

**U.18 Long Civil Rights Movement:  
Heirs to a Fighting Tradition**

**Interview U-0582  
Bryan Proffitt  
October 25, 2008**

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## FIELD NOTES- Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewee: Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview Dates: October 25, 2008 (Third of Three Interviews)

Project: Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists

Locations: Durham, NC

HEIRS TO A FIGHTING TRADITION: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists” is a multi-phased oral history project which explores the stories and traditions of social justice activism in North Carolina through in-depth interviews with fourteen highly respected activists and organizers. Selected for the integrity and high level of skill in their work dedicated to social justice, the interviewees represent a diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity. These narratives capture the richness of a set of activists with powerful perspectives on social justice and similar visions of the common good. These are stories of transition and transformation, tales of sea change and burnout, organizing successes and heart wrenching defeats. These are the stories of the Movement.

All of the oral histories will be archived in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and will be a valuable addition to the modest amount of literature about contemporary social justice activism in the South.

Heirs to a Fighting Tradition was formerly a project of the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition. Since NCPJC has not been functioning actively as an organization for over a year, in July of 2008 Bridgette changed the name of her sole proprietorship from “North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition” to “The Heirs Project” on our bank account and with the NC Secretary of State’s assumed name for sole proprietorships.

THE INTERVIEWEE: Bryan Proffitt is a white, Hip-Hop generation organizer, public school teacher, and writer living in Durham, NC at the time of this interview. He was born in Woodbridge, VA in 1978. His father served in the military and he moved frequently when he was young through his high school years. He a bachelor’s degree in microbiology with a minor in film studies from North Carolina State University in 2001 and a master’s degree in liberal studies and a secondary social studies teaching certification in 2004. He is a founding member of Men Against Rape Culture (MARC) and has been affiliated with Hip Hop Against Racist War, United for Peace and Justice, and the North Carolina Peace and Justice Coalition, among other organizations.

THE INTERVIEWER: Bridgette Burge graduated from Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee in 1995 with a degree in Anthropology/Sociology and a semester of intensive study of oral history theory and methodology. In 1995 and 1996, Burge and a colleague conducted fieldwork in Honduras, Central America collecting the oral histories of six Honduran women. She earned her master's degree in Anthropology from the University of Memphis in 1998. In 1999, she moved to North Carolina and served as North Carolina Peace Action's state coordinator, and later as North Carolina Peace Action Education Fund's executive director. In 2005, Burge began her own consulting company to provide training, facilitation and planning to social change organizations. The same year, with the support of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Burge launched the project "Heirs to a Fighting Tradition: Oral Histories of North Carolina Social Justice Activists." The interviews from this project are archived at the Southern Historical Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW: October 25, 2008, School started back for Bryan, so it took us this long to reschedule. It was a cool, rainy fall day. I had been sick with a bad cold for over a week and you can hear it in my voice. I had spent the morning at Rigsby Hall in Durham just below Tema Okun's place at a luncheon that Cynthia Brown had organized for over 100 of her beloved women friends and family to celebrate us for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday! Just like Cynthia to organize something like that.

Bryan and Rebecca are reunited and bought this house at 1020 Sycamore. When we greeted each other, I told Bryan how I'd driven down this street before just because I thought it was pretty. Well, I was wrong. It must have been a different street in that neighborhood. Bryan said that it had a bad history. Michael Peterson's house was at the end of the road. He was convicted of brutally murdering his wife. It got a lot of media attention. After the interview, I drove down to look at the place. Sorry to be redundant, but the mansion is gigantic. The iron-wrought gate in front of the driveway has "Wonderland" on it. Sick.

Bryan has cleared a space up in the attic that had been converted into a bedroom and which they were using for storage. He set up two wooden chairs and a tv tray and we got started. I hadn't reviewed his last interview recently, so we repeated some things. About half way through the interview, I smelled chocolate. Sure enough, Rebecca was downstairs making brownies for us. Nice. It went well. Bryan's such a great talker and has great insights.

## TRANSCRIPT – Bryan David Proffitt

Interviewee: Bryan Proffitt

Interviewer: Bridgette Burge

Interview date: October 25, 2008

Location: Home of Bryan Proffitt, Durham, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 89 minutes

### START OF DISC

BRIDGETTE BURGE: Okay, today is October 25, 2008 and this is the third interview with Bryan Proffitt for Heirs to a Fighting Tradition. Bridgette Burge is the interviewer, and we are upstairs in a little cubby that Bryan has carved out. It used to be an attic that they converted to a space at Bryan's house on Sycamore Street in Durham. And we're going to do our best to remember where we left over, since I was slacking and didn't listen to the last interview.

BRYAN PROFFITT: Either that or I'm the most talkative person who you've ever spoken with.

BB: No, Cynthia Brown's the most. You're second. Getting close, no, I'm just kidding.

BP: Well, we're not done yet.

BB: [Laughter] We're not done yet.

BP: I can rival Cynthia. We'll see. We'll see.

BB: So let's start with--. You minored in film studies at State in 2001. Tell me why you chose film studies. Microbiology, because you were thinking about being a doctor, and then film studies, what was that about?

BP: Just for fun, really. I guess I always was really, really into watching movies, going to movies, really influenced by movies. Like in high school, I didn't have to work in the summers as long as I was doing sports stuff. My parents were like, "If that's what's important to you, then you can do your workouts every day or go to camps or whatever." So I had a lot of time to myself in the summer and I used to know guys at the movie theater, so I'd just go see a movie like four days a week or something, just get in free, and just go watch the movie. So, as long as I can remember, I've gone to movies. So then I was in college--. I sort of made up my mind that I was just going to take stuff I liked. If that meant I took twenty-one hours in a semester, that's fine, because the last six would just be stuff that I liked to do. So I took an intro to film course just to see what it'd be like and dug it. It was like, "I get to sit and watch movies and talk about them? Yeah, I'll do that." So I ended up taking five courses to be a minor. And you can do the direction or production or whatever, but the real strength at State was theory kind of stuff. I wasn't going to be a filmmaker, so I just took the courses in theory kind of stuff. So I took a course in European directors, so like Fellini and Bergman and Roberto Rossellini, just kind of the influential European directors of the last, mostly from the '50s and '60s, a little bit since then, a little bit before then. And then an African American film course, which was pretty cool, and just to see stuff all the way back from the '30s up until now.

A film and spirituality course that I was actually just talking about at dinner last night, because the guy who taught that course and the European directors course, a guy named Joe Gomez, and he'd been teaching at State forever--. He sort of was the film department, and they built people around him. So, Joe taught that course, and it was, like the last film in the course was this guy, Lars von Trier, this Danish filmmaker, real influential, experimental

filmmaker, made this film called “Breaking the Waves” with Emily Watson, who I have since totally fallen in love with. And I can just remember the film classes that--. My classes were once a week at night, like six to ten or something like that, and I just remember walking out after watching “Breaking the Waves,” and the whole world looked like a different place. It was just like the whole course kind of came together in this one film. It was like, “Oh, shit. I get it.” And everything looked different. I can remember the way the air felt and smelled when I walked outside. I was just like, “Wow. This is something different.” So I remember being really, really impacted by it. It’s really funny that you asked this because I was really just talking about this last night.

