

VOICES

Collective action and care

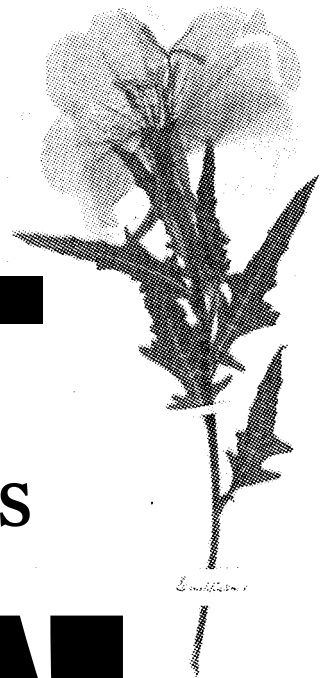
BEYOND

across borders

LOCK-

in a time of crisis

DOWN





Conium maculatum, apocynifolium. Sm.

INTRODUCTION

This series of interviews explores the ways in which community activists, artists and frontline workers in Montréal responded to the first months of the current global pandemic.

This set of conversations recorded between March and May 2020 focuses on lifting up the ideas of friends and collaborators. I appreciate the ways that each individual interview shares important insights to the specific political, social and cultural context of each speaker. I believe there is something to learn from each voice featured here.

Voices beyond lockdown is really about witnessing important connections and reflections that are both local and global, articulated by insightful voices from Montréal community organizing and artistic circles. The urgent and persistent need for solidarity across borders expressed by these voices in the first months of the pandemic remains clear today in 2024.

The project is focused on highlighting voices who have all in distinct ways contributed to collective community struggles at a grassroots level. It is this type of essential work that I believe plays a central role in holding together our collective well being locally and globally.

In all of these interviews we can learn about the ways that the collective crisis of the pandemic exposed systemic inequalities, in regards to class, race and gender, realities that travel across borders and transpire in different but interconnected ways. The structural issues addressed in these interviews remain critically relevant today.

It is critical to recall and reflect on the first months of the pandemic that shaped these interviews, as this period of crisis illustrates the ways that mainstream corporate and state power deeply failed and continues to fail in addressing many issues of systemic injustice.

Instead of viewing these important issues as political oversights, I feel it is key to underline the injustices addressed in these conversations as inherent to the basic infrastructure of the structures of economic and political global governance today.

This interview series is about giving value to the voices of people working to address the pandemic on the front lines, operating far away from the voices of politicians and corporate leaders.

The people featured in this project allow us to critically recall the ways that mutual aid and collective solidarity, at grassroots levels, was central to ensuring survival for many people and communities.

On this note it is also important for us to always remember the many who were lost in this crisis due to the ineptitude of the vast majority of politicians and corporate leaders who continue to hold unjust and unacceptable levels of power over our lives.

It is critical to underline the support offered by Elena Razlogova for this project and also the Social Justice Centre at Concordia University.

These conversations took place also in the context of my ongoing work in community radio which involves the weekly Free City Radio program, a project that is now syndicated on seven FM / AM stations in Canada. Also you can look the program up as a podcast through both Apple Podcasts and Spotify, just search Free City Radio.

The show broadcasts on CKUT 90.3FM at 11am on Wednesdays, on CJLO 1690 AM on Wednesdays at 8:30am, both in Tiohti:àke/Montréal. On CKUW 95.9FM in Winnipeg at 10:30pm on Tuesdays, on CFRC 101.9FM in Kingston, Ontario at 11:30am on Wednesdays, on CFUV 101.9 FM in Victoria, BC on Wednesdays at 9am and Saturdays at 7am, as well as Met Radio 1280 AM in Toronto at 5:30am on Fridays and on CKCU FM 93.1 in Ottawa on Tuesdays at 2pm, tune-in!

Thank you to my partner Tanha Gomes for your unwavering love.

It is an honour to share these conversations with you, thank you for reading.

— Stefan Christoff, September 2024
Tiohti:àke / Mooniyang / Montréal.

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MARTIN AKWIRANORON LOFT

An Indigenous perspective on COVID-19 in Canada

Highlighting critical Indigenous perspectives on public health emergencies is important. This is a transcript of a conversation that I had with photographer Martin Akwiranoron Loft during the first lockdown of the pandemic.

