

# BNPower:

## BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

*A set of multimedia tools that explore why some ideas take root while others disappear.*

### BEYOND STORY PODCAST: Adventures in Narrative Power Show Notes & Transcript

#### EPISODE 1: Classrooms, Concrete, and Canvases: Disrupting Dominant Narratives

- PART I: Jesse Hagopian, Rethinking Schools <https://rethinkingschools.org/> and the Zinn Education Project, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/> and Deborah Menkart, Teaching for Change <https://www.teachingforchange.org/>
- PART II: Kenneth Bailey, [Design Studio 4 Social Intervention](#) and Christopher Cozier, [Caribbean anti-colonial and liberatory artist](#) (start 30:48)

#### TRANSCRIPT PART I:

Makani Themba:

Why do some ideas take root and become prevailing wisdom while others trend a minute and seem to disappear? The reason, we're told, is that ideas that stick are more compelling and easier to grasp than the ones that don't. Umm, but that's not quite true.

[bell rings]

I'm Makani Themba. An organizer, change communication strategist, and black women trying to get free. I've learned that what distinguishes ideas that root and stay with us, good or bad, is the structural and cultural power behind them. It's not about powerful narratives. Though they help. It's about out narrative power. This power is all around us, in our heads...

[singer]

One two three four five six seven eight nine

Makani:

And hearts.

[gospel song]

Makani:

It shapes what we think is true.

The power to define what's true, to determine the story of the past and institutionalize ideas so they replicate, this is narrative power.

[clip]

How Christopher Columbus discovered America.

Makani:

What's fact. What's right. Narrative power determines the story of the past and roots and reproduces ideas over time. It's way beyond story. Join us. As we stretch our understanding of what it means to build narrative power and explore ways to transform the institutions that shape how we, all of us, make sense of the world.

Makani:

Hip hop, phenom Digable Planets once wrapped time and space is fake and that's the real haps. And yes, in quantum physics time and space is not what it seems, but there are other forces that shape our perceptions of time and space, including systems of oppression and privilege. School, culture, and other institutions that root and reproduce narrative often work to alter our understanding of the past, present and even the future. Ideas about fake news speak to the battle over our perceptions of the present. Fights over what's taught in school. What books are read or not, are just a few of the heated battles in the war to control the story of the past. Today, we're hanging out with Deborah Menkart and Jesse Hagopian who have been on the front lines of this fight for decades. Deborah Menkart is Executive Director at Teaching for Change an organization that provides teachers and parents with the tools to create schools where students learn to read, write and change the world.

Makani:

Her experiences as an activist, laborer and firstborn of European immigrants brought home the critical importance of changing K through 12 education as an essential strategy for achieving social justice. She's been at this work since 1989. Jesse Hagopian teaches high school ethnic studies in English language arts in Seattle. Jesse is an editor for Rethinking Schools Magazine, Director of the Black Education Matter Student Activist Award. He's also editor and co-editor of several books, including *Black Lives Matter at School* <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/publications.html> and *Uprising for Educational Justice* <https://www.amazon.com/Black-Lives-Matter-at-School/dp/1642592706> . He also plays a lead role at the Zinn Education Project's Teach The Black Freedom Struggle Campaign <https://www.zinnedproject.org/campaigns/teach-black-freedom-struggle/> . So welcome. So I was wondering if you guys would each take a minute, so folks can know exactly what you do and who you are.

Jesse Hagopian:

So I work for the Zinn Education Project <https://www.zinnedproject.org/>, which is a collaboration between Teaching for Change and Rethinking Schools where I serve as an editor and the Zinn Education Project has really become a leading resource for social justice teaching for educators all across the country. It's been organizing over 10 years and it has introduced students to really a more complex and accurate and engaging understanding of history than you'll find in the corporate textbooks in most classrooms. And there are over 130,000 people who are registered at the Zinn Education Project website. And it's just been incredible to see some 10,000 teachers every year, newly signing up on our website. And so many educators turn to us because they are sick of the whitewashed history that they find in the textbooks that is just lying to kids or hiding things from them. And, you know, I think the textbooks at their best are really like a mind-numbing version of trivial pursuit, where students get introduced to endless strings of facts and names and dates.

Jesse Hagopian:

But we really take our inspiration for how to study history from the great historian Howard Zinn who believed in a people's history approach that looks at history from those who have been left out. And then we combine that with teaching activities that promote inquiry and critical thinking and active engagement with students, right. And so, you know, the textbooks make it seem as if all history is just a march of great white men with big ideas that changed the world. And we're interested in having students engage with the ideas of people who have largely have been left out, right, so we flipped the script with a people's history. We look at it from the standpoint of workers instead of owners and CEOs. We look at wars, not from the perspective of the generals, but from those who have been injured and hurt, and soldiers who had to fight

in it. And we look at it from the perspective of those who have been invaded, not just those who have launched the war. And I think by doing this, we can more fully understand our society and more accurately teach history.

