

The following is a full transcript of Episode 9 of the 2020 season of the Praxis Radio podcast. You can download it as a pdf [here](#) and listen/subscribe [here](#).

Praxis Radio 2020 Podcast

Episode 9: kai lumumba barrow, New Orleans, LA

<orchestral music intro, "Praxis Theme" by Jason Cross continues to play under narration>

Taylor, the host of the show: Welcome listeners, to a new installment of the 2020 season of Praxis. If this is your first listen, welcome. Each episode this season stands alone, but if you want to hear more interviews with organizers, activists, and artists about the 'how' of making social change, you can check out past episodes and subscribe. You can do that anywhere you get your podcasts by going to praxisradio.com slash subscribe. This season is a radio show road trip, returning to a trip I took during the summer of 2015 to connect with folks on the ground doing work around responding to climate change and building powerful alternatives to capitalism.

In the first episode, in Portland Oregon, Paul talked about the people who inspire him in the current moment and one of the names he dropped was Kai Barrow. He was nice enough to put me in touch and Kai was generous enough to make time to chat with me. So in another imaginative extension of the road trip, in which we pretend I was able to be out for longer and make it to New Orleans, where Kai was working to create visual opera around the 10th anniversary of Katrina, let's go to that conversation from this October.

<music fades out>
<interview drops in mid-conversation>

Taylor Roseweeds (trw): "Yeah, even just listening to— maybe we'll get into it— but listening to the audio that pops up on the website for [b]REACH and just hearing it while reading about it rather than like, experiencing it in the place is interesting too, I don't know..."

kai lumumba barrow (klb): "Mmhmm, yeah I'm trying to think through this idea of— I think sonics, you know, what is, what is an—I'm actually trying to think through the question of abolitionist aesthetics and what then, does that look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? You know, all those elements. How many um, layers can you identify in this notion of abolitionist aesthetics, right?"

trw: Mmhmm

klb: And I think I don't know yet, but I'm really interested in where the musicality of things are. Because I'm not a musician and *<laughs>* in my work, but my work is pretty...it's... I think it's more in alignment with dance and music than it is story and

narrative, right? So I'm trying to kind of work in that— in that medium, so sound is something that I'm interested in. Radio as a medium I'm interested in. The more and more we become alienated from each other, but this assumption that we're connected cause we can see each other? *<laughs>* you know?

trw: Yeah

klb: And really like, what markets are going to be developed out of this [pandemic], too, I'm really interested in. Right? So what are the new, you know, kind of, industries that are gonna come up or how will the fashion industry and the makeup industry and the design industry shift to make space for this new form of communication? And then you know, so all those things are why I say 'oh can we take off the picture?' [on the Zoom call being recorded]

<laughter>

trw: Yeah, well I'm a hundred percent with it especially, like, it's just weird. And that's why I did radio, too. Nobody needs to know....

klb: Yeah, it's the gaze thing, right?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: It's the gaze thing, that's what it is and also that kind of hyper-surveillance, right? Um, how are we determining what is appropriate and inappropriate, right? So when you see folks that are on these zoom calls in public and outside and they might not have on a mask and there's lots of questions around like, 'whose land are they sitting in?' and 'where are the other people?' and it's just a lot! Let's, we could, is this the focus?

trw: No yeah, right, I do want to back up and make sure we get into the other stuff, but no, it's super interesting. Do you want to, I guess just to officially start, do you mind just introducing yourself for folks listening and maybe just by way of introduction, I'm really curious what you think in your background made you an artist and an organizer. Cause you're described as both, seems like you're both.

klb: Well, I self-describe so there's that. *<laughs>* I don't know how other people are describing me, but I self-describe as an artist and an organizer or an artist and an activist. My name is kai lumumba barrow. So I'm currently based in New Orleans and I work full time as an artist, yeah, I work full time as an artist and part of my work as an artist is trying to think through the nexus that is art, organizing, activism, education. How all those things, you know, kind of connect together to help spark movement building and social justice organizing. So it's a way that I have chosen and feel really good about linking the multiple selves— I think that comes out of a black feminist framework—the many different ways that we engage, you know, our everyday lives. And you know, I don't think that I can exist as an artist, as a black artist, and a queer black artist, and a queer black fem artist, you could keep going— elder artist, whatever— you know what I

mean. All these different labels, right? That are very— that have with them class associations and class affiliations, right? So the labels aren't just the labels for the sake of identity, there's also with those labels particular kind of class positionalities, right? And so within those definitions of self, like who I am, I cannot afford to highlight any one particular component of the identity, right? Or else the other parts will get short-shrifted. So I think as an artist, and one who is interested in design and form and shape, to me that is just like, that's the fun part, right, linking it together.

trw: Mmhmm

klb: Right, and other people like to do it other ways, but I like to do it artistically and aesthetically cause it makes me happy.