It is important to note that within this interview Martin stresses the importance of supporting Resilience Montreal and the Native Women's Shelter of Montréal / *Le foyer pour femmes autochtones de Montréal*, two frontline organizations that are important to keep supporting today in 2024.

This conversation was recorded in Montréal at the height of the first pandemic lockdown in spring 2020, so it is important to engage with this material while taking into consideration the immediate context within which it was recorded.

Stefan Christoff: Canada's government has proposed a minimum of three-hundred-million for Indigenous communities to deal with the pandemic, on reserves, is this adequate?

Martin Akwiranoron Loft: I would say, considering all the communities across Canada, from coast-to-coast-to-coast, south-to-north, this amount presents many challenges.

I am not a first responder, or someone delivering medical services, but I know, from seeing things online and speaking with many friends, the need is humongous.

I am thinking of northern communities and the fact that there are no hospitals. In this context patients need to fly south for care, so just the transport is a major amount of

money. Also if people go north from the cities in the south, to pick-up people, they can bring infections.

Even in the south, in Akwesasne, Kahnawake, Kanehsatà:ke, there is little money available for medical transport, calling ambulances is costly, so if we have twenty or thirty percent of people getting sick, many Indigenous communities are going to run out of resources even in the south.

Marc Miller (*then the Minister of Crown Indigenous Relations*), announced three-hundred-million and I asked Marc directly if this includes urban Indigenous communities, and it doesn't.

Today there are so many Indigenous people in cities, towns and villages, right across Canada (*that fall outside of support systems managed by band councils*). All of these communities have special needs, given there are higher levels of diabetes and other health issues which put our people, Indigenous peoples, at a disadvantage. In Canada urban Indigenous communities are often put into the same category as everyone else, in regards to services and funding, not always, but often, and this move erases the particular needs that Indigenous people have. This point is important to remember.

Right now, billions of dollars are going out across Canada, this is good, but I am wondering specifically how urban Indigenous people will be supported. I am thinking everyday about Indigenous people with specific needs.

SC: What are your friends who work directly with community organizations like Native Friendship Centres saying to you?

MAL: At Native Friendship Centres in Ottawa, Hamilton and Toronto people are asking similar questions. How will urban Indigenous people be supported?

In response to this crisis, band councils are responding, in some cases, to say that urban Indigenous people can't be helped with their specifically allocated resources for non-urban band members living on reserve.

For instance there are Indigenous people from Kahnawake in every major city, in Montréal, in Toronto, in Vancouver and across Canada, the band can't send out planes to pick people up, or send medical teams to support those folks. So now I am wondering how urban Indigenous people, who live outside of reserves, get support specifically? This brings up larger questions that are important even outside of the pandemic context.

So it is all wrong right now for many Indigenous folks, it is like the nightmare scenario that people have been reading about and watching movies about forever. So I stay up at night wondering how this nightmare scenario is impacting different Indigenous people all over. Governments are telling people to stay put, but what does staying put on the street mean when you have nowhere to go? Or staying put in cramped quarters, with five people living in a small urban apartment which also does also seem like a good option.

SC: This happens a lot for Indigenous people coming from the North to the city, here in Montreal for sure. Many folks are sharing small apartments due to a lack of funds.

MAL: Yes, exactly. This is already a challenge, but right now it is even more major because of the pandemic. I have heard and seen of Indigenous people in Montreal who are now deciding to leave the city to go into the bush, the forest. There are a couple people making that choice that I have heard about from Indigenous friends. The alarm bells are ringing.

SC: The Native Friendship Centre Network across Canada plays a really important role in supporting Indigenous people in urban centres, in many ways, culturally, economically and in terms of services. So with many friendship centres being closed, what does this mean in the context of the COVID crisis for many urban Indigenous folks who rely on those spaces?

MAL: A good question. I was on the board of the Native Friendship Centre in Montreal for some time, so I keep thinking about these spaces. I have also been in touch with Native Montreal, where I did workshops. I keep thinking about how these spaces need more resources due to the critical frontline role that they play.

SC: You presented many arts workshops in these spaces. Can you speak about these efforts?

MAL: Yes I did printmaking workshops and attended many Indigenous arts meetings also. The printmaking workshops were an effort to create a context for urban Indigenous people to learn new tools for creative expression and to share their voice, to speak about their experiences.