The final in that class, we had an essay to write or something like that. I can remember sitting down, and we had a good three or four hours to work, sat down, started writing. Three or four hours later, I had written like sixteen, seventeen pages and I was done. And it was like the most proud of any work I’d ever done, and it was just like I was able to take this whole course and kind of put it in this one piece of work. So I had some really meaningful experiences in studying film, and I felt like it gave me a pretty good lens at even just how to look at pop films, in addition to art stuff or important historical stuff. It was just fun. I just tried to make college be--. And I think I graduated with like fifteen more classes than I needed to.

BB: Big nerd?

BP: Basically. [Laughter] I mean because I was done. I was basically done with my degree by the time I got to my fourth year. I had fourteen hours left. It was just basically like four classes and a lab or something like that. So I was like, “Well, I could finish early and just take all of the micro classes this one semester, or I could just take a whole bunch of

shit I want to take.” How often are you going to be in college and have this level of time? I mean at the time, by then I was working almost full-time, but still twenty-one and twenty-two and I was never going to be a full-time college student again, I didn’t think. So I just thought, “Well, just take a bunch of stuff I like.” So I took all kinds of courses that I really got into and got a lot out of. And it ended up ultimately serving me pretty well, because when I went back to school for my liberal studies degree and to get certified to teach, to become a social studies teacher, I had to have this many economics courses, this many sociology courses, this many history courses from these different places in the world, these psychology courses, these anthropology. And so I’d already--. And since I was at the same institution, I could just say, “Well, let’s look at my transcript,” because it was only a year since I had left school. So I said, “Can I count this, this, this?” So a lot of the stuff that I needed to take, I was already done with because I had taken it as an undergrad. So it ended up, quote, benefitting me in that way, in the traditional sense as well, but I just did it for fun because I am a big nerd.

BB: [Laughter] Say more about that moment about “Breaking the Waves.” How was it so different? What about the movie--? What kinds of things that you learned in film class came together to--?

BP: I don’t even know that I can really remember exactly what the moment was about, but the film is a tough film. I think if I looked at it now, I’d have a really difficult time with it, just because of the relationship of Emily Watson’s character to her love in the film and what she does because of that or whatever. But it’s about transcendent love, and this spiritual connection between people that sometimes is not real pretty, but the final shot, if memory serves, is you sort of float up into the sky and you see this bell ringing in the

heavens, and it was just like, this is what love is. Love isn't just some sentimental box of chocolates on Valentine's Day. It's this connection between people spiritually, and people and their God, people and their divineness. And I can just remember walking out and being like, "Damn." It's heavy stuff. It was really heavy stuff, but it was like, again, I was never really--.

I've never really been that incredibly moved by sculpture or painting or even really dance to a large part. Music has always been something that has moved me, but I think encountering film in a lot of ways and that experience of film as art was kind of my way into understanding art in a complicated way. So I think a lot of it was about that, just sort of about how art moves people. And there are other forms of art that touch people in different ways that didn't necessarily impact me that much, but film did. And film continues to, but I just don't have that venue to look at a film as a serious work of art and break it down as a work of art in the same way that I did, particularly in Joe's classes, but in other film classes that I took over there.

BB: Are there any political films or films that resonated for you politically that shaped you in some way, or shifted your politics in some way?

BP: Oh, god, yeah.

BB: What are a couple or a few that come to mind?

BP: Well, I mean, Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing." I think I've mentioned this in my previous accounts that I was really impacted early by any conversation about race. I can remember my cousin, who was the one who turned me on to a lot of hip-hop and a lot of different things when I'd see him once every year or two, and he had this script, he had in book form, of "Do the Right Thing." I remember reading it long before I saw the film, and I



was just really impacted by these characters who were from this world that I'd never seen, and what it was that they were talking about. So when I finally saw the film, it had a big, big impact on me. Yeah, I don't know. It's hard because you don't really know--. It's hard to remember these moments when different transitions happened.

A film like John Sayles "Matewan," talking about the coal miners' struggles in West Virginia back in, I guess it was the '20s and the '30s, was important. Seeing a film like, and I can't remember the director, the film that was made about Patrice Lumumba, called "Lumumba," was really impactful because you get to see the impact of the U.S. on the rest of the world. There's countless documentaries about people's lives, about situations that people went through. I remember seeing this--. I have a tape of it. It's maybe on PBS or something like that, called "Freedom on My Mind," which was about the Freedom Summer in '64 with the SNCC folks, just seeing Fannie Lou Hamer and just watching these kids who, probably by the time I saw the film, were significantly younger than me, putting their lives on the line like that.

There's a film that came out a few years ago called "The Weather Underground," which was about the Weather folks, and kind of encouraged me--. I'm feeling daily guilt about this because I started--. I had always thought that I should be writing letters with folks that were in prison, just as a way of support and building relationships. So finally after I saw that, I was like, "Okay, I have to do this." So I started writing letters with David Gilbert after seeing him in the film, because he just shined in the film. He'd been in prison for probably twenty years by the time the film was made and he just has this glow about him and this warmth about him, and it's just like, "Damn." The stuff that the Weather was doing is sort of easy to look back and be sort of romantic about and say, "Oh, if I was then, I might've done

this.” Strategically, I don’t think it was necessarily the right direction, but you have to put yourself in this moment and say, “Shit, I don’t know.” The whole world is turning upside down, and as a white kid, it’s just like, “What the hell do you do in this moment?” And to watch these people who walked away from their families, walked away from their lives, risked everything. Was it strategically the right move? I don’t think so, but again, who knows what you would do when you’re in that moment. So I started writing letters with David after that. I’m feeling guilty because it’s been about four or five months or so since I’ve written him, but that had an impact on me. That was a new relationship that came into my life because of the film. That’s now something that always happens when you look at a movie. And you start a friendship because of the movie, you know? I’m sure there’ve been lots and lots more, but for a while, I was really into Spike Lee. He was doing a lot for me.

BB: So, what do you think about right now how Bill Ayers is being played in the media? And say who he is and your thoughts on how the Weather is being talked about these days.

BP: I think it’s desperately sad and pathetic. When he first came up a year and a half or however long ago that was, for me it really felt like this was the Clintons [William and Hillary], who are like the most cynical human beings on the planet, really grasping at straws during the primary campaign. So Bill Ayers was one of the folks who in the late ‘60s was a leader in the Students for a Democratic Society and was one of the people, when there was a split at the SDS convention in 1969 on which direction folks should take, Ayers was with the split that won and kind of took the organization in this direction of really--. They left the campuses, went to white working-class communities, and decided that they were going to organize on the ground and fight, literally fight the police to say, “If the Vietnamese are

fighting, if the Black Panthers are fighting, if Africans are fighting these national liberation struggles, then white people need to be fighting to take some of the pressure off.”