<laughter>

trw: Good, yeah, that's a good reason that you don't hear people center enough. And I like that take— that these roles you know, not— maybe artist is an identity and a role, but these roles in society are... are linked in the same way that your identities are and I think that's an interesting way to frame it. So, I got in touch with you because Paul Messersmith-Glavin was name dropping you a lot in the interview I did with him. I asked if he could put me in touch with some folks and he put me in touch with you and I'm glad he did. But the framing of this project I'm working on is around this trip I took five years ago, summer 2015, we didn't meet then, obviously, but if we had met then, where were you? Right at that moment what was going on in your life?

klb: Uh, summer 2015?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: That's...that's deep. So that's five years ago. I was just talking about that. What time of the year? What month?

trw: August

klb: So you know, that's Katrina's... that's the anniversary of Katrina. It was the tenth anniversary of Katrina and I had just moved to New Orleans with I don't want to say permission, because that would be weird, *<laughs>* but I did reach out to a lot of organizers and artists I know in the city of New Orleans and I knew them because I had done work with them prior to me reaching out to them in 2015, or 2014. And I worked here with Critical Resistance working around the prison industrial complex and abolition of such in New Orleans, right? And so I knew that there was going to be a big deal about Katrina and I was like, you know it would be really interesting to see what would be the grassroots response to this anniversary, right, like you know, where are we at ten years later? When we think about this location and when we think about the ways that the city was looking at tourism, etc, right. And so I reached out to folks I knew here in New Orleans and asked if they'd be interested in participating in this project I was sitting

called “ECOHYBRIDITY: Love Song for New Orleans” and they said yes. And so I moved here and in August we sited “ECOHYBRIDITY” which was a five-part visual opera. And there were twenty or twenty-five Black feminists who helped site that work and that siting included individual—not individual—but, like, autonomous performances, installations and community talks, a range of different things. So we were in New Orleans moving through the streets in August 2015, both organizing for “ECOHYBRIDITY” and then, you know, performing or making “ECOHYBRIDITY” around the anniversary. Where were you? *<laughs>*

trw: Oh god... I was— so I was traveling around. I took July and August, I quit my job and I took my radio show at the time, now this podcast, on the road across the country. Well, across the U.S. and Canada. Uh, I did not go anywhere in the South. I’ve actually never been to the South I’m from, like, North Idaho, Eastern Washington, which is about as opposite New Orleans as you can get...

klb: Uh huh

trw: probably... *<laughs>* in a lot of ways. So yeah, you know, I ran out of money in Kentucky and came back so. It was planned to run out of money then, but so yeah... that’s what I was up to. But it felt like, you know, there were like, the Katrina anniversary I remember was very present everywhere because at the time—climate change—a lot of people were talking about climate in this very urgent way, it was the hottest summer so far, it’s not the hottest summer anymore but it was at the time.

klb: Mmm

trw: So yeah, but good, thanks for sharing that and I guess what has...what has changed since then in your work? Or in your outlook or in your practice?

klb: Yeah...*<laughs>* oh my god, what hasn’t changed? And then, you know, I’m not doing, like, microbiology right now? *<laughs>*

trw: You’re in the same...

klb: Right

trw: ...the same universe that you were in.

klb: Exactly. They don’t call me for the cure to covid, right? So I am still in the lane, so to speak. But um... it’s interesting right now because we dev—cause literally today we are making a decision about yet another pivot in this current project that we’re working on, which is called “[b]REACH: Adventures in Heterotopia”. So what we did in 2015 with “ECOHYBRIDITY”, we have built on in 2020 with *<audio glitches throughout title>* “[b]REACH: Adventures in Heterotopia”. So actually at the end of “ECOHYBRIDITY“, I started really thinking through this next what we call visual opera. Which is a serialization of shorts and vignettes that come together to create one solid piece and

involves community— like it is community engaged, it's not an individual act, it's not a, you know, an individual genius, it's multiple participants and also both in the making and the thinking and the shaping. So there's a lot of improvisation with it as well as— what was I trying to say? I forgot what I was trying to say— oh, also in terms of medium. So there's multiple mediums right. So this creates this opera, right? This kind of comedy and tragedy of what we are currently and have been working on. This idea of Black geographies, right? So “ECOHYBRIDITY” was looking at Black geographies at a time of climate disaster as well as the dislocation of folks in relationship to, you know, Katrina and other disasters, right? At this point we are continuing that look at Black geographies with “[b]REACH: Adventures in Heterotopia” and now we're thinking about it in relationship to a range of different ideas from climate to... to at this point we're talking about representational democracy, right?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: So we were planning to site or—I don't know what we are [planning] *<laughs>*—so we have been working to site this opera I mean this version, this portion, of the opera where our main character, Prisoner Number 25, runs away to the political circus. And we started siting that in 2018, November 2018, with the idea that we were going to run a slate, we were running a slate of presidents to abolish the presidency along with some other things during this election season. So we're still, you know, trying to do that, but with the pandemic, that has put somewhat of a... it's, you know, it's making us consistently have to pivot because part of the vision was that we were doing a series of stump speeches around the country where we were going to articulate our platform. Which like I said, includes things like 'abolish the presidency' and you know, 'reparations now and forever', and you know, 'laugh at the state'...