SC: Why is it important to consider the impact of these spaces being closed now?

MAL: I just wanted to note that Resilience Montreal is open and they are doing great work right now.

simply put they don't want to be a centre for spreading illness, this includes the Native Friendship Centre. As it is a cultural centre, it had to be closed, but still that equals less support for Indigenous people and this is a major concern that I have.

The Resilience Centre and the Native Women's Shelter need donations right now, there are many people in desperate need who rely on these spaces and thankfully they do remain open. They are always looking for support, in the winter people are looking for socks and gloves. This is especially important for people who live on the streets with diabetes who get numb feet and fingers in the winter. I am thinking of people still homeless right now, including Indigenous people, who are crowding into shelters right now to keep warm. They are facing great health risks.

SC: Thanks for sharing these reflections. As an Indigenous artist, given everything that is happening, what are some reflections that you would like to share as an artist?

MAL: I am stunned and in disbelief everyday. I feel it is almost like this is a social death. I keep waking up in the morning and thinking this was all a bad dream, but it isn't, we are living it.

One of my kids has asthma, so we were scrambling to get their asthma medication. My son is 28-years old and is vulnerable due to asthma, so this situation is serious for many of us in big and small ways, it is real.

I keep thinking about many families who are facing difficult situations, especially those relying on shelters.

People are upset with all levels of government, even with the band councils, for not stepping up in the ways that they should and must.

I am listening to the new bulletins on K1037, which has been a good source of current information in regards to how the crisis is impacting Indigenous people locally and also in other communities.

Kahnawake is doing well until now, that is a relief, but all the councils need to get together to address this situation as Indigenous governing bodies also. Akwesasne is between Ontario, Quebec and also within the U.S. so this creates a difficult bureaucracy, for medical bills specifically, but it also illustrates how Indigenous communities exist across borders and don't fit into Canada. This has big impacts in terms of policy and accessing public resources.

SC: So administering health services to Indigenous communities that are between borders means that often people face bureaucratic nightmares



because the community doesn't fit exactly into a colonial province, territory or country.

MAL: Yes exactly. In this light we need to think about this in the current context in relation to these points as lived by Indigenous peoples.

People must stay informed and aware of what Indigenous communities are facing right now, the Resilience Centre and the Native Women's Shelter are good reference points for supporting people locally. When calls come for help, especially right now, you should listen. Indigenous communities already have a lot of pre-existing issues, due to colonialism, people face poverty, homelessness, isolation, while people in the North mostly don't have institutional health services access, especially to hospitals.

SC: Thank you for sharing this.

MAL: Well you know there are lots of native memes going around that basically say: everyone is stuck inside, you can't do what you want to do, your needs aren't met, well Canada now you know what Indigenous people face all the time!

Despite this all, people are practicing resilience, Indigenous people have had hard times before. Also we aren't being bombed, it is not like in Syria, or Palestine, but still this is serious. We have electricity, heat, food, till now, but still it is a crisis and we need to hear the voices of Indigenous people right now. Especially voices of the most vulnerable and urban Indigenous communities already struggling with poverty, homelessness and isolation in many cases.

SC: It is important to remember all the time that some Indigenous people are in poverty and don't have shelter and care. This was a reality before the pandemic and it is heightened right now.

MAL: Yes exactly.

MOHAMED BARRY

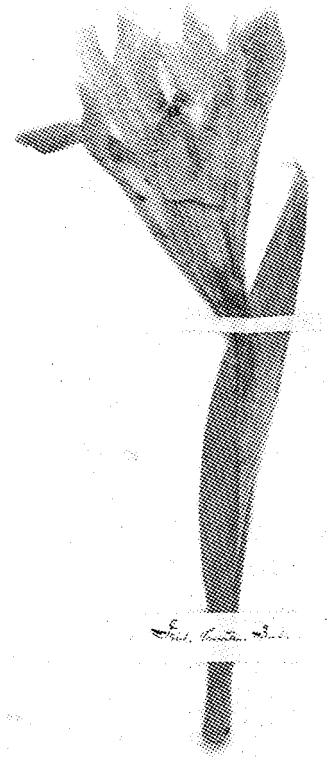
Guinean community activist speaks on a hunger strike by migrants detained by Canadian authorities during COVID-19 and the rights of immigrant warehouse workers

In spring 2020 there was an important migrant justice hunger strike action at the Canadian government's federal immigration detention centre in Laval, which was actually called *Le Centre de prévention de l'immigration à Laval* until around 2023 when after some renovations it was renamed *Le centre de surveillance de l'immigration (CSI)*.