Makani:

Thank you for that. That's awesome. So Deborah, tell us a little bit about Teaching for Change and your organization's part of the collaboration.

Deborah Menkart:

Sure. So the Teaching for Change and actually both Teaching for Change and Rethinking Schools have been around for more than 30 years and we've collaborated over time on various projects. We worked, Teaching for Change, helped host workshops on rethinking Columbus when Rethinking Schools published that sort of pivotal narrative changing book for the classroom. At the time of the quincentenary. And so we were approached about 15 years ago now by, almost 15 years ago, by a former student of Howard Zinn, who had wanted to make sure that young people had the same sort of experience that he had with it, but got to have it before they went to college, got to really rethink things when they were in school. And he wanted to give out copies of Howard Zinn's [People's History](#). And he got in touch with Howard and Howard said, well, you should reach out to Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change.

Deborah Menkart:

And we met with this former student and said that really what people need are not just a copy of a book. You don't want them to replace just even as much as we all love in People's History of the United States, replacing one book with the textbook just leaves young people with the thoughts that, you know, all knowledge comes from one source. And so we argued for placing lessons online that teachers could download for free to teach outside the textbook as Jesse explained. And so that's really, the collaboration has largely been Rethinking Schools, providing a lot of the articles and most of the lessons, and then on the Teaching for Change, we have developed the website and do a lot of the logistics and collaboratively over this past couple of years, it's grown from this network of teachers who download lessons to now creating opportunities for them to get together, to learn together.

Deborah Menkart:

So just about a year ago, now we launched these Teaching for Black Lives study groups based on a book that we Thinking Schools published and that Jesse co-edited and we piloted last year with 30 study groups. And this year we have just alerted a hundred groups that they have been selected. Sort of following the rebellion of last year so many teachers realize that they needed to be thinking differently about instruction, that it wasn't just about diversity. It was really about anti-racism and looking deeply and critically at the structures in this society. There is no way that one group could provide all the professional development for all the teachers who were ready to relearn what they had learned in school. And so we came up with this idea of supporting study groups and it's been really, really powerful. We're also working on a report on teaching about reconstruction that will be releasing this fall, and then collaboratively with historian and author [unintelligible] Harris, we've launched online historians classes again, so that teachers have an opportunity to rethink what they've learned in school and then to bring that knowledge to young people.

Deborah Menkart:

And that I think is what has contributed to the recent attacks that we've seen starting with last, I think was it September that number 45 held a conference at the White House and was really attacking any groups that were trying to teach history honestly, including the Zinn Education Project. And then the GOP has carried that on the spring with bills across the country trying to ban the teaching of history. They say that it's against CRT, but none of the bills actually mentioned CRT. It's really a banning of teaching any history outside of the textbook. That's informed by issues of race, class, power, all the work that teachers are trying to do now.

Makani:

That is the thing, right. I live in Mississippi where one of the first of those bills were, you know, sort of surface. And it's ironic in some ways, because if folks knew more about reconstruction, they'd actually that during that time, Mississippi had the most radical, most progressive constitution in the country. In that story one of my mentors and folks that I love very much, Peggy Cooper Davis wrote this amazing book called *Neglected Stories*, and she has been arguing for many decades that when you talk about framer theory for the constitution, you have to talk about reconstruction framers, not, you know, Jefferson and all those folks, because that's the actual constitution that we should be, you know, thinking about what they thought. So this is really powerful and really important and also a lot of fight back, right?

Makani:

There's this huge battle over the past, you know, because you think about, well, what kind of kids go to kindergarten, learn about social justice for 12 years, and what kind of beings do you know, get produced on the other end, which is so powerful. It feels like such the biggest part of the game. You know, people talk about narrow change, but they were always just talking about messaging, which is, well, I can't say the word that I think about that, at least on this podcast, but why do you think there's not more progressive folks in there supporting this, taking over schools as sites of struggle and work, you know, not just teachers, but all of us.

Jesse Hagopian:

Well, I think you're right that the right wing has paid much more attention to what students are learning. And I think that's a real shame. Republicans and the right wing have a sophisticated strategy for local school board elections. And they're trying to get people elected who will ban any kind of anti-racist teaching in the classrooms. They've been very concerned about what's in textbooks and making sure that the narrative of American exceptionalism is woven throughout all the major textbooks. And I think part of the problem is that too many left-leaning folks only will go as far as what establishment Democrats will accept. And those folks aren't actually interested in the kind of transformational change that we need in our schools. That our students need to have decent lives and ultimately a school system that's based upon empowering students, empowering students who have been marginalized, right. Giving voice to Black and Brown and queer and undocumented students and beyond could be a very big problem, not only for Republicans, but for anybody who is invested in maintaining the status quo.