<laughter>

klb: ...you know, 'make Black music'. And it's just, you know, a range of like, 'abolish celebrity'

trw: Mmhmm

klb: You know, so we're still canvassing and we're still doing that. There's twenty of us and we're spread out mostly South and East, but now we were planning to site the circus on Election Day, do the final siting on Election Day, November 3 2020, and we were gonna do that in one place called Hush Harbor. And we were starting to raise resources, etc and we have, uh, principles of agreement in terms of like, what does it mean for us to go on this journey to get to Mississippi? Hush Harbor was envisioned in Mississippi. What does it mean for us to go during this time of racist and, you know, pandemics and Trumps and...shit....climate eruption, like...

trw: Yeah...

klb: Should we be moving, you know what I mean? And so we were still willing to do that and still come together at this hush harbor—and hush harbors historically were places where the slaves, runaways, and free people would gather to exchange information and strategize and perform rituals, what have you. So we were doing this kind of contemporary hush harbor. Now, after, you know, your president has clowned to the point where we can't make it more absurd than it actually is...

trw: Mmhmm

klb: You know we feel like it is... I can't fix my mouth to ask people to give any kind of... any kind of vision that we're not taking this seriously. And we had planned to have mask on and do, you know, the six feet piece and all like that, but I just think his cavaliness, this idea of 'don't let covid dominate your life', is so foul and so disrespectful. We also found out yesterday that one of our people's— one of our comrade's— mother died from covid, you know? So taking all of that, and we just found out another friend, uh, who's young has been diagnosed with covid. So we're getting all hit with this stuff this week while the president of these—these United States *<laughs>* is actually completely disrespecting the harm that he is causing for so many people. And we just cannot be anywhere near associated with that disgusting behavior, right? It's absolutely not how we're going to do this. So even though we were already challenging it, you know, making satire of the absurdity of the state, just the act of us coming together in that way is— at this point today, it feels very disrespectful. Even though I think the larger picture, the risk taking, the going-against you know, is the higher calling. But today, it feels disrespectful. And I think that's part of how this work is changing in this moment specifically because we have to be so mindful of the conditions that are constantly changing around us. And making art, again, has to be such an improvisational piece, because you have to be moving with what's happening around you. You can't just say 'oh were going to set this cause we have it'.

trw: Yeah, I haven't heard, I mean you talked about doing satire, Paul described some of your work when we talked as being absurdist... I wonder, like, with having such a, I mean I feel like just from what I've browsed of your work online and talking to you so far you have this kind of, like, jazz approach it seems. Very improvisational, very collaborative...

klb: Yeah

trw: When there's so much... we have such an absurd situation and in some ways, I think, the only thing Donald Trump is really good at is, like, making good television. And like, I do think that that's a talent that is at play in this administration is keeping people reacting to them and kind of having this performative aspect. What does that pivot look... look like for you and what's your balance between putting your vision out...

klb: Mmhmm

trw: ...and reacting to this kind of, like, wall of bad shit that keeps coming at all of us?

klb: <laughs> Right. So I— right now I don't want to say cause I have to talk to the artists about it, but we are envisioning going forward with it, but the way that we're moving— and I'm glad that you read the jazz in it, you know?— so we're making a film with this project. And the ways that we're going, instead of it being a live performance piece that we're focusing on, we're focusing on the filmic version of it. And so that allows us to take—to move slower. So if you think about jazz, I think we're slowing down more now as opposed to speeding up. At one point we were you know, really, like, I was really thinking about what is our grassroots fundraising approach, right? And how are we dealing with mutual aid, etc etc etc. I'm still thinking about that, but now I'm switching over. Maybe we need to be thinking about institutional support now, right? Maybe we need to let our folks hold resources and share resources with each other and have outside sources support our work. You know what I mean? There's a way for all of these pivots to happen that are more in alignment with what we're... what we're looking at. So if Joe Biden gets in, which is probably likely, what does that mean for the left and all the Trump money that we've generated in order to stop this clown?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: Does that just freeze? Cause the problem's done, you know? <laughs>

trw: Yeah...

klb: Cause Biden's the president? Or what happens then, you know what I'm saying? And how are we prepared to deal with those shifts when it's going to be told to us that the only reason this is happening is because of the pandemic and we've got to support people who don't have other resources, all of which are true. So then we get pushed between a rock and hard place, right? Which we already are— between neoliberalism and authoritarianism. But given that we're in... and I might have got a little abstract there, but I think you know, we will see ourselves being forced to make choices with min— with this idea of scarcity. And I think that is really going to call on us to think around abundance on every level. Not just on the policy level, and not just on the institutional level, and not just on a mutual aid level. So what does that look like, symphonically, right? How do you organize that in a way so that we're working in a chord? So that each part is feeding the other part, right? And I think that's what we're gonna... as we're attempting to, like, think through and demonstrate aesthetically right. And you know it— we'll have to explain it. <laughs>

trw: Sure, yeah. So there's a, there's a quote actually, that I pulled from an article, I'm trying to remember where it's from [*Scalawag* magazine] but I have the link, I'll link it below, but by Ra Malika Imhotep and she talks about your work, about being about freedom in like claiming these spaces and engaging spaces. And I think abundance is a word you just used that I would link to how she talks about freedom here. She says, '... Freedom not just as a political goal or an abstract feeling, but as a mode of being in the world. A mode of refusing anti-Blackness, white supremacy, capitalism, transphobia, homophobia and all of the oppressive systems they begat through the reclamation of

space and an insistence on playful conspiracy.’ Um, she also describes you, personally, as having a presence of ‘militant whimsy’. I was just super obsessed with both