The Canadian government locks away immigrants and asylum seekers in this centre, which operates basically like a prison and is located just outside of Montreal. There have been important campaigns and efforts to call into question the inherent violence of Canadian government policy around the detention, in some cases indefinitely, of asylum seekers. Amnesty International writes: "Under Canadian law, a non-citizen can be incarcerated indefinitely in immigration detention, based solely on administrative grounds."

In March and April 2020 there was an important series of hunger strike actions organized by asylum seekers at the Laval immigration jail. During one of those actions I called Mohamed Barry, the spokesperson for the *Statut pour les guinéens* campaign, which is a vital and important force within the larger #StatusForAll movement.

Mohamed has faced detention in Laval as an asylum seeker in the past and has also done a lot of support work for those locked up, with a particular focus on supporting West African migrants. I thought



it would be meaningful to speak with Mohamed at a critical moment, during an active hunger strike.

In the context of the pandemic Mohamed worked as an essential worker in warehouse distribution centres in the Montreal area alongside many other migrant workers. These warehouses illustrate that the shutdown during the pandemic simply wasn't a shutdown for all, as many weren't able to stop working within the context of the pandemic. In this interview Mohamed shared reflections about this reality.

I should also note that I have known Mohamed since 2017 when the *Statut pour les guinéens* campaign launched. This campaign united community organizers around the Immigrant Workers Centre and Solidarity Across Borders with a network of Guinean asylum seekers organizing to fight for status.

I have been a supporter and actively involved in building community support for this group of self-organized Guinean refugees who are openly fighting the deportation system administered by the Canadian government. I have learned a great deal working as a community activist alongside Mohamed and within the larger network of Guinean migrants and community organizers occupying this critical frontline of migrant justice struggle.

Also please note that this conversation was recorded before any vaccines were administered, this fact outlines why some of the points being raised by Mohamed in the interview were even more critically important at the time.

Stefan Christoff: Thank you for speaking with me so late in the evening Mohamed. So right now at the Laval detention centre, there is a hunger strike going on. You have spent a lot of time at the Laval jail, both as a refugee claimant, but also in visits when you are trying to support people who are detained. So I really wanted to hear how you are feeling about the hunger strike taking place...

Mohamed Barry: I feel very angry, I don't see why people are detained there right now. Why are they being held and not released by the government?

There is a high chance for people to get COVID-19 in there. At the centre they keep people in the same rooms, the same areas, people can't stay apart in a safe way, because the centre is often crowded, I know this from personal experience.

SC: Also there are families and people of different generations detained there, right?

MB: Yes, some elderly people and also some families have been detained for sure. I don't honestly know exactly who is all in there right now. The whole situation is very sad, everyone detained needs to be free.

SC: What do you want to say to the Canadian government about this?

MB: I want to say that all the people in Laval who are detained need to be released immediately.

I feel really sad that people are forced to go on a hunger strike to call for their rights and health to be respected. I feel sad about the detention situation, but I am encouraging the strikers to continue taking action until they are released. They must release them, because their detention is a violation of human rights. This situation is not safe for all the people detained, so by extension this situation is not safe for all in this society.

SC: Also people are jailed at the Laval centre for no crime, just for being immigrants, for being refugees. I thought it is important to underline this, could you address this point?

MB: Actually it is a crime from the Canadian government to keep these immigrants and refugees locked in a prison.

The government is cutting outside visitors during the hunger strike as punishment to the migrants, but all they have really done is to try to address their situation collectively, to speak to the COVID-19 dangers. The situation isn't safe, it is a crowded situation in the centre, they must be released.

SC: So this is a violation of human rights by the Canadian government?

MB: Yes, the government is denying the human rights and safety of the people at Laval centre.

SC: Are you speaking with anyone in the detention centre in Laval?

MB: I have been speaking with some of those detained, particularly people from Guinea and West Africa. I have also gotten voice mails from others inside the strike, it is very touching. I am very sad about their situation, they must be released now.

SC: So right now you are working during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a warehouse ...