Jesse Hagopian:

And so I think that that scares establishment liberals as well, and has made it difficult for us to build a broad based approach to transforming education, to make it about this transformation of society that we need. And I think what students are being taught is so critical because I've seen a lot of the students in my classroom that came out of the ethnic studies curriculum that I was using many of the lessons at the Zinn Education Project that I used as well. I saw them become leaders in the Movement for Black Lives, for example, or movements for education funding. And part of that was because of the way they were raised and their links to the Black freedom struggle and their own family. Part of it was what they learned on their own, looking at society and having experienced police brutality themselves, having experienced underfunded schools themselves. And part of it was what we learned in the classroom about the long history of structural racism in this country and the long history of resistance to that oppression that gave them confidence that they could be part of movements to organize for social justice today.

Deborah Menkart:

And too, I was thinking about how this happened, that the right became so much, you know, as, as Jesse noted, just sort of savvy and organized about the impact of K through 12, and one thought is that it actually hasn't always been the case. And that it's part of what got repressed with the brutal attack on reconstruction, which one thing that came up in the study that we're gonna release, through the report that we're gonna release this fall, is that it still gets characterized by school districts as the failure, the successes and failures. Rather than the successes in brutal white supremacists, violent attacks. But one thing that got attacked was the advances being made by largely Black legislators, arguing for the need for

public schools and public schools as being part of that fight for liberation and to rethink, to understand history and to shape a better future.

Deborah Menkart:

And then in many ways the same thing happened again with Brown v Board. Jesse has behind him a copy of the book *Fugitive Pedagogy*, which looks at the role of Black educators after that repression of reconstruction of continuing to teach the truth, but having to do it as a fugitive effort. And so I think every time there have been efforts and largely by Black educators to teach outside the textbook as a part of a social movement it's been repressed. And that's where I think we're seeing currently these attacks, because more recently they've been able to control what young people learn by saying, okay, we're gonna diversify the curriculum, but it's still a very controlled narrative. As you know, one of the things that Teaching for Change, we have published a book called *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching and working with the SNCC veterans*.

Deborah Menkart:

They've pointed out that the dominant narrative is they let you learn about the civil rights movement, but it's individual heroes. It's the good north and the bad south, and very little about the role of young people and women. And so I think what the right realizes now is that as more teachers are committed to teaching outside the textbook, when they saw the rebellion last summer and white people participating, they realized that they're no longer able to control the narrative in the way they had. And that's why we're seeing the repression again. We hope progressives listening to your podcast, join teachers, join students. There are students, I think what was it Jesse, yesterday or this week in York, Pennsylvania walking out and demanding that they deserve to learn the truth. So I think we do hope people stand by teachers and students in the struggle. It's McCarthyism writ large out there. The teachers who literally just signed the pledge just to teach the truth, which is basically their job are getting threatening for phone calls, getting calls saying that they should be fired, getting anonymous threats. And some of them are, in districts where they're isolated are quite scared.

Makani:

Absolutely. This history is so important. And so real. And again, as you said, it's not just about the south, cuz a lot of times people say, oh, you know, that's Mississippi, whatever, whatever, or, you know, or of course the classic Mississippi. But I grew up in New York. I was a kid who integrated the school in New York and had rocks thrown at me on my way into school. You know, and just like every single day. So I think that deconstructing and really disturbing the narrative around like the north, the south who is right. All of those things, that's part of what happens, right, when we have education that literally—education that tells the truth, that draws out the best of kids, it's not just about in facts or even better facts. But what I'm struck by both in Zinn Education Project Teaching for Change, that it's not just about changing the information, but it's also about changing the methodology, changing the pedagogy, changing the relationships between us as a society and community and schools. So I'm just curious if you could just say a little bit about this vision, what are you organizing for?

Jesse Hagopian:

Well, I think we wanna organize for a whole different society where the people who are out of power get to have democratic control over their lives and the resources that they produce. And we know that young people have always been leaders in the struggles for social justice. And we want to reveal that history to the young people of today who are taking the streets and demanding change. I mean the uprising of 2020 was described by the Washington Post as the broadest uprising in US history, and many of those demonstrations and teach-ins and organizing meetings, were all organized by young people. Some of my students and the students of many teachers across the country, helped to lead this rebellion and we wanna be there to support them in those efforts. You know, there's been all this talk about learning loss during the time of COVID right.

Jesse Hagopian:

And it's another deficit model that's attached to usually Black and Brown students saying that they're hopelessly behind white students. And they haven't learned what they need to and of course in a time as

difficult as we're living through, there's gonna be challenges and things that they might not attend to in school the way they would've before. But this deficit narrative just crumbles under any kind of broader analysis of our society. When you look at the fact that students not only learned about structural racism, but became the nation's greatest educators in teaching the entire country, what it was teaching us about police violence, about unequal distribution of resources, and then teaching us the power of solidarity in linking arms together and building a mass social movement that could call for redirecting funds from police departments to healthcare programs and education programs and social services. And I think we see education as a vehicle to help advance liberation for all oppressed people.