And so after a little while, they weren't having a whole lot of luck with that and decided that they would abandon that strategy and that they would go underground as a small collective of folks, organized themselves into cells all around the country, and began a campaign of armed resistance that at first was sort of ambiguous about whether or not it might target people. And then there was a famous accident. There was an explosion at a townhouse in Greenwich Village where the bomb that they were building was being planned to actually target people, a group of Naval officers at a ball. And so after three of their folks got killed in that accident, they decided that they were going to stick to targeting places and not people. Over about the next seven, eight, nine years, they waged this campaign where anytime--. So when Nixon revealed that the U.S. had been bombing Cambodia or that the U.S. was going to invade Cambodia, they targeted specific places. I think it was when Shell Oil was doing some really nasty stuff with respect to the Portuguese colonies in Africa, in Mozambique and Angola, they targeted Shell Oil. When the police or the F.B.I. would go after some Black Panthers, they'd blow up a facility that related to that. After the Attica uprising, they put a bomb in the New York state correctional offices.

At the end of the '70s, as the war was over and folks on the Left really lost their direction, all these different organizations that had started to try to build Communist parties had kind of fallen apart and devolved into this sectarian awfulness of attacking each other and just getting smaller and smaller and smaller. And the Weather was kind of marginal. There was a brief period where they had sort of an above ground--. It was called the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee auxiliary that was kind of working with them, but the Weather

had sort of lost its direction because the primary thing that it had been involved in was support for national liberation struggles by oppressed peoples all over the world, but by the time things were happening in the '70s, it was like China had taken a very different direction politically. Most of the national liberation struggles in Africa were over. They had won. The Vietnamese had won. And so this thing that kind of bound folks together--. And even the Black liberation movement in the U.S. was decimated. So you had some folks that went underground as the Black Liberation Army and some folks just going in lots of different directions because the Panthers, who had been this force that was providing direction for folks, had been assassinated, drugged, kidnapped, imprisoned, until the organization was basically dead.

The Black liberation movement was so scattered that the Weather didn't really have much to relate to, so folks started coming up in the mid to late '70s. And the interesting thing about it is that because of the way they had done the investigations for most of the '70s, most of the stuff that they had on the Weather was illegal and couldn't be used in court. Whereas that didn't really stop them when it was the Black Panthers or the American Indian Movement, the courts for some reason respected that. So most of the folks that came up in the late '70s and early '80s, nothing could happen to them legally. And so that the situation where Bill Ayers, his partner Bernadine Dohrn, Mark Rudd was another guy who came up, and nothing could really happen to the majority of the folks.

A number of the folks thought that coming up was a sell-out and that it was an abandonment of the commitment to national liberation movements and continued to stay underground and work in support of folks, particularly the Black Liberation Army, which was sort of a real loose, almost anarchist cell structure of folks that were doing independent

actions. So David ended up working with the BLA cell that robbed a Brinks security truck. In the course of the getaway, a couple of police officers were killed, and David's been in prison since the early '80s. Most of the folks that went on to work in BLA support work and support of other underground stuff did go to prison. Kathy Boudin, who was David's partner, was in prison until the early part of this decade. A woman named Marilyn Buck was in prison for a really long time. A number of different folks that continued, ended up going to prison for their work, while most of the folks who came up during the '70s have gone on and had these sort of legit lives.

So Bill teaches at the University of Chicago in the School of Education. Bernadine teaches at Northwestern's School of Law and has done a lot of stuff with children's defense law and stuff like that. So Bill's kind of been this legit figure in Chicago for a long time. I know folks that know him. So it's not surprising that anybody who would be doing social justice work in Chicago would be working with Bill Ayers because he's been around for a really long time and has a lot of relationships. So it just feels absurd that someone would say he's a terrorist and all of that. And again, there's this vacuum of historical knowledge about what the Weather was, and so there's never anything--. I mean even somebody said something the other day on the news about the Weather Underground who did all this and this and this and may have been responsible for the killing of such and such, and I was just sitting and looking at the news and saying, "This is totally inaccurate. The Weather's not responsible for the death of anyone except for three of their own folks." So I think it just points out this gulf in historical knowledge from what was going on in the '60s and '70s and where we are now, that Bill Ayers then could come up like this. But it doesn't really seem like--.

It seems to me like people publicly have read it like it is, which is just this grasping at straws, but it's also for, at least these fringe elements that have a validated space in the mainstream media, it has provided some space for--. When Palin is talking about who Obama is at her rallies, people yelling out, "terrorist," and, "Kill him," and all this kind of stuff, which is pretty frightening. And I think the Bill Ayers stuff connects to that. Fortunately, I guess fortunately for Obama, they've not connected him to Assata Shakur or Fred Hampton, Jr. They've not connected him to a black revolutionary from the time period, because that would have--. I think that would've opened up a whole new area. I've never seen a picture of Bill Ayers' face in the middle of any of this stuff, so there's this, "Who is Bill Ayers?" So I wonder if folks are reading Bill Ayers as this black revolutionary figure or whatever. Now granted, I don't watch television a whole lot, so they could have a whole lot of pictures of him out there, but I think that the repercussions of this discussion would be a little different had it been somebody connected to the Panthers, for example, or the Black Liberation Army.

So then there's also been this connection back to Obama as Muslim, Muslim as terrorist thing that's come up a lot. I've been telling folks this is deep that the most progressive and what I thought principled position that anybody has taken in this whole two-year saga around race, religion, et cetera, was Colin Powell, who earlier on in the week said what Obama should've said a year ago, when this thing about Obama being a Muslim's coming up. And Colin Powell said, "No, he's not. But b., it doesn't matter because Muslim kids need to feel like they could go to the White House, too." He kind of couched it in this nationalist--. There's this photo of this woman mourning at her son's or her husband's grave at Arlington and it has a Muslim crescent on the grave, and he died fighting for freedom for

America, too, or something. But it was just this moment where Colin Powell was the voice of reason, which was just like, “Whoa, how have we gotten here? Really, how have we gotten here that this dude is taking the best position?” But I think, in the middle of this chaos, him offering that was really helpful. I don’t know to what extent it really has held, but I also think it’s like the Bill Ayers thing has been this, on one hand connecting to this race-based fear, and on the other hand connecting to--.

I’ve not heard it a whole lot that Bill Ayers was a communist, but that’s this other thing that’s coming up right now is that Obama is somehow a socialist, which is, again, laughable. But there’s also this other direction that the Bill Ayers thing could be taken, which is, if people were smart and people understood who Bill Ayers actually was, they could’ve said, “Wow, he was a revolutionary communist, and Obama’s hanging out with him. So maybe he really is a socialist.” But people aren’t smart enough, like the historical knowledge isn’t even there to do that. And so I think actually, if they were going to use Bill Ayers, in my mind that would be the direction I would go, but they don’t seem to be slick enough to put that together. So I don’t know. I think it’s just silly. It’s just silly and desperate and they’re done. And the only way it can happen for them now is just out and out theft, which they’ve proven quite capable of going on the last two occasions. Yeah, I don’t know. It just feels done.

BB: How do you personally feel about Barack Obama?