<laughter>

trw: ...playful conspiracy and militant whimsy. It’s why, I think, like, artists are so important in the movement because everyone gets so stoic and stressed out and like bound up about how scary things are. But like, how... how do you think— what about your work, what is your aesthetic of bringing freedom and play and abundance into our social justice spaces?

klb: Oh wow, ok. So that’s... that’s great, Ra, thank you. Militant whimsy. I think that’s real. Yeah, and I think you know, I don’t know how to even answer that. I think that we have to constantly look at ourselves as we would look at ourselves in the future. Like if we were to look back at ourselves right now, you know, if we put ourselves fifty years ahead in time and we were to look at our practices in the now, what will we see? Right? Like, what do we learn from how we go about doing our work, right? And I think one of the things that we’ve learned is how much life do we miss when we’re so overwhelmed by the state? And the hardness that the state creates? Like, how much life is happening in between and who’s paying attention to that and who’s cultivating that? Because it is happening! Right? It’s what keeps us together, what makes us laugh, it makes us, like, think, it’s stuff we dream on, it’s where we set our desires. You know, that’s how I came into organizing because I had such a crush on the beauty and the fluidity of the people who were engaged in making change. I thought they were just *big*. And fun. And alive. Those people who looked really somber <laughs> and like ‘uh, uh’...it’s gray! I don’t wanna go to the gray space! <laughs> You know? That—that does not feel good to me. And one of my happiest moments is seeing people smile and laugh. So in my work I like to, even in my painting in everything, I like to add in little jokes and little...I talk a lot of shit, and I constantly am putting that somewhere. And so in a way it’s a way that I am hoping that at some point, I’m engaging people in a conversation and a playfulness that nobody gets but them and/or me, you know what I mean? It’s a dialogue happening, it’s a way I can communicate with people without it having to be so direct, right? So there’s the playfulness. So I guess that you know, even though I might not want it to be, I think that’s what shows up in the work you know? And I think that... Don Cherry like, yeah? You know?

trw: Mmhmm...yeah. So I want to make sure that I hit a couple specific questions that I was asking everyone on that trip, but I also just really briefly would love to loop back. I feel like the last, just since the pandemic, but definitely over the last five years, you’ve been working on abolition related to the prison industrial complex and beyond for, for some time, but I feel like the ideas of abolition regarding policing, regarding jail, the whole kit and caboodle, is really mainstreamed pretty quickly in a way I didn’t expect personally. I’m just curious to hear more, you talked about having an abolitionist aesthetic when we were first talking at the beginning, but what do you think that mainstreaming means and is it encouraging to you? How do you feel about it?

klb: Umm...I don't know. You know, I don't necessarily think there's a mainstream abolitionist analysis, right? I think that there are some ideas in the mainstream that speak to reforming various aspects of the prison industrial complex, but I think in terms of— I think if you bounce each of these things back around, what I would say abolition is actually—and I echo Ruthie Gilmore's idea that abolition is about the end of all ownership, hierarchy and, you know, control. That's what abolition is and so you know, all of the formal institutions that hold those values in place will eventually create cages and structures that limit people's freedom of movement and freedom of thought, right? So you know, there's gotta be, so... so, so even thinking about the system as it exists, with it maybe not having a police, like the police don't have certain equipment or get certain equipment— will not work. This jail gets closed, will not in and of itself, you know, create this abolitionist landscape, right?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: Those are parts of a larger. And so I think as much as the practical or the more... or the more understandable, tangible, aspects of an abolitionist demand are people are rallying around, right? But I think that is great and not far enough and we're not— we still have to push ourselves so much further because it's an ongoing organic process, it doesn't just stop.

<laughter>

klb: You don't just 'get' abolition. Abolition is a life process, right? How do you deal when you yourself are harmed? How do you deal when you harm yourself? There's so much decolonization that goes into constructing abolition. There's, I don't think—I think it's really disrespectful to our movements to assume that the state will produce an abolition in a five or twenty year time frame.

trw: Mmhmm

klb: That's ridiculous and insulting. And it indicates to me that we're not really doing the work. And that we don't want to do the work of decolonizing and deep thinking about what we have constructed and created and what we are constructing and creating for the future, right? Right? So that's where I'm at right now.

trw: All right

klb: *<laughs>* And I think you know granted, like, I also worry about these trends you know?

trw: Yep

klb: And like, what happens when the cop vice president and the... you know, the, whatever he is...