Deborah Menkart:

I think I would go back to one thing that you mentioned about the pedagogy. And so Bill Bigelow with Rethinking Schools wrote a piece on people's pedagogy that we have at the Zinn Education Project site and argues that it's not just about learning people's history, but also that young people do that through what we would consider people's pedagogy, that they step into the history that they realized that it wasn't just inevitable, that at each spot, each time there were choices, a lesson that Bill Bigelow wrote on the US constitution, young people step into the roles of the people who were not invited to be writers and see what kind of constitution they would've written. And there was a teacher in Durham, Tracy Barrett, whose students, I remember she tweeted afterwards were saying, you know, what was up with those founders? Like what they wrote was pretty useless compared to the constitution they drafted in her high school class in Durham.

Deborah Menkart:

So they realize that depending on who's at the table impacts how history is written and they also become more critical thinkers and questioners. All along the way they're asked why didn't you learn this before? Or why was this decision made? So that they learn the history. For example, with the Vietnam war who benefited, who lost. Central America, what's the history there. If we had generations of young people, who'd been learning that history, there would've been a lot more people demanding that their Congress people vote the same way Congresswoman Barbara Lee did. That she wouldn't have been standing alone. It wouldn't have even depended on the politicians. The electorate would be saying, we've seen this before. We know what this looks like. We know who's gonna benefit. Who's gonna lose. But when people don't know the history, they don't know how to hold their elected leaders or the media accountable. And we also have a focus around climate change as well. In the same way as reconstruction, climate change is also large left out of the curriculum and we're seeing the results of that. So I would just add that it's the pedagogy, not just the content that we emphasize.

Jesse Hagopian:

Yeah. And I would just add that it's incredible that thousands of classrooms are engaging their kids in these interactive lessons, role plays, mixer activities that bring this history to life. For literally millions of students across the country. And then we couple that pedagogy, that social justice pedagogy with organizing, right. And so we're not just teaching kids about the struggles of the past. We're also organizing the struggles of the present and the Zinn Education Project helped launch the hashtag #teachtruth campaign to push back against these GOP bills that would ban the teaching of structural racism. And it was incredible to see the outpouring of parents, students, and educators across the country on June 12th, who built rallies in city of after city to demand the repealing of these bills. And to declare that they're gonna teach the truth about structural racism and sexism and heterosexism, regardless of what the laws say in these states.

Jesse Hagopian:

And then we saw even more people participate in a weekend of action that was co-sponsored with Black Lives Matter at school and the African American policy forum, August 27th through the 29th and over 115 different locations across the country. People built this teach truth movement. They did things like do a book swap so that they could share books that are often left out of the curriculum. They picked historic sites that have something to say about structural racism or the Black freedom struggle and taught about their own neighborhoods and how they relate to the struggle. It's been incredible to see this movement grow across the country and to be part of it.

Deborah Menkart:

It's because there are teachers throughout the country taking this stand that we see these bills, you know, sometimes when people shake their head and say, Mississippi, well, no one will be trying to pass—And I think there it was initially a budget resolution or budget. And then it was a bill; that no one would be trying to do that if there weren't teachers teaching this history. And so sometimes we hear scholars, even people on the left saying, well, no, one's teaching this and that's writing off the teachers around the country who are, and who really need us to stand and provide support. And so every time we see an act of repression that we know that that is in response to really organized resistance and that includes many teachers that are using Zinn Education Project resources in Mississippi and throughout the country.

Makani:

Well, that is actually what I wanted to get into a little bit next as we close. And that is, I mean, obviously solidarity is really important, right. To support our folks on the front lines. And sometimes folks don't actually know what's happening. So I was just curious if you guys could just take a few minutes to, well, is there a hashtag or hashtags we should be following? Are there spots we should be hanging out with on social media and elsewhere so that we can show up and be a part of it? Because I always say, how, how is the revolutionary question always. Whenever you have a handle for show up. So I'm like, what's the handles fam, what you got?

Jesse Hagopian:

Right on. Well, we have a lot of different ways that people can engage in this work of advancing the movement for racial and social and educational justice. And one of the things we've done as Deborah mentioned, was launch the Teaching the Black Freedom Struggle campaign. It includes the online classes once a month, that can help educators relearn the history from the perspective of the Black freedom struggle. And we also have the study groups for the book that I co-edited Teaching for Black Lives. So those are great resources and ways to meet other educators around the country and learn more about this history. I think in addition to that, people should get involved in the movement and the struggle, and we have a big national day of action coming up. That's sponsored by Black Lives Matter at School organization that I am on the steering committee of, and Black Lives Matter at School has called for October 14th, George Floyd's birthday to be a national day to teach about structural of racism. And we have a growing number of endorsers and organizations around the country who are supporting this. We're gonna need your support because there's educators in states where bills have passed banning the teaching of structural racism who will be engaged in teaching on that day that could trigger some really vicious right wing backlash, and they're gonna need our support in solidarity. And so I hope everyone will go to <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/> and click on the link about our year of purpose, where you can learn about how to participate in the October 14th national day of action.