MB: Yes I am. Right now the work is hard, but I have to work. I haven't done a warehouse job like this for

a long time, since my injury (*Mohamed had a debilitating injury in a warehouse before the pandemic that he is still dealing with today a serious injury to one foot and specifically a toe seriously damaged by a forklift*), so it is really challenging to stand up on my feet for a long time.

SC: Yes, because you injured your foot seriously at another warehouse job ...

MB: Yes, that's it. So it is hard to stand up for a long time, but I need to work. I have to stand-up without sitting down for 2 hours. I can then sit for 15 minutes, also there is lunch for 30 mins and then another 15 minutes break. I work from 3-11pm most days.

SC: You lost part of your foot in a warehouse job accident, right?

MB: Yes, I have two small toes seriously wounded and my large toe was seriously cut. I am still taking medication for pain and have to do exercises for my balance.

SC: Can you describe the warehouse where you are working? What are you collecting, arranging, taking out of boxes?

MB: Inside the boxes there are different products for Montreal, some for Dollarama type places, but also clothes for other stores. Mostly recently it has been clothing from different companies, for stores, shoes, bags and other products.

So I have to arrange them. This is a distribution centre, sometimes I also go to arrange and fold all the empty boxes for a long time, very big sheets of cardboard.

SC: When you work in the distribution centre, are you far apart from the other people?

MB: They give us masks, and gloves, but it is still dangerous because there are many workers close together. So we are touching, moving things all the time, then we all go to eat together and some people go to smoke together on the breaks.

SC: Who are you working with at the distribution centre?

MB: Mostly I am working with immigrants, from many different countries, but mostly from Africa, from Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Congo and other counties, but also a few people from Pakistan and India, and a couple other people from different parts of the world, like the Caribbean and

Latin America, even Eastern Europe.

SC: So now you're working at this distribution centre, but also you have been involved in migrant justice movements, with the Immigrant Workers Centre, with Solidarity Across Borders, so you are seeing the workplace injustices occurring, but also you are working on campaigns for justice for immigrants and refugees.

MB: Sometimes I feel shocked because of the exploitation toward the workers that I see on the job. For example, when the floor managers speak to the immigrant workers, you can feel the managers aren't kind often, they try to cut our time, in the cafeteria for example. Also in the cafeteria, there are many people, only two microwaves, people line-up for this and then they rush us to finish eating, so cutting our time sometimes means we weren't able to heat up our food.

Mostly we aren't paid very well, often we are paid minimum wage or just above minimum in these warehouses, that's all.

Because of my injury I can't work long in the cold, because of my foot, I can't lift heavy things, so I get pressure to do these things from the company, but I simply can't right now.

SC: When you're doing all this, are you thinking about the Guinean community and the work that you do outside?

MB: Yes I think about Guineans and about our struggle to fight deportations. But also, on the job, I think of the many Africans working, from Mali, Cameroon, Burkina and many places in Africa, there is even one guy I work with from Pakistan that I talk with, but mostly I am talking with other Africans.

SC: How do you feel about working during COVID-19 overall? I feel it is important people get a sense of your feelings overall.

MB: I don't feel safe, I feel sad, but I need to work. If we don't work, we don't have money. Many people working in the space have difficult situations, no status, non-status, refused refugee claimants, many different situations actually, also international students, so all these groups aren't getting support during COVID-19 and have to keep working.

I am worried about my health, I am always worried. I have to keep the sanitizer with me and be careful after returning from work when in transit.

ZAYID AL-BAGHDADI

Lawyer and musician speaks on the impacts of COVID-19 on prisoners in Quebec and shares perspectives from a member of Iraqi Diaspora

Prisoners in Montréal, across Québec and Canada faced particular vulnerabilities at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I recorded this conversation in March 2020 there were reports about COVID beginning to spread within the *Centre de detention Sherbrooke* on Talbot street in Sherbrooke and within other jails in Canada.

I should note that this interview was first recorded within the context of sharing information on the situation facing prisoners within the mutual aid networks that were forming within different neighborhoods. I documented this conversation with Zayid who was in communication with people who were jailed with the aim of sharing details about how COVID was impacting prisoners. This topic certainly was not a major focus in mainstream media reporting on the pandemic crisis at the time.