<laughter>

klb: You know, Joe. <laughs>

trw: Old Joe, yeah.

klb: Joe <laughs>, he's just a Joe! What happens when the Joe and the cop become like, the gatekeepers, right? What happens to these demands? And you know, what happens is that the people say, 'oh we didn't really understand it like that'. Because we're not really willing to engage in the kind of *wo—ork*, you know, that it takes to really deconstruct, defund, or get rid of the police right? So I think as a movement, we see this as a challenge and a charge and an opportunity while we're all locked down...

trw: Mmhmm

klb: ...on our blocks and whatnot, holla at your neighbor. Like, and— you know, it's not that people aren't doing that. I think also, what is it that we expect to see in what period of time, right?

trw: Yes

klb: And I don't think there has to be one thing. I think things are happening. I think people have these answers. And how is it, again, that this becomes part of a larger chorus as opposed to a siloed conversation or as opposed to something that is necessarily discordant, right? So how are these just— because frankly, things are shifting and changing. We just need, I think, to keep it... keep pushing ourselves and what is the rhythm that we're moving here? What do we expect to see? And how do we keep moving and not have to keep going backwards and reclaiming and re— and starting again and that feels very much what we've been doing around the question of police violence, right? Justifying like, why a cop should get, like, jail? <laughs> You know? And it's just like, it's a ridiculous, the premise... the premise of it, it's an illogical assumption, right? We're saying, 'oh the police should have...' Whatever, I'm not even gonna....

trw: Yeah, no, I gotcha I think.

<laughs>

trw: Well, I do want to respect your time so, rapid fire, these are the two questions I was asking everyone five years ago that I'm asking as many of them as I can again and they're simple. So what frustrates you the most, right now, and what is giving you hope?

klb: I just... <laughs>

trw: You just kind of, I think, you got into some of it...

klb: I think I answered that! I think we can cut through all of it. I think what, I think it is that. Like how do we use this moment, right?

trw: Mmhmm

<cell phone chimes>

klb: How do we think about this moment in a long term, whatever long term means in this time frame, right? We're likely to be here in 2050, right? So what are our lifestyles going to look like, right? Even if we can't think about what systems are going to change, maybe we can think about some things that will change in our practices, right? How will we meet? Right? How will we...will we continue to do the same type of actions? If so, why? Is that because we're upholding the tradition of organizing or is that because we couldn't come up with nothing else?

<laughter>

klb: Right? I mean, seriously!

trw: Yeah! That's why the show's called Praxis, I'm all about that *<laughs>*

klb: So yeah, so that would be real interesting to me. What visions and alternatives and that's really where my work is *<phone chimes>* that's what we're hoping to see. We're saying, 'look if the empire, if we agree that the empire is genocidal, right? What is an abolitionist response to genocide?' *<phone chimes>* Let's hear from us, right?

trw: Mmhmm

klb: We're calling for more better ideas. Not solutions, just some more better ideas. What do we do with a crumbling empire? Right? And that, to me, is the creative exercise right? Let alone how do we do it? Just what do we do, let's start there, right?

trw: Yeah

klb: Start there. And think wild! Right? It's just an art project. *<phone chimes>*

<laughter>

klb: That's the beauty of making it art.

trw: It is.

klb: Somebody's texting me...

trw: I can hear that

klb: ...something crazy right now. It's my grand baby's second birthday.

trw: Well that's important, you should get to that! Is there anything you want to plug, where can people find you, should I just pull all that together and say it?

klb: Yeah, yeah, that's cool, online is great I guess, the website, you know, yes.

trw: Ok. Thank you so much for your time Kai, it was so nice to talk to you.

klb: You too, Taylor. I look forward to continuing, huh?

trw: Yeah, sounds good to me.

klb: Ok, peace."

trw: Bye"

<music fades in under narration>

TRW: "Again, I'm so glad I got to talk with Kai. Our conversation, both when it happened and when I revisited it to edit and write this episode, helped remind me a few things—that transformative social justice work is supposed to be joyful and creative, and that we don't need a perfect solution, just better ideas. Reflecting on some of her questions—what do we want and how are we trying to achieve it? What works from the past and what should we do away with? These are fundamental questions this show has always been about...so I pulled a couple of interviews from the road which I loved but who couldn't return for this season. The first, Daisy, is a comrade in Portland, who at the time was working with a new worker owned coop there. I thought, though their work has changed and we didn't update, that the spirit of this conversation is super relevant to the question of reimagining our daily lives. So here is that conversation, from July 2015."

Daisy (D): "My name is Daisy Montague and I've, you know, have been in the activist crowd in Portland and in Olympia, but then we moved to Portland and then I got involved with the Industrial Workers of the World. And that was pretty interesting because I always wanted to be part of the IWW and didn't really think that that could exist now. And, well, I was wrong and the IWW did exist here and they did and are still doing some really awesome organizing. I'm no longer part of the IWW, but still really respect what they're founded on and what they historically and currently are doing.

Taylor (T): "And now?"

D: And now in the vein of what the IWW stands for and how they organize in the workplace, we're doing something similar. We started a worker collective and we're—it's pretty awesome cause we own this collective, all of us, and it's amazing because we get to see the fruits of our labor and there's no hierarchy. There's no boss. We all own it

and we all run it democratically and it's a really empowering and amazing experience to do that.

T: That kind of leads in... a lot of people, and myself even included in this, really love the idea of, you know, escaping from capitalism, domination in all forms, and the rest, and a lot of people who are organizers also still have one foot in, you know, the system, are still working for a boss, are still engaged in all of that. How does that, like, economic freedom that that affords you, relate to, I guess, greater struggle beyond that?