Deborah Menkart:

Yep. And I would echo all that. And also just add that following the #teachtruth hashtag following @ZinnEdProject on Twitter and Instagram. I also recommend whether you're a teacher or not subscribing to the Rethinking Schools Magazine, cuz there's so many stories that show that this work is going on and ways you can learn to support it. And also following Social Justice Books, that's hosted by Teaching for Change and anyone, whether you're a teacher parent or not can go to your local library and ask what books do you have in stock? Let's take a look at what narrative you're telling about the civil rights movement. Do you have any children's books about reconstruction? Do you have any children's books about the Black Lives Matter movement? So going to bookstores, going to libraries and asking those questions and following Social Justice Books would be a way to learn what titles to recommend or not. So those are some suggestions and then Black Lives Matter at School also has a week of action in February, which is growing across the country and is a great way for people again, whether teachers or not to participate.

Makani:

Wow, thank you for that. Those are awesome handles. We'll also make sure to collect them and have links on the website so people can get down. This is the work, right here fam. This is the work. Deborah

knows I've had so much love over the years and I hope that anybody who thinks that they're about building narrative power understands you are not doing it, if you are not connected with what's happening in schools, you're just not doing it. So thank you both Deborah Menkart, Jesse Hagopian for your work y'all are everything I so appreciate you and thank you for your time today.

## TRANSCRIPT PART II (start 30:48)

Makani:

Of course the classroom isn't the only place where we're working to disrupt dominant narratives. I'm talking with Kenneth Bailey and Christopher Cozier, two brilliant culture warriors working in different ways to trouble our assumptions and how we make sense of the world. Christopher Cozier was born, lives and works in Trinidad. His work as an artist, writer and curator aims to explore and disrupt conventional readings of the Caribbean. He investigates the problematic space of post-independence in symbols of power which remain in shape narratives of development, right. Commercial expansion and profitability. And my homey, Kenneth Bailey is the co-founder and beautiful wizard of Design Studio for Social Intervention, DS4SI is situated at the intersections of design thinking and practice, social justice and activism, public art, social practice, and civic popular engagement. They design and test social interventions with, and on behalf, of marginalized populations. So I'm really excited that you all are here today.

Makani:

I mean, both of you are kind of like space pioneers, right? Disturbing space, disrupting space, reinterpreting, and bending space to get people to think and rethink what they think they know and believe. So I'm gonna start off with you K B. One of the things I love about DS4SI work was the Public Kitchen project that you all call a productive fiction, right. To create these beautiful generative spaces where folk got to not only cook and build community together, but they got to interrogate the narrative around the public and what it means. I'd love if we could just jump into that for a minute and just talk a little bit about that. And why did you think that was important?

Kenneth Bailey:

So with the project Public Kitchen, we posed the question: If kitchens were public and ubiquitous in public and urban space, the ways in which schools or libraries or parks are ubiquitous in cities and public space, how might they change social life? If we had public kitchens we could attend the way we can attend libraries, the way we get to attend community centers, the way in which we get to attend parks. And in it, we were really trying to gesture towards reimagining, or continuing to say, that public life and our social lives can continue to be imagined that we get to create other opportunities for conviviality and sociability that should be paid for and part of our tax structure, our public infrastructure, and should be supported by our cities. And that those kinds of spaces could create opportunities that make our lives more sustained and nourishing literally, but also more nourishing socially and more nourishing in terms of how we connect with each other.

Kenneth Bailey:

So most of the time, when we think about publics and public life, or when we think about things being public, we tend to juxtapose them to better things with our private. So one wouldn't want a public kitchen, if one could have a private one. Or one wouldn't want a public hospital if one could have a private one. And part of what we were trying to do there is to really interrogate this idea of privatization of everything and all of our lives to say, we can naturally have better lives that are public lives and have the kinds of aesthetic qualities that we tend to attribute to private things. So we can look at that through the lens of public housing, we tend to, in the United States think that public housing is by its name, less desirable than private housing, but that was a design decision.



