philosophically, I actually think we need to challenge individualism, not only currently, but I see myself connected to my ancestors and future generations, I see myself more accountable to people who've been dead for decades, then people who are here now. And so if that is real for me, if that is actually philosophical in the world, which is completely counter to the, to the American consciousness of neoliberal individualism, me, me, me, just do it, hustle, grind, rat race. It takes a retraining of your thinking if you've not been introduced, to see that there's nothing more valuable than contributing to something that is going to outlive you. So I say that the work that I'm doing, I do not actually believe that in my lifetime, I will see an end to prisons or police. But it is still important for us to push that boulder up the hill. Because we are in seven generation struggles. And so it's like pure (indiscernible, audio skipped) as a metaphor. Those structures took hundreds or thousands of years. And we think about it as if one group of people did that. But that means those plans and instructions were passed down and passed down and passed down. And I believe that's how we need to see it. And we need to not limit our understanding of politics to what the electoral arena has taught us, that it's about six months, two years, four year cycles, where there's a winner and a loser. So that's my step away. And then I'll just offer a few more framings before getting to some of the tangible of what deconstructing the system looks like, what experiments any new models can look like, even though those answers is not something I can give, and is an always continuing project. But another thing that's just important to note, and why I kept using the language chattel slavery specifically, is because the 13th amendment approximately says, neither

slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist in the US or any of us jurisdictions, except for punishment as a crime. So as as a teacher of abolition, I think it's important that you are but also I try to model provoking people every time I can, to let people know that every day that you have drawn breath in this land, regardless of what your social studies books taught you to believe, you have been living in a place where slavery is constitutional, legal. Anytime that a police officer does their job successfully, and then that person was put in front of a judge, and then the judge slams a gavel and says guilty, that person is then legally submitted to what can constitutionally be named as slavery, involuntary servitude, and torture. And so that's what the system is. And so a lot of people…I don't know about you growing up, but it was very popular in the American conscious, oh, what would I do if I was alive back in slavery? Oh I wouldn't go for that. But there are a lot of free negros out here that passively accepting, or free people period, that passively accepting a slave system that actually in number rivals or if not outpaces the one that is wrapped in our historical imagination. And so there's a responsibility that we have of I think it's actually…and this is not to your question, your question's sincere, but a lot of people ask this in bad faith, I think it's actually problematic to be starting with well, then what's the solution before actually engaging the problem. I don't think a lot of people, people like to talk about police killings, or people like to talk about mass incarceration, or the drug war, or, the fact that black people are disproportionately incarcerated, but don't want to talk about the fact that incarceration is actually a reform of mutilation and torture. So in European nation states, used to rip people's bodies apart, or put them in blockades or cut people's heads off, or torture people or whip and lash them, and it would be public spectacle. So the community would come, and that would be how justice was thought about, and how order was maintained; was through these trauma performances. And that's what the prison is a continuation of, is we are going to destroy life as a deterrent to control behavior. And I don't think that's how human behavior works. And so I say all that to say, we have a great responsibility to actually struggle and imagine towards the unknown. So I don't think Harriet Tubman was wrestling with the idea of well, where are all these people going to live? And how are we going to distribute cotton? And how are we going to have an economy? Or what's the tangible next step? What's the program that we're going to fund to prove that this is going to work? I think there's a deeper human…and I even call it spiritual responsibility of how we need to analyze this, that doesn't get discussed when people talk about it on the news. People talk about it like is this an electable campaign platform or is this a law that we can pass as opposed to questioning what our society is built on? And so then from that, then you start to look at oh wait, 40% of Chicago's budget is going to each (indiscernible, audio cut out) Did you lose me? Can you hear me still?

WATTS (1:27:09)

Ok, you kind of broke up a little bit. Ok I can hear you.