Also I should note that the interview was recorded when many frontline healthcare workers and community activists were calling for mass access to testing. At this time, early spring 2020, mass testing simply wasn't available.

For this interview I am happy to highlight the voice of lawyer and the awesome *nay* (Iraqi flute) player Zayid Al-Baghdadi to ask about these issues. Zayid is a progressive criminal defence lawyer working in Montréal who often deals with people in prison, or who are facing prison time.

Within this conversation we also talked about the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting people in Iraq, where Zayid

has extended family. Many of the points in this interview remain relevant to consider today.

Stefan Christoff: I am wondering what you have been hearing from people you work with regarding COVID-19 in prisons and in general about the situation facing prisoners around Quebec in this context...

Zayid Al-Baghdadi: If this virus spreads in prisons, we could have a real disaster. Prisons simply can't handle COVID-19 infections in a safe way, medically, we are talking about small overpopulated spaces, plus a lot of the space in prisons is communal, so if it spreads in prisons, it will spread fast there.

SC: Do you think that the Quebec gov. is taking this seriously?

ZAB: I think that the government will have to start taking this seriously when and if there is an outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons.

I think there are people who have COVID-19 in prisons, because there are people who are sick who have obvious symptoms, but there are many people who have it and have no symptoms, or it just seems like they are just a little sick, like a cold. So given that they aren't testing systemically in the prisons it seems that we are going toward a potential prison outbreak of COVID-19.

SC: So, the government should be testing systematically?

ZAB: Yes for sure.

I also think that state prosecution needs to consider the risk of detention when requesting that a person remain in custody.

Yes, we need to weigh the safety of the victims, because usually when a person is facing continued detention the safety of the victim is considered, so in those circumstances when someone is in danger. I understand why someone could remain in custody, there are many reasons, real reasons, as to why someone could be a danger, but even for those in jail right now this pandemic needs to be taken very seriously for all prisons.

For most who are currently jailed or detained there is no violent crime involved and we need to take the context into consideration and try to get people released from jail immediately.

Unfortunately the great number of people behind bars are in jail for trivial reasons. I see this all the time



in my work. These are people who maybe broke their conditions, or consumed alcohol when they weren't supposed to, many are behind bars for relatively trivial things, often because of social circumstances, poverty, or interrelated reasons, they are put behind bars.

Right now, given these circumstances, state prosecutors, the crown, need to keep an open mind, as they should always by the way, but if someone is breaking conditions, and if they aren't conditions that are designed to protect someone from a serious situation, the crown needs to release that person, actually they need to release as many people as possible right now.

For serious matters it is different, people accused of murder or serious assaults, but most people aren't in jail for these things, it is usually for small crimes. So most people should be released.

Right now because many courts are shut down, there aren't many cases going toward trial, but there are detention review hearings, so all of these points need to be considered for these hearings. In general the crown must consider non custodial sentencing.

SC: So are you talking about this with other legal colleagues?

ZAB: Honestly we aren't talking as much as normal right now, because we aren't gathering at the courts day-by-day.

But I do speak with people, lawyers and I believe that lawyers need to really prioritize getting people out of custody right now. The more people you have in custody right now the more we are putting oil on the fire in the prisons, in the context of COVID-19.

Given the fact that we aren't doing systemic testing, in prisons, people might be carriers without exhibiting symptoms and you know prisons are revolving doors, people who are locked-up after being arrested are often quickly released pre-trial. Prisoners going in and out, or just staying in while others enter and leave, meaning that the prison population is rotating and in danger, but that also puts the entire population in danger, as people often get out of jail quickly and this will spread the pandemic.

Right now we need to do everything possible to not jail people and release non violent offenders, while providing good health services in prisons, which is actually difficult, but this is all important to consider.

Today it was announced one person in Sherbrooke prison has COVID-19,
so I wonder, how many people was
this prisoner exposed to? I don't
know what type of protocol they

have in the jails exactly, but I do know that it is not a hospital there for sure.

This also goes for parole hearings, so for conditional releasing and stuff, the parole boards have to be far more open minded and lenient in light of this epidemic, but the releases need to be expanded now.