Kenneth Bailey:

We could have forms of public housing and forms of public life that are more desirable than private life. If we made those kinds of decisions and put the resources and infrastructure behind them. So what we were really trying to do with this as a productive fiction, as a place, was to embody a story of what publics could be like if invested in in the right way. And really to challenge the ways in which we divide ourselves across ideas of who's in need and who isn't. And what does it mean to be in need? And the really challenge that a lot of what we experience as need is really arrangements that precede us, that put us in the conditions of need, and that if we can move one layer up and create new arrangements, like public kitchen, that function as ways for us to rearrange how we are with the each other and rearrange our relationships to things like food, things like access to pots and pans, things like new ways to experience other people's gastronomies and all of this stuff; that if we arrange our lives at the level of new forms of infrastructure, these questions around who's in need and who isn't in need become blurred, become boundaried.

Kenneth Bailey:

If we do things at that level differently, we actually get to become new subjects. So I think going back to this idea of productive fictions is if you can create these opportunities, people get to create new narratives of themselves, create new narratives of other and create new narratives about what social life could be like.

Makani:

Wow, that's it right there. And thank you. I appreciate that reflection. And Chris in some ways, your work feels like a mirror, a part of it, but the part that's more like how we explore how the public is not serving us. And you've had this amazing body of work over decades and you are clearly one of the greats of our time. I feel very honored that I'm getting to have this conversation with you. And I wonder if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit about that and like how you sort of blur but also make clearer our relationships in that context.

Christopher Cozier:

Well, thanks for that introduction. Now I have to live up to it. And I have Kenneth's voice my head, that I was really thinking a lot about what he said about private and public. It comes with an irony, you know, because I think, especially in postcolonial environments, people associate association on one side with a kind of past degradation and they kind of aspire to remove, you know? So I grew up in the Caribbean in a time when people had no fences, had no bars on their windows. And there was a kind of fluency, you know, confluence between homes. And then the new newer forms of supplement that are manifesting now based on consumer models that we apply from abroad and elsewhere, people seem to think that progress is isolation and private consumption. So there's a kind of a weird thing where there's a lot of conversation about community, but the process is actually eliminating everyone from each other. And then all the fears and distrust that, you know, exacerbated by people being locked up in there. And in places like the Caribbean, like on my street, I have one of the few houses where I have no fence.

Christopher Cozier:

I have no air conditioning and you can see these are breeze bricks, so I'm letting in the outside world because that's the value of living in this kind of climate, but that's considered to be old fashioned or romantic. Everybody wants to, you know, progress is isolation. Air conditioning, you're fighting with the climate. You're kinda fighting even with your neighbors. In this box where you watch cable TV, listen to the radio, get any air conditioned car and go to the mall and you're all in climate denial. So a lot of my work tries to kind of rethink some of those things and to kind of underscore the way that privacy and progress have becoming entangled. And of course it doesn't help in a place like Trinidad where I live, which is an oily corner. So it means therefore energy costs are lowered. And in most places, people are not as anxious about how they use a certain kind of resource that is precious elsewhere. And that brings up a whole host of other questions.

Kenneth Bailey:

It even gets back to the question with the kitchen in terms of sort of interrupting, the only way one can eat is through one's own individual's acts that your food is a private matter. Your kitchen is a private matter. Your dinner table is a private matter. Even the act of eating is enclosed between you and yours. So a lot out of the poetics that were really behind Public Kitchen was about saying, what if there was a place where these kinds of concerns were never just for you and yours, but were always entangled.

Christopher Cozier:

I mean, let's just do a timeline in terms of living in this part of the world. The first form of collectivity would've been on the plantation and not as people, but as property.

Makani:

Okay. But wait a second, Chris, I wanna push back on that. Do you consider that collectivity or just being in the same place? I wanna know.

Christopher Cozier:

Well, collectivity as being herded in is one problem, but of course one is more than that. So in other words, your broadest property, but you're kind of aspiring to personhood and selfhood that has been taken away from you by being transplanted. But what I mean is the collectivity is inherent because people are in this condition. And then they have to invent new ways of being to celebrate, to worship, to play because we are not brought here to do these things. And a lot of these things happen in secret beyond the kind of gaze of the game of power and so on. So what I'm really talking about is that the first collectivity is when people were living in these barrack conditions and they had to share resources and organize themselves. And sadly, there's still a perception that those conditions the positive side of that, those conditions, which is the sharing and the kind of lack of conventional privacy are now things we have to progress beyond because we are using the template of the plantation house as progress. As opposed to transforming the forms of collective living that we had to build on under those circumstances in making them more positive.

Christopher Cozier:

And I could think about that in terms of say Amerindian, like indigenous life, because we lived the right next to indigenous life, say in, in the context as Venezuela and things like—when I think of the kitchen as Kenny was talking, I think of even now, you know, going into certain in communities around the city where people have these yards and in these yards, they may be a dominant mother and then everybody cooks in one place and then they share and subdivide. Or in large families where there's a kind of central hub to how people live, even though they move out, they may still come back to the home of their mother to have lunch. And they bring the grandchildren and different kinds of ways that people wanna continue to share resources, share time and be together. But all of these things are kinds of forms of resistance to what is the bleed for progress. So that's what I was thinking. Yeah.