D: Yeah, right, I think— and that's super interesting— and I think about this a lot because especially, like, as a small business startup, we're very much beholden and, even when it becomes actually a successful business, we're still very much beholden to the capitalist system. You know, we have and work with— everyone's a capitalist that we work with— but we provide a service. And so, there's a certain sort of freedom in the way that we govern ourselves, because it's democratically. And no one, we don't have to submit to power every single day when we go to work. We don't have, to you know, I want to say... to cuss cause I'm a cusser. <laughs>

T: I can edit it, I don't care.

D: But we don't have to kiss anyone's ass. We don't have to... we don't have to do... we don't have to do and say whatever the boss would like us to say.

T: Mmhmm

D: We don't have to, you know, manipulate ourselves to say the nice things or do exactly what they say, and so that's really, really amazing. When we have an issue, we have to communicate that with our fellow workers and say 'hey, you know... ' and that organically arises, you know? There will always be problems. There will always be something that happens, but we don't have to submit our power every single day in the workplace and have the fear of losing our job because the person in power decides that, you know, they no longer want to deal with us, or that it's economically better for them to get rid of us so that they can continue to exploit our labor in whatever manner or fashion they would like. We're not enriching one person. We are, you know, making a living for ourselves together and that's what's, like, so amazing and powerful. But like I said, I think that we're very much beholden to the capitalist system in many, many ways. And until there's more worker collectives out there and the the rule would be cooperation and how to support each other, then we're going to continue to have to figure out and, unfortunately, appease the capitalist powers in a lot of ways.

T: But I do see it being a useful bridge, kind of.

D: Yes

T: When people... I think it's very overwhelming for people to discover the reality of what we're dealing with and living in and realizing there's names for all the, like, daily

humiliation of the system and all of that. People want to get out. But it's so daunting when it, like, dictates so many aspects of our lives that I feel like there's a lot of people kind of, like, standing on the edge of this thing, like, waiting for— cause we all have to jump at the same time, kind of, in some ways, to leverage our power. But this is one of those ways where...it's a big step out into the newness.

D: Right, yeah. I would add to that that I think not only is it a bridge, it's... it's so imaginative and courageous to to create something like this because a lot of the times I think the left has like tons of criticisms— and you know, like, very much valid, good, critical— that are like, 'hey, the system is super oppressive', 'the system is strangling us, it's killing us', and, you know, 'fuck the system', ok? Yes, absolutely. But like, there has to be... there has to be those people who are creating the system that they want to see.

T: Mmhmm

D: You know, the new world that they want to see. And that's what the IWW says, they say, you know, 'creating the new world in the shell of the old.' So what is that, you know? And this is... this is one of the things that, like, if we are to work, which is fine, I think, but it has to be rooted in, you know, cooperation and love and compassion and not enriching someone on the top of this hierarchal system that is exploiting other peoples' labor and lives for the enrichment of themselves. So that's— not only are we dismantling that, we're also saying, 'this is what we'd like to see'. And I think that that's super powerful.

T: I don't think you can go back from experiencing an actually democratic— small d democratic— like, direct democratic participation in a workplace or in a home even or... I think it ruins your taste for accepting less than that.

D: Right

T: And that's really hopeful, right? To like, see that for people. And just the notion, just the confidence that it would build for people, because that's a huge part of the problem is that people don't have belief in themselves a lot of the time. People don't think they can do something like that...

D: Right

T: ...let alone, like...

D: And why would you, right?

T: Yeah.

D: There's the system currently right now that we operate under and we unfortunately just barely survive, but the system that exists now is just pushing us down and is designed for us to fail.

T: Mmhmm

D: There's no two ways about that. So when you have an alternative to it, and a well thought out one, too, *<sound of a kid yelling in background>* it's an opportunity, it's a chance, it's hope, you know? It's a lot of things. And people, if it's well thought out, people can plug in and say, 'oh wow I haven't even thought of these things before'.

T: Hmm

D: It's really powerful. I think something that's really hopeful is that, you know, that... that there's a lot of people who are putting their efforts of organizing in solidarity with... with one another to make, to create a better world and, like, I have hope for that. I have lots of hope that that can happen. But I would say that the only way that I'm gonna have hope is, like, if people are loving and compassionate. That's super, super important because I think that a lot of people are so ego-driven in this country. They're all about, like, 'I'm so...', you know, like, 'what about me? what about me? what about me?'. That also creates a lot of suffering, too. But if we can get over ourselves and work together and if we're gonna be organizing, we have to be over ourselves, we have to be loving and compassionate and, you know, work on ourselves, take care of ourselves. And then also, like, look at how this world is affecting everyone and if that was actually happening, *shhh*, we'd be in a way better place. Yeah, so that's like, if there's gonna be any sort of organizing, it has to be rooted in love and compassion. I'm an anarchist, so I believe that, you know, there can't be these hierarchies. I think that... that really, when we have these in place and that's how people think— of like, going up the ladder— that creates all of these oppressions that we see all the time, daily, in our interactions in the structures that are there. So if we can root that out and we can look horizontally at one another and in a way of cooperation, where people are taking and building and creating relationships with one another, that's going to be a really beautiful place for all of us. So let's get rid of the hierarchal system that is designed for us to fail and put our efforts into working on a horizontal world, where we cooperate and love each other.”