Basically it is important that the government acts and thinks about trying to reduce, as much as possible, the incarcerated population. I don't know how many more arrests have taken place since this began, but something tells me there will be a decline in arrests, but nonetheless there will unfortunately be an increase in conjugal violence, so people will be arrested, so these people will need to be kept in custody, at least for the first appearance, but if the person arrested shows sufficient grounds to illustrate that the victims is not in danger, then detention should be a last resort, but in the case of detention, we also need to think about setting-up other protocols. But if the person is held, for good reason, we also need to think about the medical situation in prisons, this is very urgent.

SC: So these are general principles overall and are even more urgent to consider right now?

ZAB: This all depends on how long this all transpires, how long the confinement takes place, how long before the end of COVID-19. However it is clear that there needs to be action taken regarding the situation in the prisons *ASAP* regarding this pandemic.

SC: So you're working here in Montreal, with your family, but you also have family in Iraq, many are living the experience of the epidemic between two places because family is in different parts of the world. Are you thinking about Iraq?

ZAB: I do have many relatives there, so the problem with Iraq is that there are so many pre-existing challenges in Iraq, the fears are big, the fear of getting kidnapped, or the fear of having a bomb explode, or getting targeted, but now also COVID-19.

It isn't that bad so far right now in Iraq, but Iran is in a super extreme situation, so this means that it will impact Iraq. I don't think that the government in Iraq has the ability to provide adequate statistics, due to lack of infrastructure, you can't really trust the information that is provided. Also the gov. in Iraq simply doesn't have the set-up for mass testing, so I am really worried.

SC: So this relates to the entire situation for Iraq, COVID-19 happens in the larger context of social and economic injustice, of major corruption that people in Iraq have been protesting about this past year.

ZAB: So yes, since the 2003, with the U.S. invasion the public infrastructure hasn't been super great, this impacts people right now. In a way the Iraqi government is trying to use this moment to highlight that they are doing something, but that isn't really happening.

Also this crisis is taking momentum away from the mass anti corruption protests that have been happening, so the virus is distracting, but also the virus is also dangerous, absolutely.

SC: I imagine that the Iraq public health system is already supersaturated.

ZAB: Yes exactly and it lacks resources.

SC: So as a lawyer, as someone active in the community, as a musician, as a father, what have you been reflecting on during relative confinement.

ZAB: I have come to the point now that my biggest concern is making sure we get through this unscathed, as far as our health, and that the people dear to us, the most vulnerable, our parents, our grandparents, making sure they don't get sick, this is of course my biggest concern.

SC: Great to hear your family is all doing well. Thanks for sharing this. What are your reflections about society at large?

ZAB: Also to be honest my thoughts right now are really surrounding the fact that this will really change the ways that people think permanently, our entire society will shift.

This is the first great global disaster in our lifetime, a situation where an entire school semester is practically cancelled and people's jobs are totally compromised.

It makes me think about how within our consumer society, we have become a society very accustomed to having access to all the products we desire, but once that supply has been impacted, we panic, which I get, but we need to think about this critically, the habits we hold and the way we live.

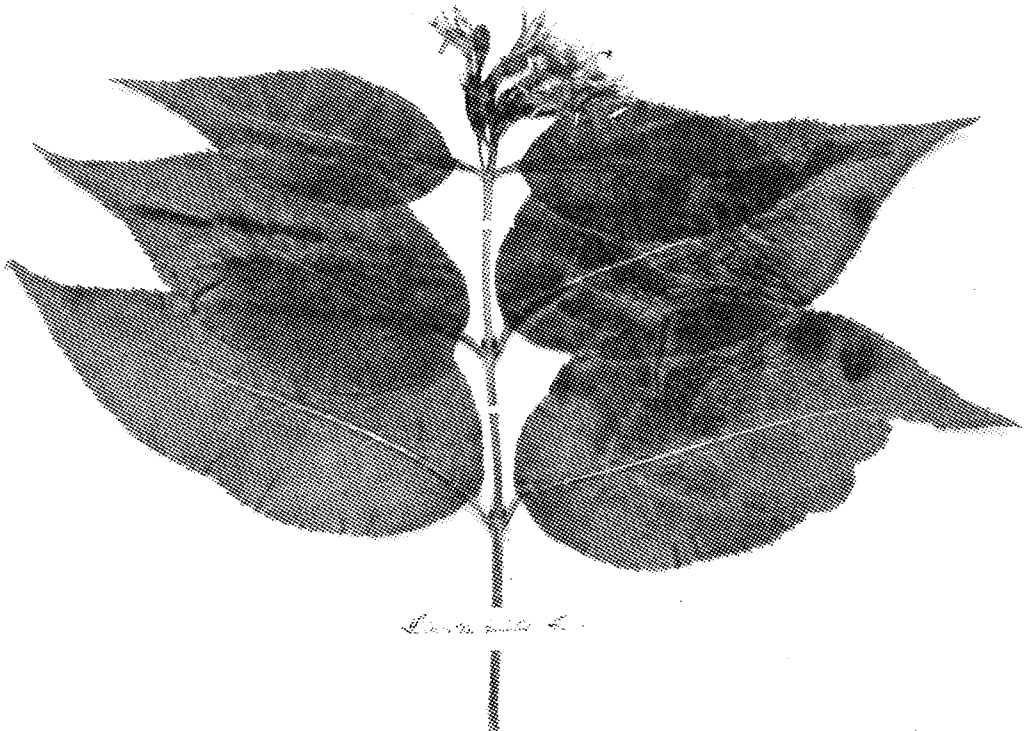
A great deal of people are living way beyond their means, house debt is very high, we take a lot for granted, so when you put something like this in the picture it really destabilizes everyone. But it also makes you think that maybe we are living in excess, that maybe we should try to moderate our lifestyles, our excesses.