BP: It was interesting. I was thinking about this and wondering if it was going to come up in our conversation because I almost--. We were going to go vote today. We were going to go vote early, which I still will do, but I think now, I will have voted in, or had the opportunity to--. I’m trying to remember if I even voted in 2004. [Laughter] I think that I

did, but '04 and 2000, I guess, are the only two elections in which I had an opportunity to vote. I remember writing for the campus paper in 2000 and saying that it was a choice between the lesser of two weasels, and just being like, "This is ridiculous. I've got to pick Al Gore?" And then feeling even less inspired in 2004 by this clown. I mean John Kerry was just like, "What are you offering me here?" So I think that, to the extent to which there has been a legitimately potentially successful political candidate in my lifetime that has run for president, which is, that's a lot of subsets of people. [Laughter] I'm most excited about this. I started off this process as a bit of a hater. I was just like, "This motherfucker doesn't talk about anything useful." And I still kind of feel the same way, but I also have been challenged by some folks and folks just saying, "Look, dude. This is somebody running for the president. What do you expect? Really, what are you looking for? It's 2008. We're in the period of forty years of entrenched, just getting the crap kicked out of us. I don't know what you're looking for right now, but this is probably the best we're going to get." Sort of putting it in that context has been really helpful, and just looking at--. Typically, it's like, well, this guy isn't the most--. This guy is awful, awful, awful, but he's not as awful, awful, awful as the other guy. This guy's like awful awful. It's like two awfuls, and so I feel like, "Huh. Well he's kind of good then." So I think just in terms of healthcare stuff--.

BB: Israel and foreign policy just hurts, just hurts to hear him talk.

BP: Man. And it's deep, because back in Chicago, he was once an ally of the Palestinian folks in the community there. So it's like, damn. So it just shows the strength that the pro-Israeli folks have in terms of shaping the discourse of the U.S., which is deep because it's not a big group of folks, but they wield some clout. So that's frightening. And just all this stuff about, "We're in the wrong war and we need to shift all this stuff to



Afghanistan.” It’s just like, man, will you stop talking? You’re giving me a headache. So that’s all really hard. And the stuff about--. I think he would get beat on it if he tried it, but merit-based pay for teachers. Some of the stuff he says, I’m just like, “God, you’re awful,” comma, right, he’s like a black dude who might get elected president of the goddamn United States of America. It is 2008 and we are in like the two hundred and thirtieth year or two hundred and thirty-second year of the existence of the United States, and it’s a black dude that’s going to be our president.

I think I’ve been most struck by it listening to the radio in the last couple of days because it’s been talking about--. There was some stuff on the radio today about these union workers going around campaigning for Obama. And when you think about the stereotypical union worker in the United States, it’s like a white dude from rural Pennsylvania or Ohio or West Virginia, who wears his pants and his hat and he’s going off to work. And it’s like these dudes are going door-to-door and knocking on doors and saying, “You’ve got to vote for this guy,” and talking to other white folks about why to support a black dude. And it’s just like, wow, this has opened the door. So it’s really interesting because so much of my life is spent immersed in this black school where I teach, where it’s sort of a given. It’s granted. So the discussions have actually been really powerful because the kids have tempered a lot of their perspectives. It’s like, “Well, he’s probably not going to be able to do this. And maybe he won’t really support us.” So it’s been cool, because at first I was kind of concerned that it’d be this “Obama as savior” kind of thing that I was going to have to work with. But the kids seem to be taking a pretty good position on it.

But the way that this has opened the door for white working-class folks to be talking about race I think has been really powerful, and the lines to get drawn. And for some people to say,

“I am not voting for a black dude,” and have to say that out loud and see how other people relate to it. Somebody on the news was talking today about--. They were having a conversation with somebody on their doorstep, like five times, five different angles, and then finally it was like, “Okay, could you just not vote then for president? Could you just vote for the other ones and don’t vote for president?” And that might actually be a viable option because people know that McCain’s a piece of shit, but they can’t stomach voting for a black dude. And they’re open about it. And so somebody says, “Okay, great. Just do this then.” This is a new conversation. Richard Trumpka from the Steelworker’s making videos and talking to his workers and saying, “The only reason you would not vote for Obama is because he’s black.” White organized labor taking this position is, man, it’s kind of mind boggling.

BB: It says, “Let me offer some other things to consider.”

BP: Yeah, it’s deep. It’s really, really deep. And again, it’s hard being in Durham and teaching at a black school because I don’t really get this perspective. I’m not really interacting in a whole lot of white spaces in Durham, in the world very frequently, so I don’t get much insight into how those conversations are playing out, but it’s really powerful. It’s really important. And having conversations with--. I think my mother voted for the first time that I can remember in 2004, because she just couldn’t deal with Bush. And it was just like, “Really? Where is this coming from?” And I don’t think I’ve asked her explicitly, but she has offered several times about how this McCain/ Palin thing is ridiculous. So I feel like my mom’s going to vote for Barack Obama. That’s pretty cool. That’s pretty cool. So yeah, it’s very tempered by a whole bunch of like, this dude’s an imperialist. This dude is the candidate of Wall Street. I mean he negotiated--. He made that seven hundred billion dollar,

eight hundred billion dollar, who knows how many trillions of dollars is actually going to end up--. He made that happen by getting on the phone and making that thing work, but he's also kind of interesting at the same time for a lot of different reasons.

BB: Have you read *Dreams From My Father*?

BP: No.

BB: I just finished it last night. You should read it.

BP: Yeah? Okay.

BB: It's deep.

BP: That's the first one?

BB: That's the first one.

BP: Okay, okay.

BB: Yeah, that's the first one. So it's a whole lot about racial identity and finding his past, going back to Kenya for the first time, a big chunk of the book on Chicago and organizing lessons, just deep.

BP: Huh. Okay, okay.

BB: Read it.

BP: I'll look at it.

BB: Yeah, I want to hear what you think about it.

BP: And just people having conversations. I've got friends--. I have a friend who was like, "I haven't voted since 1980 when I needed to vote against Reagan," who are anti-electoral in like every possible way, being like--. It was a spiritual experience for her to go and vote for this black dude. I think that while I can understand the historical significance of that and being moved by that, I also don't have the experience of being a black person in this

country and being like, “Oh, shit. The president is a black dude.” And so I think that’s the other thing that has really kind of chilled out a lot of my criticism, because I’ve got really smart folks around me who are just strategic in every way possible, being like, “I watched the acceptance speech and turned off my critical everything, just because I wanted to soak in hearing this black dude talk about becoming the president and knowing that he’s going to.” This is like Bill Fletcher, who is this mentor to so many people that I know, and this coldly calculated political creature, and Bill just being like, “I turned off and I just soaked in this brother giving this speech.” And so I think that’s the other thing that I’m trying to sit with and just listen to how my kids talk about it and what it means for them is a lot, is a lot. And again, as a white dude, I think that there’s a lot about that that I can’t know and can’t experience, but I’m sort of allowing myself the space to be moved by it in a way that is sort of helping me turn off a little bit of the hater stuff I was coming with at first.

BB: I’m also really struck by how much music and artists and Hollywood and real multi-ethnic, multi-national--. There’s beautiful stuff, and that doesn’t even touch on just how fun--. Like satire, I think is brilliant, political satire, Colbert.

BP: Tina Fey is killing me.

BB: Tina, oh, my god.

BP: Tina Fey is killing me.

BB: It’s some of the most brilliant stuff, and I think they’re talking like them having impact like Chevy Chase and Ford, like really people still blaming him for Ford losing. So I think political satire, they really have some political influence.