T: Word”

<laughter>

<music fades in under narration>

TRW: “That was a short snip of the conversation I had with Daisy back in 2015. I want to close out the show staying on this train of alternatives and robust work around reimagining and creating the new in the shell of the old, while returning to the realm of artistic expression. In Denver, I got to meet Stephen and Jamie, aka Brer Rabbit and Jonny 5, who together have performed as Flobots for the last two decades. In 2015, they were launching a project called No Enemies, working to bring songs back into social movements, experimenting with how an old tool might be updated for a new moment and used to question organizing dogma. Here is that interview with them.”

<music fades out as interview starts>

Stephen Brackett (SB): “I’m Stephen Brackett. My rapper name is Brer Rabbit and I’m one of the emcees of Flobots. I think if I were to encapsulate... I’m just really taken with a Freirean change model. I’m just really passionate about different ways of introducing education and allowing for agency shift. And our main mode is through the arts.

Jamie Laurie (JL): “My name is Jamie, AKA Jonny 5, and I got where I am by rapping.

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): “Nice. And do you kind of... that same approach, you want to use it as a tool, as well as making art?”

JL: No, I’m about making money.

<laughter>

JL: I mean as a tool...

TRW: To make money...

JL: ...as a tool for the kids. We see music as a tool for social change, and as a fun tool for social change. It brings people together and any time you have people together, you have power. But what we are is a place where people can come, like multi-issue, across the movement, and share songs and share, like, our spirit a little bit. And I think that is pretty welcome and that brings us, then, in and we’re creating community for all these different movements.

SB: And trying to create kind of an undergirding for— there’s no lack of intellectual rigor in conversation and dialogue happening in movement. There’s not much emotional and there’s not much spiritual. And we do not claim to know how to do that, but we find that that’s where the arts live. And it’s not just music that needs to be integrated, it’s the visual arts and all of these other... And that’s what we’re trying to do more and more in No Enemies is doing this open call cause it’s...it’s food. It’s the stuff that can help keep us going. One of our mentors, Dr. Vincent Harding, an incredible civil rights movement leader, expert, he wrote speeches for Dr. King. Wrote, was it ‘Beyond Vietnam’?

JL: Yeah

SB: He wrote ‘Beyond Vietnam’ by Martin Luther King Jr.

TRW: You’re in good company, then.

SB: Well, he... he passed last year, but one of the things he would do whenever we were having our meetings, like, we were doing trainings and different things like that with young folk, he would ask us, ‘where are the songs?’. And he wasn’t asking from an aesthetic basis he was like, ‘no, I’ve witnessed this firsthand, the songs are an essential

part of bringing disparate situations: anger, pain, together for a moment'. Together for a period of time, willingly. And then being able to come to some just place of commonality. Like despite all of these differences. When you ask the question, 'what do you want this to be?', a lot of people don't ask that before they tell people to volunteer their time to come out. It's this unfocused wave as opposed to a focused, defined show of power and that's what nonviolent action needs. It still needs to be a show of force. But without certain types of underpinnings and focusing, it ends up being very... everybody comes with their own issue, or their own take. And then, like, what ends up being the easiest. Some of the chants are very easy to say. And a lot of actions I've been to, they have three.

TRW: Mmhmm

SB: There's nothing wrong with chants. But then there's like— songs of power are also very easy to learn and very easy to say and they give it another color, another flavor. So we're also, like, trying to bring a bit of tactical thinking to— a very quick tactical thinking — to many of these actions. Just like, what do you want?

JL: Justice!

<laughter>

SB: Yes

JL and TRW in unison: When do we want it? Now!

<laughter>

SB: Sometime? If we keep on doing it this way? Never.

TRW: Yeah, there's so much superstition that, like, 'oh, our moral superiority will somehow vaguely lead us to win', that's...yeah...

SB: But that's the amazing thing, like, something that we found in our process is there is so much social science, there's actually some hard science, into nonviolent actions that nobody's drawing from. But there are best practices for all of these things and we've been in many circles and done many marches where we weren't able to access any of them. It's been recently through a group called Momentum that we've been getting some actual training and access to these materials that [are] like, out there, that they're now using in presidential campaigns, but that first came from nonviolent actions. But it's just... it's another thing that needs to be... I think songs are a great way to kind of gently bring that kind of thinking back into it. And I think that's why it's also... we haven't felt much resistance either. And it's not like we're coming in like, No Enemies is not the sort of organization that has its own agenda. We're actually trying to make ourselves available to reintroduce this tool to activist culture. And the thing has been largely an experiment and it's been really amazing seeing both the local response and even

national responses and invitations that we're getting to like try and train and bring song leaders back to organizations. But yeah, yeah, it's tactical.

JL: And I would say, like, the first— there's several first steps— one is look around in your area for something. We encounter so many people who are doing a similar thing in other cities.

SB: Cause it's time, that's one thing, it's just time. People are looking for this again.

JL: Yep. The other thing is it's a lens, it's a question. And the question is, 'what are songs that a group of people can sing together?', and all together in public and share, you know, share collectively. And that's it. So listen to songs on the radio, any song you're listening to, and think, 'huh, what's the part of this that might really resonate?'. 'What's the part of this I can change the words around and we can all sing it and it can be powerful?'

TRW: Mmm

JL: If you're somebody who's already going out to demonstrations and rallies, just apply that lens when you're trying to figure out what to do at the rally. Cause you... it's not that hard to write new material to go sing together.