WILLIAMS (1:27:10)

Alright you froze…if you can hear me… you can hear me though? And then another language I expanded from just saying police and prisons, and militaries. I've tried to encapsulate it all in one term of carceral militarism. Because it's important to note that also, as we're—Afghanistan is back in the news right now—the police and the military are expressions of the same thing. One is international, and one is domestic. And so we also have the largest global, militaristic, carceral force that is destroying the planet, and so, on actual survival level, we can't continue this way, long term. Building prisons, building military bases, is an ecological disaster, even before it is a human disaster. So what it's doing to our environment is unsustainable. And so then, acknowledging then all of those truths, then we have to start really small. Because again, we only have so much capacity of building different restorative programs and transformative programs. So I'll direct you to a resource because I don't want to be loose, but I'm actually…AirGo's partnering with, we'll be doing a project soon called One Million Experiments. And it comes from a quote of Mariame Kaba, which is actually really important, is that it's important to name this as a complex. So it's the PIC, the prison industrial complex, which means this many things coming together. It's not actually one institution. And so the idea that we're going to have one institution or one process to air quote, replace it, or as an alternative is a false promise. So what she teaches is that we actually don't need an alternative, we need a million experiments. We need people practicing in new ways. So I think it will look different in different places. So I think urban models are going to be different from suburban models are going to be different from rural models. I think models in the global south are going to be different from places in the United States and Western Europe. I think queer, trans, and non-binary communities have different needs than cis-hetero communities.[14] I think black people and indigenous people have unique needs and processes that we need to build that are going to be different from European descendant people. And so that, in my head I can see and imagine it doesn't come out as program. Different communal models that look like circle keeping, that look like food systems, that look like cultural practice, that are all the responses. So here's my example that I use to what does it look like if there's no police. So once we did our Freedom Square action, we had like six or seven tenths that represented the things we want to invest in. And it's a pretty good start to what we need. So food systems, housing, and shelter, education and development, youth and elder care, cultural practice and space, healthcare, I don't think I said. And then I think we called it restorative justice, but those six or seven things. So now, you know Chicago, Chicago is actually a really good example because our oppression and how linear the city is, and how segregated it is, actually makes these really geometrical units. So all our neighborhoods are built in these four by four squares. So in those four by four squares, what we imagine is not always the truth, but the way we imagine our society is that people should be in walking distance to a school, probably a park or playground, and a library, kind of, you kind of think that that's what a neighborhood or community has within walking distance. So what I propose is, then let's expand that, we also need an institution that takes care of housing, so if your roof caves in, or if you still

[14] The term "cis-hetero" aka "cishet" is a shorthand way to say cisgender and heterosexual when referring to people who fall outside of the LGBTQ+ community.

on a rental system, if your rent is back pay, or if you're overcrowded, there's a space in your neighborhood, that figures out how to house you, relocate you, or, rehabilitate your space, as it is a elder and childcare space, mental health facility, we call it a health clinic. So now imagine all of those things and walking distance of everybody, and we have the resources, we have the capacity to to do something like this. So now you have these seven to eight institutions that exist in every neighborhood. And now let's network them. Now let's say every neighborhood is in communication with each other. So if there's an institution that deals with your housing deals, deals with your children's education, you go and eat and get meals, then those are folks that are…spaces that can be ready to be deployed, and can do this type of well proact that I already talked about. And so, within the institutions that take care of our needs, like the society that existed for the 250,000 years, before prisons, and police, were invented, that will be where conflict is addressed, that will be where synergy and community is instilled. So conflict does not happen readily. If you know the people, in your community, you are much less likely to be in an antagonistic relationship. And so said that utopian example, it tells us how horribly our cities are organized. Because I'm sure…you're on a campus now. So I'm sure it's probably some white kid talking about I'm not from 63rd, right.[15] Like that's now part of the popular culture people don;t know what the fuck they talking about, but that is something that people can understand. And they don't recognize in the way that I'm sure you can do the math. 63rd and St. Lourdes and 65th and King Drive, is about a mile away from each other. And so we should have institutions or organizations where all of their aunties, all of their grandmas, all of their cousins should be in community with each other, as opposed to having our hospitals closed down. Our schools closed down on libraries, underfunded, and then all of these profit seeking entities that are just trying to extract resources from the community that then puts people in isolation and then antagonism. So the fact that 16 year olds who live within a mile from each other, cannot respect the humanity of really who their neighbor is, means that our society is disorganized. So when we say abolition, actually, the first…so the language last year that got popular was defund the police or defund police. Which I agree with, it's pretty simple, but it's actually a shorthand for DivestInvest. So I was a part of an action because I joined BYP100 for a few years, and BYP, with a few other organizations, particularly in the city but nationally, did a really important direct action in 2015 against the International Association of Chiefs of Police. They were having their global conference at McCormick Place. And Barack Obama was the keynote speaker. So every police department in the world basically was here collaborating on how to oppress the planet. And so, basically 12 or so groups came and did different lock in actions and shut down the conference for the day. And that was the first time we named or launched the DivestInvest. And so what we say is take the actual resources that are being used for carceral militarism, and invest those into communal healing resources, and then build an infrastructure through which we can have responses from. So another thing that you say rhetorically, and I know going on, is we're not talking about abolishing 911. We're not talking about abolishing emergency response, we are