Makani:

No, I appreciate that. And in fact, that brings up some—well, that was rich? For so many levels for the both of you. So one is this sort of idea, cuz part of how, part of how narrative power works is that it makes the belief seemed like the natural thing, right. The natural, who we are naturally, it's almost like it's biological. Like it's not a choice. It's not, you know, it's just who we are. And so there's a whole part of what we talk about in this work, is the role of science and the role of school and all these things and creating this architecture right, of how this works and how this plays out. And one of the things you guys talked about is this question of—well, there's the individual agency and being able to sort of be in this separate little pod, this nuclear, whatever, family, or even on your own as progress, right. The so-called master the plantation owner, his success is the success that we emulate, right. Like what's our idea of success. And this is really important and central right. To how where we're socialized and dipped in this. I'd love for you both to talk more broadly about what's the role of art and culture and being disruptive in that way. How do you think this process works and what drives you to engage it in the first place?

Christopher Cozier:

Well, I was thinking it's first, when you spoke about narrative, I was thinking about it in the sense that narrative to my mind, sort of demands a kind of ordering, a shaping of things around us or retaliate, so to speak. But sometimes it also distorts. And I often think in my mind, there's a kind of an anxiety about things being fragmented and a demand for authority and wholeness. Over the years, I've become more and more suspicious of that because I've been reading some stuff about non-authoritarian formulations. And when I think about my own practice, I think of it as small, incremental gestures, responding to things as they happen along the way, so that each fragment rather it makes a kind of a hole, but it also instigates through engagement or how people engage in actions elsewhere or thoughts elsewhere. So it seems like it's not quite there and it seems fragmented.

Christopher Cozier:

And one is struggling to kind of understand what is the shape of this thing, but it keeps its agency or its instigative, and this is not something unique. I've been reading some stuff about older artists and older thinkers from the Caribbean and Latin America where their work seem incomplete, but yet it generates all these things. So this challenge of narrative as an enterprise, as a process, I kinda distrust it as much as I kind of understand it's necessity. And I think maybe it's because when I lived in the US as a student, it was the era of hip hop and the kind of white American super structure of that era talked about appropriation. I was in New York when that kind of thing was going on and I thought, but wait a minute, it's going on in hip hop. When I listen to it, I hear James Brown.

Christopher Cozier:

I hear different kinds of music from different eras. So it's creating a new form that feels fragmented, but at the same time it's made of all, it's like a form of ancestor worship and it's telling the story of now, but using the fragments from a past and it becomes totally new and refreshing. And that fascinated me because in the kind of normal Euro-American artwork of the time they were talking about just appropriating things from past eras and they had a slightly more male-istic idea and they were trying to plant that on hip hop. But hip hop at that time was extremely productive, imaginative, and, you know, taking it to where it, it has eventually gone. So that always stayed with me.

Makani:

We cannot have this conversation without at least turning a little bit into monumentality. And this place, that's the intersection of the past, you know, what's valued, space, what do we make monuments too, we're in this space too, where we are battling, we are toppling monuments to racism and violence of a certain kind. Acts against monuments to peace and to justice for many years. I mean, I live in the Mississippi where the tombstones of James Chaney every year is knocked down. So it's been 50 years. So this is not the same folks who did it in the sixties. This is some practice that's been passed on, right. To folks who have the strength to pull down a tombstone, right. To somebody who they murdered, right. That the mere existence of his headstone is a threat to some folks, even though he's already dead. Right. But the memory, right, the space, this intersection of memory, right. Of a movement and of resistance.

Christopher Cozier:

Well, I think the monumentality is in some way linked to some of my anxieties about narrative as a process or as a thing, there's something really confusing in my mind about how do we commemorate. And I think in the context of the Caribbean commemoration comes through gestures and space and through all of these processes, collective kitchens, you know, talking, it's a kinda ongoing celebration of who we are and what our journeys are into this hemisphere and through this hemisphere. So the obsession with statues and objects always disturbs me because it seems a kind of an inherited or received knowledge and all of these commissions to build monuments. Now, I always think, well, why do you need them? You need to build spaces where people can assemble, or you need to recognize the spaces where people naturally assemble.

Christopher Cozier:

Because if you think about it, something like the Brooklyn Labor Day festival, which is a parade through the streets of New York, generated by Caribbean people to declare their presence in the United States, becomes something larger than that. In terms of all s that have assembled in that city. So they've taken a place that will just boxes for workers to go to factories and turned that into a site of celebration and look at how much struggle that festival has gone through, or is going through, the amount of police, once five black, more than five black people are in one place, people start to panic, right. So what happens when you have hundreds of thousands of them, moving through the street. And I'll tell you some interesting stories about that. I think in my own experience, they just move the Lord Nelson. There was a Trafalgar Square in Bridgetown that's in Caribbean, before there was one in England, celebrating Nelson, and they fought for years long before these stories came up in the US to get rid of it.