BP: Yeah.

BB: Yeah, it’s just brilliant stuff.

BP: Tina Fey is doing it right now. She's unbelievable. I also was looking--. We were talking--. I'm doing a unit on the three branches of government in my civic classes last week and was looking at the presidency once day, and brought in--. Nas did this song called "Black President." We looked at the video and talked about it. And he's sort of taken this, "You civil rights generation of folks who don't want this young brother to succeed," and all this. He's been like, "Fuck you. We're talking. We're stepping up." It's just like kind of playing, looking at this generation gap a bit. Yeah, there's some powerful--. Like Big Boi from Outkast doing a song which is basically just an Obama commercial is the video. There's been a lot out there, and I think, if anything that's really exciting about the campaign is the public consciousness. I mean people are fucking talking about politics, man. Saturday Night Live is relevant for the first time in like who knows. Ten years, fifteen years that show hasn't really mattered, and now it's like it's Saturday Night Live again, because you want to go see what the hell Tina Fey--. Tina Fey's not even on the show anymore.

BB: They're on Thursday nights, too.

BP: Yeah, so it's like the level of discourse that has evolved around this campaign, which I think after the election of 2000, people were paying attention. And in 2004, people were paying attention, but not like this. This is something else. I think that the Hillary Clinton piece is a piece of that that is interesting. And the Sarah Palin piece is a piece of it that's really been stimulating, but ultimately it goes back to this dude, this black dude that's going to win the presidency and have his two black children and his black wife in that White House with him, which is a lot. It's a lot. So I almost had the experience of voting today and being able to talk about that, but it just didn't come together. Part of me kind of wants to wait. If I wasn't so aware that North Carolina actually--. You know the other thing that's

cool is that I've never voted in a way that mattered for the presidency. Bush was going to win in 2000. Bush was going to win in 2004.

BB: And North Carolina was late and going to be red anyway.

BP: Yeah, and so voting in the primary when it actually mattered was pretty cool. And voting in this presidential election, and it's like, man, when I put my little arrow next to Barack Obama it matters because he could win North Carolina or he could lose. So it's like my vote actually means something. And filling in Kay Hagan to get Elizabeth Dole's awful ass out of there is going to be cool. For the first time in a minute--. It's coming at this time period when I've been pushed really hard by people around me politically to recognize the centrality of electoral politics to winning some power in this place. And I'm moving--. I don't know if it's maturity or if it's just that the tactical relationship to electoral politics is becoming clearer to me, and I think clearer to a lot of folks on the Left nationally, particularly in the wake of this last election. I could see myself--. Some of the stuff that I'm working with folks in Durham here and talking about trying to build in Durham is about building something that could look like something like a party or an apparatus that would engage in local struggles around electoral stuff, possibly at some point could offer its own candidates, and having that be part of a national movement to do the same thing, and hook up forces of folks that can work with the Left end of the Democratic Party, and actually work to shift elections and become relevant in a way that the Left is really, really not relevant in the United States right now because elections is where the majority of people in the United States interact with politics. So I think the longer we stay on the sidelines, the less relevant we become. So all of this is kind of going on in my head at the same time when I'm voting for the first time in a way that feels important to me. It's pretty cool. It's pretty cool.

BB: Are you with a specific organization that's thinking about this electoral work locally or is it--?

BP: Well, I think nationally, my connection to Freedom Road--. There's a lot of conversations about starting to--. Because people on the Left have this experience of having been involved in the Rainbow Coalition in '84 and '88. The Rainbow Coalition, which spanned a good chunk of the '80s and was this powerful place for organized labor, for the anti-apartheid movement, for the nuclear freeze stuff, for the Central American support work, for regular folks on the Left side of the Democratic Party to come together and have something that, for a brief period, had autonomy from the Democratic Party, worked in conjunction with the Democratic Party, but had autonomy in some ways, some small ways, from the Democratic Party. And then it got wrapped up in a cult of personality around Jesse Jackson and was co-opted by the Democratic Party, but folks on the Left in the '80s built that thing, revolutionaries, communists in '80s worked really, really hard to help to put together this force called the Rainbow Coalition. Jesse Jackson won the primary in South Carolina in one of the elections. It's like putting together something meaningful.

And so people around the country are starting to have this conversation again around, like, well, what would a Neo-Rainbow be? What would it take to put together something that wasn't immediately focused on winning a national level campaign, like the Greens [Green Party] or something like that, but could start to integrate building new mass organizations on the ground in local places and then hooking those mass organizations up with other people to see how you can shift votes. In this election, you've got--. In northern Virginia, which is really, really critical right now. Somebody was calling it a socialist enclave or something like that in the news recently. In northern Virginia, there's an organization called Tenants &

Workers United that has been the centerpiece of building this 501c4 electoral get out the vote apparatus that is reaching ten thousand folks or more. The Miami Workers Center, which is doing some of the most innovative work in the country right now, in terms of their organizing in low-income communities and with workers, particularly in the service sectors. Miami Workers Center got a grant. It's putting like twenty-five canvassers on the ground doing get out the vote work, touching ten thousand folks in a couple of weeks. They're going to be going out, encouraging people to vote, and getting information that they'll go back and use in their organizing. These two sets of folks that are just I think doing some of the best work in the country, period, are now looking at this electoral work in a really meaningful way. So I think it would be dumb to not be looking at them, who are like the smartest people out there as far as I can tell, who are really investing in electoral work and saying, "There's something here."

So there's these conversations among folks that are saying, "How do we replicate stuff like this? How do we take these models and maybe begin to have an impact?" It's gotten back to [Max] Elbaum out in the Bay, who is a scholar of the '68 generation, the folks that were coming of age in a Maoist kind of political trend. Max has been influential in lots of ways. He writes for "War Times," which has been this newspaper that's been around since the, I guess, war in Iraq started or maybe even prior to that. Every time I talk to Max, he just says, "We need to build a neo-Rainbow. We need to build an electoral apparatus. We need to have an impact on the election in 2012." And he's just like, "That's it. If you're talking about anything other than that, you're wasting your time." And he's a pretty smart dude.



So I think that with some of the folks locally, people who we've worked with over the years in lots of different capacities from Hip Hop Against Racist War, six, seven, however long ago years that was, to UBUNTU and Men Against Rape Culture and some of the work that we were doing around there. We're trying to get a set of folks to get together and do what we call a social investigation, kind of map out Durham and do some study of some people who approach work in this kind of way, and make a map of Durham and say, "Here's where the big employers are. Here's who the real estate developers are. Here's what the plan is for downtown. Here's how many people own a car versus how many people ride the bus. Here's where black people live. Here's where Latino people live. What are the school districts like? What are the electoral districts?" and get this good, comprehensive strategic picture of Durham. And at the end of it, say, "Okay, now the capacity that we have as ten, fifteen, twenty people to go to develop some new kinds of organizing work, or hook up different kinds of organizing work that we may be engaged in to say, "Let's build an organization or organizations that have a membership, like working-class membership." Develop leadership. Do campaign work. Maybe one day do electoral kind of work out of this operation. How do we do that so that we actually have an impact on the political landscape in Durham, instead of just being anti, and participating in building this state-wide coalition or just thinking, "How do we shift the conversation in Durham so that working-class people have control over their lives?"