[15] What Damon is referencing is 63rd Street, a street in the city of Chicago, that along with Martin Luther King Drive has become a joke making fun of how dangerous it is, especially at the intersection of the two.

saying that a military unit is not the person, is not who we need to call for human issues. Militarism, as we see in Afghanistan and Iraq, does not help conflict, if anything it creates and brings about conflict. And so what would it look like because there actually are people through usually through some messed up nonprofits, but there are, good people emerge. But there are people who are trained in addiction, there are people who are trained in supporting people through poverty, there are people who are trained in domestic violence, sexual assault, there are people who are trained in gang intervention or street violence, right. And so what would happen if somebody who actually knew what they were doing, as opposed to one person who is not trained in anything, but just has a gun, was responding accurately to our needs? And so yeah, another thing to advocate for abolition, particularly from Chicago, because what happened was particularly when a movement emerged, and the Trump campaign emerged, you have these three dynamics, you have the liberal establishment talking about Chicago, because New York, Chicago, a lot of people study our city. Then you have the hip hop space, as drill came up, Chicago then became what Compton was.[16] It is the the imagination of what violence, even though there's violence in St. Louis, Detroit, Jacksonville, Houston, LA, but for some reason, Chicago through how it is reported, is imagined as different. So the hip hop space, the liberal space, but then also, once we started demanding accountability for police violence, basically, the way that the Republican, or the conservative cohort would gaslight that claim is by saying, we can't do anything about the police look at Chicago. So a lot of people are invested in saying how horrible Chicago is in order to support the status quo. But here's something they don't look at. They always say we need police because look at Chicago, we need to send more, we need to send the National Guard, we need some more police to Chicago, but out of all major cities of the top 30 most populated cities in America, Chicago has the most police per capita. So it's not the biggest police force in absolute numbers, but relative to its population, it's bigger than New York, LA and all of the other major cities. And then I'm sure you know those resources are not spread out equally, they are concentrated in communities that are under-resourced. So the south or the west side of Chicago that is imagined…the language Chiraq used to ring out a lot more when I started doing this. But is imagined as this dystopian war zone, is actually the most policed area in America. And so for me, that actually tells me the opposite. If police worked, then Chicago would actually be the safest city. And I think the violence in Chicago is an example that hyper investment into militarism and into policing actually brings about lack and scarcity and brings about more violence. And so I think Chicago is like the perfect example of policing does not work and if anything, makes it worse, and that we need to invest into new resources. So, I did the big thing, but then there's programs such as…there was a big push here in the city called Treatment not Trauma, which is about having mental health responders be the ones to show up as opposed to a militarized bureaucrat who like basically cheated on their homework to pass through high school. So yeah, so those are some of the things. I mean, did you feel like your question was answered?

[16] Drill refers to a style of hip-hop/rap music that originated in Chicago and became relatively poplar in the late 200's/early 2010's.

WATTS (1:39:19)

Oh, most definitely. Most definitely. And with that, I just really really really want to say thank you number one, for doing this interview with me. It was very insightful, just touching on so many things that, like I mentioned before, that I thought about but haven't really just kind of broken out of the set idea that I have of that. I mean, I was taking notes not for just for the sake of the interview, just for myself. Literally, I have like five pages of notes, which is so crazy. I was like and I really wanted to make sure that I was picking up on what you're saying and like asking the questions that…just that I really wanted to hear…get more on and figure out more on, based on your opinions. And I will say that you really hit it hard, talk about a mic job. Oh my goodness.

WILLIAMS (1:40:19)

Oh, can I say one last thing?

WATTS (1:40:21)

Yes, absolutely.