SB: And like, some of it we've been... we've been looking at how songs in the past were made and the Southern Freedom movement is so mythologized, but then when you actually look at, mechanically, most of those songs from the Southern Freedom movement came from old spirituals. And the reason they came from spirituals is not because the songs were great, as a matter of fact, those songs were really old to most of the people. But they were songs that everybody knew the melody. So when you change, like, like, "Hands on the Plow" to "Eyes on the Prize", people are like, 'oh, ok'. They can just switch the words cause they knew the melody. You can do the same thing with Taylor Swift songs.

<laughter>

SB: You can make it about the Keystone, right? Then all the sudden—the Keystone pipeline—then all of the sudden you have a group of people that are able to, like, kind of co-opt pop culture and sing the song powerfully. And so it's... it's so different than trying to write a song that you're trying to get a Grammy for. Like, it can be quick. And you just take the chorus of it, switch it around, boom. There you go.

JL (singing): <to the tune of Meghan Trainor's "All About That Bass"> Because it's all about that change, climate change, no pipeline. It's all about that change, climate change,

SB (joins in): no pipeline.

<laughter>

JL: That is not Taylor Swift...

TRW: Sure.

JL: ...but it is a song we sing.

TRW: Yeah.

SB: And sometimes, like, the other thing is, it's like, sometimes it's more valuable to have something to sing together than like, necessarily being, like, the most beautiful thing.

TRW: Sure.

SB: Cause if you start practicing it, then it just opens up once that question's asked. Like, everything around you starts becoming an opportunity to like, 'oh we could change this'.

TRW: And then you create that comfort, too, and somebody's like, 'hey, I've got an idea for a verse', like. And then all the sudden you're having, like...

JL: Yeah

TRW: ...it's collaborative all the sudden.

JL: So just start doing it, that's the main thing.

SB: Yeah.

JL: Just start doing it, cause it's not a complicated thing. You don't need to be an expert to start doing it and we'll all get better at it.

SB: And you don't need to sing well, that's one of the big things.

JL: Right, that's part of the problem is that people think, 'oh, I'm not a singer'. Well, that's the whole point, like...

TRW: If you're a talker, you are. Like, if you can talk, you can sing. Straight up.

SB: Mmhmm

JL: Exactly.

TRW: And if you can't, then drum, or do something. Like... I mean, no, and I don't mean it like, disparagingly to drummers...

<laughter>

TRW: ...I mean people who do not have the ability to speak can still be part of it.

JL: If you can't talk, you can drum.

TRW: Yeah.

JL: This is a song that a friend of ours wrote. It's the first few lines of a longer piece, but when we were thinking about the police killings and trying to imagine how you could take that anger and put it into a song rather than just wanting to break something— which seems like a much more like normal response to that level of rage— this song came to mind as, you know, a possibility or a beginning. And it goes like this. These are her words obviously. It goes *<singing>* I am a sleeping giant / there lives a riot in my bones...

SB joins in: I am a sleeping giant *<clap>* / there lives a *<clap>* riot in my *<clap>* bones...

TRW joins in: I am a sleeping giant *<clap>* / there lives a *<clap>* riot in my *<clap>* bones...

JL: One more time

All three: I am a sleeping giant *<clap>* / there lives a *<clap>* riot in my *<clap>* bones...

JL: So that's one example.

TRW: That was easy.

JL: Easy, right.

TRW: It's beautiful, too. That's... then you can just imagine 20,000 people like that.
<snaps fingers>

JL and SB: Yeah

TRW: You don't have to imagine... I mean in this case, like, it's not outside the realm of imagination right now

JL: Right, but it's all about seeding a culture and the more, the more people know it, the easier it is for all of us to sing it, but also the more people who are ready to sing, even if they don't know it, they can jump in. So if we see ourselves as singers... if you see

yourself as a singer, you listeners, then the next time you show up at a rally and someone else tries to lead a song, you'll be ready.”

TRW: Mmhmm don't be shy, nobody cares...

SB: No!

TRW: That's the other thing that I try to explain to people. You know, nobody watching you, nobody sitting there in judgment like...”

SB: The other thing is, I feel like once we get our demonstrations back to practices of power, then they will be powerful. And this is one of the ways to kind of get out of ourselves and the different ways that we're self-policing so we can resonate and be powerful.”

<music fades in as interview fades out under narration>

TRW: “It's obviously a little bittersweet to share all of these conversations in the ongoing context of a pandemic. Thinking about going to large demonstrations or about smaller gatherings to sing and plan actions, thinking about how amazing the full plan of stump speeches and performances Kai and the team working on “[b]REACH” would have been in person, in the streets, and thinking about all of the worker coops, projects, and groups that have been pinched more than usual under these conditions. At the same time, all of these conversations are about imagining something better and starting to build it anyway. So I hope you enjoyed them. Thank you to Kai, Daisy, Stephen and Jamie for your time and work, and to all of you for listening. You can find links to things we mentioned below and you can find past episodes, transcripts and all the rest at praxis radio dot com thats p-r-a-x-i-s-r-a-d-i-o. I'll be back next week.”

<music fades out>

END