And electoral politics is certainly going to play a role in that in the long term, probably not anytime soon, though Ray [Eurguhart] thinks we can somebody elected in two years in Durham. [Laughter] He may be right. And so at some point, hopefully if we can build some power and some legitimate organization around some of this stuff, we could have

that fight. And we could say, “Well, is it better to get somebody elected when we don’t have the mass base to really move yet, because then they could start making it easier to do organizing and from the top can have an impact? Or do we wait until we have a big mass base to try to run somebody? Or do we ever run somebody or do we just push people on the questions?” And that’s some of the experience--. The folks at Tenants & Workers United in northern Virginia, I was talking to one of their organizers the other day and he was saying, “Look, we’re not interested in running folks, any of our people for campaigns, but we’ve shifted the dialogue. There’s things that we couldn’t talk about publicly four or five years ago, and now are on the table” because of the work that they’ve done. So that’s really exciting.

I want to be involved in the stuff that gets us out of the margins, that gets us out of the protest vote, or four people standing on a corner holding up signs. Not to say that those things aren’t important, but I really want to be trying to build real organization on the ground that is not an organization that’s just folks who already get it, but really interacting in a day-to-day political dialogue of a city. The school board wants to do this. They can’t do that unless they have our support. I think that’s a conversation that we’ve kind of moved away from because we’ve been getting our asses kicked for so long. It’s just like, well, what if we could win? What does power mean? We were having this conversation with some folks. We were kind of having a meeting about this the other night. One of the guys involved, he was like, “Man.” He was like, “The bailout plan got crushed the first time it got offered, and in two or three days they flipped the vote of dozens of people.” He was like, “I want to know how much power it takes to flip votes of a dozen people in a week on an eight-hundred billion dollar question.” He’s like, “I want to know what that power is.” And I think we shy

away from this question of power because it's delicate. It's like, well, there's power over or power through, but it's like, until, I think, we begin to enter the conversation with real organization and focused on different things, then we just keep protesting. And I'm not saying that we're not going to keep protesting, but how do we win? I think I was really struck by--.

There's a guy, Davey D, who's a DJ and a political commentator out in the Bay, writing about Rosa Clemente being chosen as Cynthia McKinney's vice presidential candidate. And he was really excited about it, because here's this Afro-Puerto Rican being chosen by this African American woman to run for--. The Green Party, I suppose, could be considered a big deal. It's a big deal that Cynthia McKinney was picked for this, particularly with her role in the Democratic Party previously. So he's writing about Rosa Clemente being picked and he said something about, "I don't have any illusions that we're going to win, but it's enough to just put some issues on the table," or something like that. And I just sort of--. I read it and I just winced, and I just thought, "Fuck." Is that enough? Is that enough? And is that respecting what we're doing to say that it's enough to not think about winning and to say, "Well, it's enough that we held up our signs and yelled and hollered some questions from the margin. We were that one dude in a room full of a thousand people who's like screaming stuff from the back, and people look at us and they go, "Hmm." And they keep going about their business. I don't think that's respectful. People are dying. All over the world, people are dying. Right here people are dying, and I think that we need to begin to think about winning. And that's not going to be clean or pure. So people say, "Hold your nose and vote." It's like a "hold your nose and vote" movement. And say, "Man, policy is an ugly game." It's not going to just be clean and pure and we can just take the exact

position we want to every time, but if we're going to matter, I think that we're going to have to start doing some different things. Maybe this is me becoming conservative or something, but--.

BB: [Laughter] **(0:27:21, second file)**

BP: I know, right. No, no.

BB: The death of youthful resistance.

BP: But I just think that I want something new, and I think that people deserve something new.

BB: What is your vision of a liberated world?

BP: Um.

BB: We did this one.

BP: I think so.

BB: We did this one. Well, do it again. We'll see if there's anything different.

BP: Well, it's interesting. On this album that Common made back in 2000 called "Water for Chocolate," he did a song about Assata Shakur, and at the end of it, he actually interviews her, probably over the phone or something like that. And she says, "Freedom. You asking me about freedom? You're asking me about freedom?" And then she says, "I don't know what freedom is. I know what it isn't." [Laughter] So it's hard to even imagine what that world looks like, but I think that it looks a world where people who do the work make the decisions about the work that they do, where people don't have to work until they're sixty-five and then die two years later or worry about their pension disappearing. Folks right now are like seventy-something years old and worrying if they're going to have to go back to work. What the hell is that? That is no kind of world that I want to live in.

And that's here in the United States where people even have the option of retiring. People all over the world don't even get to consider stopping working. No, you don't even live that long. You just die. And even here in the U.S., on some reservations, life expectancy is forty-something years old for men. That's not something I want to be a part of. I want to be a part of a place where kids get to explore the world and not have to worry. And we don't have to limit them because they might not be safe. Where we get to read beautiful books and see beautiful movies. Where our work means something. It's not just like fucking making money for somebody else. And where our schools are these places for exploration and meeting the needs of the future.

I was invited by my principal to participate as our school's delegation at the Durham Public Schools high school reform meeting. It meets like four times a year or something like that. I asked the superintendent--. We got this five-minute question and answer period with the superintendent. I was like, well, how often am I going to get this chance? Let me just ask--. I said, "What's the plan for the ecological crisis? Like what's the plan? Is there a plan? If so, where can we find it? And if not, can we have one?" And he was like, "Yeah, there isn't one." They were counting days that they had fuel left in the recent period where there were some shortages in North Carolina. They were counting days they had fuel left for the buses. And it's like, there's no plan for food. There's no plan for energy efficiency. There's no plan for fuel. That's not a world that I want to live in. A world that I want to live in says, "Damn, there's this big challenge ahead of us. How are we going to fix it?" You know what I mean? Like have kids in schools working on solar technology and growing gardens in the back so that the school lunch can be safe. And we know there's going to be food, and that the food might actually be nutritious, and that the kids actually know where the

food comes from because they grow it themselves. Where we can say we're not so stuck in this reactionary discourse where we can say, "Man, how do we fix stuff? How do we recognize the challenges?" People in the United States can realize, "I am part of a planet where there are other people." You know? [Laughter] "And what I do here impacts what happens to other people, and what other people do in other places impacts what I do here." Globalization has become this evil word or whatever, but globalization is a fact. Like globalization is a globalization where we get to interact with each other and meet each other and know each other and make solutions with each other. People aren't put into boxes because they are men, or because they're women, or because they're not really feeling like they're either of those things, or because they come from a certain place.

I've just been really heart-broken by looking at my kids and just being like, fuck, somebody rolled the dice and you lost, and that's it. That's it. They're seventeen, eighteen years old, and a good portion of them are not going to make it out of their twenties either alive or from the other side of bars, period. I've asked two of my guys lately how many black dudes they know that are thirty that have never been to prison and are alive. One of them said, "One." The other one said, "Two." It's just like that is not something I want to be a part of. That is not a planet that I want to be a part of. And these kids didn't do anything wrong. They didn't sin. [Laughter] They just were born and that's it. That is it. That is their lives. There's no Horatio Alger. There's no pulling themselves up out of that. It's just, that's it. That's their choices. And so they can either hustle while they're here to not be worrying about money every second of the day, but be worrying about getting killed every second of the day or getting arrested every second of the day, or they can worry, worrying about starving, worrying about the lights getting turned out every day. That's your choice.