Christopher Cozier:

In fact, the situation in the US exacerbated the conversation and they were able to get rid of it. And then in my own context, when we were growing up in the seventies, there was a statue of Lord Harris. I mean Lord Harris was a colonial government governor. He wasn't as evil as most of them, but he represented something. And when we had the Black power revolts in 1970 students poured black paint on him because they said they wanted Black heroes. So this colonial statue of a white man was covered in black paint. And then they tried to restore it years later. And then somewhere in the eighties into the nineties, there was a drag queen ball one night in the city and they decided to jump on the statue's head and he fell on broke. And then drug addicts tried to take his parts to sell it for scrap, to the Chinese smugglers. So in the kinda way, the whole process that Harris was subjected to in the real story of how Harris, his role in our imagination or his value to our imagination kept changing

Christopher Cozier:

But no one talks about that because it's like an aberration, there's still a lobby to restore Harris or to replace him with somebody that we have something more invested in. But what they're not recognizing is how people are using the space around Harris. That night there was a popular song called Ride the Donkey, which was a dance where your girlfriend jumps onto your shoulder in a carnival, and people were running around with their girlfriends on their shoulders. It's absolutely bizarre. So a drag queen jumps onto Harris' neck and breaks him in the middle of the night, which to me is totally wild and exciting, you know, and that story is more important. So I think monumentality and narrative and this kind of sense of object and subjectivity, the object and the subject to the, you know, the subject thing are all things that we are trying to get away from. So commemoration is really about space: spaces to think, and imagine, and to dream. And we don't really have dedicated spaces for that, especially for us, because we were brought here to work and create capital.

Makani:

But that is the goal, right. That's part of what we're trying to do is to build, that's part of the thing, right. To, you know, that's sort of like the public kitchen, the other spaces is like to create, to turn monumentality or the creation of space, you know, monumental space or less than that. Right. Um, that that's ours. That reflects us. Right. And that we turn around and; I know here, living where I live here, it's been so important, to have the Medgar Evers airport for people, right. To have these spaces, like Freedom Corner and other things that commemorate who we are and our resistance. I also know that DS4SI has really been thinking about that. You guys construct literally these kind of spaces under the sort of rubric of productive fiction. Because the truth is we don't have them, so they have to be a fiction. Right? I'd love for you to just say more about that. And what do you think the call is? I mean, people are trying to figure this out all over the world.

Kenneth Bailey:

Yeah. I think the call is to making more spaces like Alice Yard. I think the call is to making more propositions for social life and social living that are commensurate to the ones that we have to experience every day. So to give you an example, when Chris and I were talking, when I was telling him about this conversation, one of the things we figured out are, Chris is always making me think better than I can on

my own. And he was talking about Black assembly. And one of the things his conversation made me think is how many stadiums, particularly baseball stadiums are in a way contemporary monuments to white assembly, but they aren't a monument in a passive sense. They are the symbol in a thing like they are actively assembling. People are actively using them and when empty or not, when being used, they stand in for that assembly.

Kenneth Bailey:

They stand in for these kinds of practices of white gathering, of white togetherness. And those places get to do that without having to deal with the fact that that's what they get to do. And so I'm really interested in the ways in which these struggles against monuments create what I'm interested in furthering. And I'm thinking the role of artists and creatives could do is a kind of symbolic literacy of our lives and in public space. To begin to use this movement around monuments towards a continued literacy of how our lives are lived through narrative, through symbol, through processes and choreographies, and to be able to read our spaces and times and places better to understand the extent to which we still need to dream our collective futures versus try to find ways to configure our subjectivities towards the spaces that are designed otherwise.

Kenneth Bailey:

I'm really excited about prospects of proposing new kinds of choreographies, new kinds of spaces, new kinds of ways that we can convene and live as a counterbalance to the ways in which cities, towns, spaces are being produced and constructed. Another way I think I'll put it is so much of the current developmental apparatus is also monumental in how ubiquitous it is and how big it is, but it's a monument to the neoliberal subject. You know what I mean? So I'm really interested in how do we get from reading the symbolic monument and the attacks on the statues to reading the ways in which other aspects of our everyday lives are being monumentalized to aspects of neoliberal capitalism and the implication of that for how we then live our everyday lives. Such that we have to start to build to scale other models of being together, living together.

Makani:

I hear that. I think that's absolutely right. And part of this work of disrupting space, getting people to; sort of like the seed; plant the seed, grow the seedling, eventually have forests, right of these different ideas I think is really critical. So I really appreciate you both taking the time. Again, I'm just so grateful to you brilliant beings. I thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Makani:

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