WILLIAMS (1:40:22)

And I kind of teased this at the beginning. And I don't want to get too technical. Butif you take an economics class, if you take intro to economics, one of the first things they're going to teach you is based off like…they take from Adam Smith, it's not just him but a bunch of people, they explain economics in this system as the competition over scarce resources. There is this eurocentric belief that the world does not have enough resources. And I believe that there's plenty of evidence, but just on a spiritual level, that that's not true. That our world creates more than enough, if we live in alignment, and live in proper balances. And so with that, that is the base model theory of the Let Us Breathe Collective, is abundance, and we are what we need, we have what we need. So, lack…there are food shortages, people don't have enough money, but there's enough money printed and created to go around, there's enough food, we throw away more food than is needed. I already told you the thing about houses, right? Like we have the capacity to take care (indiscernible, Zoom audio skipped) the Let Us Breathe Collective barely exists on paper, we have been fiscally sponsored, we got our space, but for the first two years, we didn't have a bank account, we didn't exist on paper, we were coming from this place of rebellion. And a lot of times, activism and movement building, and contained within this nonprofit model. And so I don't want to be absolute because a lot of good work and a lot of movement work comes from the nonprofit structure, because it's kind of the only way you can do it at a large scale right now based off how our society is organized. But the stuff that made me who I am in this space, I don't get paid for 99% of the things I do. The Let Us Breathe Collective is not a resource space, we've only recently began to get nonprofit funding. And in terms of young people, that was one of the things that when I was first starting young people used to ask a

lot. It's like what do I do if I don't have money? And I just want to…it's a conundrum because we want people to do a lot of work. But what does it look like for that work to not be professionalized? What does it look like actually for a lot of the work to be voluntary? And then once we have the resources to maintain people, we do it in the ways that we can, or at least support or offer stipends. But I want even for your own life per view, but for the record, to know that we can engage these institutions and kind of be clever or be nuanced, and how we get resources or finesse our way through the game. But that is not the game. And for a lot of people and for a lot of traditional activism, a lot of stuff you would see on the news, most days of here's the mayor, here's the activists...that is very much decided by, at the largest sense, the owners of capital that are invested in the system. So it is actually not just about the police. It's about racial capitalism and it's about our bureaucratic Republic. It's about transforming this whole thing. And realizing that the nonprofit system was designed to create this. The nonprofit system came from the idea that it is not the state's responsibility to take care of people, we're going to get charity and church to do it. And that they'll do it with no structure, and then do it on their own well, and so the way in which that is organized and structured is actually not aligned with our liberatory formations. And so that's always putting a square in a circle. And so just knowing that our work is under resourced, and unresourced, most of the work is unresourced and under resourced, and that there is often a compromise and attention in dealing with this professionalized institutional capital that a lot of people depend on to sustain. Because for a lot of folks going into this right like protesting was a job. You'd get your salary and you fill your requirements, and it's not actually about doing the thing. It's not actually about liberation, it's about meeting your grant requirements. And I think that's actually a counter example that we need to be very cautious of. And it's starting to break a little bit. But I just want to give you some of that perspective of it's always attention, if you can get grants, get them as much as you can. We live in a society where you need money to survive and to operate. But through mutual aid, and like up through Freedom Square, it was just through people. And so obviously other people with money were contributing, with all of our stuff in kind donation, and we actually haven't asked for money, since that first GoFundMe that I told you about, outside of supporting specific things, there's never been like, just give us money. And so we've been living through the law of abundance, we've not fundraised in any intentional type of way. And then you'll look up, andthen last year tens of thousands of dollars just started coming from just people around the country once uprising started, and we never asked for it. And so again, I don't want to send people off, I also am of privilege and an exceptional communicator, and so there's access that my sister, myself, my partner can get that everybody can't get that like the group Lost Voices wouldn't be able to get for example to come up with name privilege. But there's a lot of capitalist facing activism that happens and we need to be subverting that as much as we can. Alright, I'll stop.

WATTS (1:46:41)

You're good. But yes, I really, really, really want to say thank you for taking the time to have this interview with me, giving me so much insight, not only to myself, but students at Duke

because this will, like I've mentioned before, become part of the archives at the school. And I feel like this…your perspective and your experience and your knowledge and your outside expertise is really going to be helpful for me and other people to just really see and understand, because you really touched on a lot of good things that I'm really glad that you did, and you kind of…you helped me with this interview, honestly. So I want to say thank you for that. And yeah, it's been a pleasure. So thank you.

WILLIAMS (1:47:34)

Much love, much love. Can you promise me one thing?

WATTS (1:47:37)

Yes.

WILLIAMS (1:47:38)

Before you graduate, or before you finish or leave, or however it goes. Read the book *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*. That's the book that changed my life. So it came to me in a way when I was really prepared to receive it because like I said, like I told you, I've been…

(interview concluded)