You either hustle, which is going to kill you or put you in jail, or you work in a four-dollar-an-hour job frying up chicken or french fries for somebody. And they shut your lights off at the end of the month every month, and your phone is never turned on. That's not a fucking choice. That is not a choice. I want people to have a choice, people to get to decide who they want to be. And if you want to be a weirdo or a nerd or a dancer or whatever, that you get to do that, because that's who you are. And we value who you are. That's not where we're at right now.

So I know a whole lot more about what we don't have. I can't imagine what it would look like for all of us to just get to be us. Who knows? And for there not to be any West Bank or Gaza. Like, what the hell? What would that look like? I don't know. I want to know. I'd like to find out. That's why I get up in the morning, because I want to know, but sometimes it's hard. I've got folks who are like, they can't read about what's going on with the ecology anymore, because if they do, they won't get out of bed, because it's just like, "Why? Why does it matter? It doesn't matter what we do because there's not going to be clean air. And we're going to be underwater and all the bees are going to be dead. And half the plants are going to be dead. So, what the fuck? Why get up every day?" And it's just like that's not okay. That's not okay. Sometimes I come back from my school and I leave right when school's over, and I come home and I fall asleep because it's just like, it just feels so big. It just feels so big. I want to not feel like that. I want to not have my friends be like, "I can't get out of bed today because it doesn't matter what I do because there won't be water in fifty years." That sucks. That sucks.

For my kids to go through what they go through, it just breaks my fucking heart. Kids talking about, well--. I asked them one day to talk about a decision that they regretted

or something they wished that they could change. And this girl's like, "Well, I wish I wouldn't have flipped out on people when my father was murdered. I wish I would've handled that better." She's sixteen years old. She might be fifteen. And she's talking about wishing that she would've handled it better when her father was murdered? You've got to be kidding me. You just want to die when you hear stuff like that. So it's just like, I don't want that. I don't want that. Nobody should get murdered. Nobody. Can we just say that? Can we just say that a liberated world looks like nobody gets murdered? How about that? Can we just start there? Kids don't have their fathers taken away from them because they're murdered over some bullshit, I'm sure. That's my vision for a liberated world, Bridgette. My kids' fathers don't get murdered. Just fucking terrible. [Sighs]

BB: I'm going to pause just for a second.

BP: Yeah.

[RECORDER IS TURNED OFF AND BACK ON]

BB: Okay. So tell me about--. Maybe you did say when you met Rebecca [Silver], but tell me about her. Describe what you love about her, what you like about her most. What's she like? What do you love about her?

BP: It's hard to encapsulate. She's complicated, man. She is somebody who, without really getting into it, should not be here. I think about some of my kids in the same way, somebody who like--. It's like Audre Lorde's poem, "for those who were never meant to survive," ["Litany for Survival] this is where you find life. I marvel sometimes at what she can do and how she can grow and how she can laugh and smile. She's figured out or is constantly searching to figure out what it is that she can do, and what it is that's good for her. And she knows that she likes--. She gets comfort from spaces that are pretty and orderly, so



it's like the aesthetic is directed towards, "How do I make my space pretty and orderly?" When we first met, she was watching "Finding Nemo" like every day, because it was just like watching "Finding Nemo" just makes you feel good. And she'd walk around the house singing, "Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming." And it's just like, man, this person is just unbelievable.

She's not got a whole lot of people around her and is very intentional about that because it takes a lot of energy to have a whole lot of people around you. And that's hard for me because I like to have lots of people around me pretty constantly, but it's also really helped me come in and learn how to take care of myself a little bit. I think that if I were left to my own devices, I would just go and go and go and go and go until I fell apart. So she's really good at knowing how to take care of herself, which is pretty inspiring and pretty helpful a lot of the time. And she's hilarious and just really, really funny, and can just talk shit with the best of them, which I need. And is really, stunningly smart. Like, she didn't go to class very much at all her whole first year of medical school, and did just as well as everybody else did. This is medical school. She just has the capacity to do stuff without putting in as much effort as other people need to. That's just like, damn, like really, how smart are? It's kind of absurd sometimes to think about what other people do and what she does and how she ends up doing as well as everybody else.

She's really into the kids, the babies, so she's going to be a pediatrician. When she comes back from working with kids at the hospital, it's just like a different--. Like the schoolwork and the studying and the going to classes has just been sort of drudgery for her, but when she gets to actually do it, it's like everybody--. She's got nurses who are like, "I want to work with you when you become a doctor." Doctors who have this manner with kids

that just doesn't get them anywhere and she'll just walk right in and say, "Oh," and approach it in this way, and the kid gives them what they want. So she's special.

She's just really special, and gets me in ways that I didn't get me, and holds parts of me up that I didn't even know were there or that if I did, I wasn't holding them up, and just adoration for these things. And you're just sort of like, "Yeah, that is cool. That is cool that I'm that," that I don't think I would've got to on my own. I'm not known for my humility, but it's funny. A lot of that is just kind of play, and so I feel like, just like with anybody else, there's lots of insecurities and there's lots of--. I kind of play with this kind of ego thing. And certainly I've been afforded the space to feel really good about myself in ways that I've not had to struggle with like other people have. But it's also like I don't walk around and really, really thinking that I'm all that, but since I've met her, it's like, "No, no, no. You really are that. You really are amazing in these ways." And I'm just like, "Really?" And she's like, "Yeah. You should know that." And it's just cool to--. I think that I've gotten--. Again, a lot of my friends would say that I didn't need this, but there's sort of a self-esteem boost just because she's just made me feel really good about who I am. Yeah, she's just great. She's great.

And she loves taking care of--. She loves being able to take care of things. So we have this dog that's like our child, and she just loves being able to take care of Bean. And you know, there have been conversations about us having kids that could materialize in the next couple of years. And it's just like I can't even imagine what she is going to be like with a child that is hers. It's just going to be really, really shocking, the intensity of love. I know that's kind of the thing with mothers and their kids anyway, but there's this whole other level of the way in which, if there's something she's responsible for, what she does with that thing.

And so there's no way I can prepare for what that's going to look like, but it's exciting to think about. And like a year ago this time, it didn't look like we were going to be together. She just is--. And this isn't directly offered at the end of that sentence, because we both had some stuff to work on, but she works on herself unrelentingly. If there's something that she wants to figure out, it's like, you get self-help books; you talk to professionals; you go to this place. You just do everything, whereas if something's wrong with the toilet, I'll just be like, "Well, let's just call somebody who knows toilets." She'll like get on the internet for an hour and then teach herself how to do something. I'm just like, "Why?" But it's just because this is what I do. And so it's really cool because she just is always into growing in new ways. So it's a lot of fun.

BB: How long have ya'll been together now?

BP: It'll be five years this coming New Year's since we met.

BB: Is there one really sweet memory that pops to mind, some sweet memory with you and her?

BP: There's lots. When we first started dating, we went to--. I had student taught at Clayton High the semester before we met, and so when we first started dating, we went to a basketball game at Clayton the next semester because I just wanted to see some of my kids or whatever. They had this contest at halftime to go shoot a free throw and win a hundred dollars or something like that. I was turning and talking to one of my students, and all of a sudden, there she is running down the bleachers to go and shoot a basket and maybe win. I remember being struck at the time like, "Damn, this chick is--." She's just really spontaneous, just whatever, but what's really interesting about that is in hindsight, that's not who she is. But to be able to get that much outside of who she is to participate in something

that was meaningful for me, it's really, it's a lot. So, yeah, that's pretty cool. There's all these sweet things from when you first meet, but I think even just like--. Most of the time she refers to me, she calls me angel. And it's not just like this term that just gets thrown on the end of a sentence. It's like she's really putting something into it. So it's just like, wow. Yeah, I keep going back to the words a lot. I don't really know. I'm into words, so the fact that I can't come up with words for it is significant.

BB: That'll make you want to be your best, someone who looks at you and believes and knows that you're a real angel.

BP: Yeah, yeah.

BB: That'll make you grow right there **(0:18:23, third file)**.

BP: Yeah, it's something else, something else.

BB: Is there anything that we haven't talked about? I know we can't remember the last couple talks, but--.

BP: We talked about everything.

BB: We talked about music, movies. We talked about books you like, organizations you've been in.

BP: I don't know what there is left. We've talked about everything under the sun.

BB: [Laughter] That's great.

BP: I hate whoever has to be the person who listens to all this and types it up because there's just ramblings about--.

BB: They're not ramblings.

BP: **(0:19:03, third file)** this and that.

BB: Good stuff. So in your justice work, what sustains and nurtures you?

BP: People. It's like the goal here is to retain some level of humanity in a whole world that is designed to just destroy our humanity right now. Capitalism literally turns people into commodities and turns all of life into commodities. And despite that, people laugh and people talk shit and people cry with each other and people go for walks and people do yoga. People cook. People just do these things and people just make it. I've got kids that--. And I consider my teaching to be part of my work. I've got kids who shouldn't be here and go through just the foulest shit every single day. And they get up and come to my class and try to learn about the Constitution. And it's just like, are you kidding me? I would've folded up and quit. I'd be lying in a corner, rocking myself back and forth in some hospital somewhere. And they're trying to learn the Constitution, and it's just like, damn. It's just this really, blown away by people's capacity to one, survive, and then two, to still smile and to still love and to still dance. And it's just like, man, that's what gets you through. It's like if my fucking kids are going through this and can smile and can crack jokes on each other and can dance, it's just like, naw, man. I can do it. I can do whatever because they're doing that. You know what I mean? Again, it's like if people in Gaza who have been locked onto a plot of land where there are no resources can survive and fight back, there's nothing I can't do. There's nothing I can't do.

And so I think just kind of holding, just kind of being among people and seeing what people have the capacity to do is just like, well, yeah, we win. In the end, we can win. We can fix this. We broke it. What's the Dick Cheney metaphor about the Pottery Barn? It's like, we broke this thing. We broke it and we can fix it. We can. We have to. That's our task. It's like the [Franz] Fanon quote, "Each generation has to find what its purpose is, what

its mission is, and either betray it or do it, make it happen.” And that’s not exactly what Fanon said, I’m sure, but it’s like we just, we have to do it. I’m driven by-- It’s hard. Rebecca and I go back and forth. Sometimes when she touches the awfulness of the world, it’s like she has to retreat from it and has to sort of insulate herself from it. I have to work when I see it. I don’t know if it’s a blessing or if it’s a curse, but I’ve been blessed with this capacity to endlessly put in time and put in work and put in energy. If I was given this, then I need to do something with it. If there’s stuff that’s broken, then you’ve got to just fix it. You’ve just got to go and go and go and go until it’s fixed.

And part of that is this kind of Catholic, got to be like Jesus thing, which I’m sure has impacted me in some ways, whether I like it or not. But it’s like the old-- I mean it’s biblical, right? The old Communist slogan, “To each according to his need, from each according to his ability.” I have a lot of capacity. I have received every level of privilege that one could have, right down to having a stable and loving and affirming household. And I’m going to do something with that. I do not have long on this place and I better do something with that because otherwise, what the hell am I doing? Living for me? Living just a life that’s about making my life better? That’s not what we’re here for. That’s not how I became who I became. I became who I became because people lived for me, because I’ve got parents who pushed it aside to help me grow. I have teachers and professors who have committed their lives to making better people. I’ve got friends and family who would do anything for me and have held me down when it was rough. I’ve got people around me who should’ve just folded up and quit on themselves, much less giving any energy to me. I’ve got kids who, like I said, should not be here, but let somebody say something bad about me?

They wouldn't have it. So it's like none of those people live lives for themselves, none of them. They all live lives for the people around them and the world around them.

So, what am I going to do? How's it going to look for me to say, "Oh, well. Let me just work so I can get my forty-inch flat screen plasma TV," which I'll get if Obama loses and we've got to go to the Circuit City. But how's that going to look? That just doesn't make any sense. That's not right. That's not what we're here for. Despite everything that capitalism tells us, that is not what we are here for. We're here for each other. That's why we're here. I've got no other choice. If that's God, then that's the purpose that I've been given. I can't quit. And plus I'm obsessive. I stay up until three o'clock in the morning working on a power point for my class the next day because I've got to look for forty-five minutes for this one picture that's in my head that I know is going to be the one that's going to make it make sense, or is going to be the right one. And I'm just so proud when I project that image. [Laughter] It's like, dude, let go, but I just don't. I just don't work like that. What keeps me engaged is just us.

I can't watch a Hollywood movie and somebody make a sacrifice for somebody else, I mean even just--. I can't watch "Finding Nemo" without tearing up. When all the fish are in the net and Nemo goes back into the net because he knows how they can get out. He says, "Well, you've just gotten swim down. Swim down." And his dad's saying, "No, I'm not going to lose you." And he says, "I have to do this. I know how to do this." And his dad says, "Okay." I mean right now I'm getting a chill, and this is like a fucking cartoon. But I cannot see someone sacrificing for somebody else and not just be moved by it, even just the smallest gestures that people make for each is like, that's how we affirm our existence in the middle of this fucking awful place that we have constructed. And so it's that stuff gets me

through, man. That stuff gets me through. That's why you do it. You do it because people taught you to do it and you've got to teach other people how to do it. And that's why we're here. So I'm just doing what everybody else is doing. I'm just doing it a little differently.

BB: That's a really beautiful way to end. Thank you, Bryan Proffitt, for being part of this project.

BP: Thank you for letting me be a part of it. I don't know what I did to deserve it, but it's been fun.

BB: You cry at Nemo, **(0:29:11, third file)**

BP: [Laughter] Yeah, well, I'm hoping that part doesn't end up in the transcript.

BB: [Laughter] All right.

BP: I'll lose some of my street cred.

BB: [Laughter]

BP: Like I have any.

BB: [Laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Madeleine Baran, Jan. 6, 2009.