I am thinking about how this is going to change the ways the world functions, this is a reflection more

about the developed countries, where it is all about the bottom line, about economic growth, but the thing is, that if this economic growth is at the expense of global health we have a serious problem, which is clearly the case right now.

It also makes me think about how good it is to have a strong public system, a strong social welfare state, if we don't have a safety net that is strong enough to deal with situations like this, for people to live decently, then many will die. I am really worried for the U.S. in this regard.

My biggest concern and my fear is that the largest benefactors, after this is all over, will be corporations, the Liberal government is trying to bail out big corporations, but in fact is that real people need this bailout money, regular citizens, these companies could borrow money rather than getting no string attached bailouts, companies could borrow at low interest or in exchange for liquidity, which overtime would come back to benefit the public pocket book. To simply hand out public funds to the corporate sector, our public money like this, as we saw in the 2008 financial crisis, is a bad look and is a financial injustice that can't happen again.



ZAHRA MOLOO

Journalist and filmmaker speaks on the impacts of COVID-19 in the global south and social movement possi- bilities at a time of pandemic

During the first pandemic lockdown I spoke with filmmaker, researcher and activist Zahra Moloo who shared reflections on the COVID-19 crisis. Zahra spoke not only on the possible roles of community activists at a time of crisis, but also on ways that addressing the global implications of this pandemic can underline international inequalities that are rooted in colonialism.

Zahra worked on an important film project, in collaboration with the ETC Group, that critically analyzes the role of the Gates Foundation in creating genetically engineered responses to malaria in West Africa.

The Gates Foundation project has been vocally opposed by rural and Indigenous communities in the regions impacted. This is an important reference given the key role that the Gates Foundation continues to play in addressing global health issues.

This point is highlighted here not to critique the fundamental basis of creating global initiatives to address health crisis points, including vaccines, but to question the ways that major corporations, as tied to projects like the Gates Foundation, can benefit politically, culturally and economically from health related disasters.

Additionally, the role that such private corporate initiatives are increasingly playing in addressing health related challenges at a global level must not be understood as a legitimate replacement to publicly funded and relatively more accountable public projects like the World Health Organization (WHO). Despite the major challenges to the functioning of international organizations like WHO, at a fundamental level they must be politically differentiated from health related projects funded by corporate billionaires like the Gates Foundation, which have limited mechanisms for democratic access

and are largely non transparent in regards to both decision making and long term policy goals.

I am sharing these points as key points of context in relation to the conversation with Zahra being shared here. This interview for the Free City Radio series was done by phone at the time despite us living in the same neighbourhood in Montréal.

Stefan Christoff: So we have been in conversation during the pandemic so far on the possibilities of organizing for change at this time. Also we have been speaking about the ways that considering the implications of the pandemic diverge in regards to potential impacts in the global north and global south. Could you share any reflections on these points that many of us are talking about today...

Zahra Moloo: Actually this is an opportunity for people to organize and expose what is not working within global systems. It is very important for people to organize. I also think it must be a time for us to be very vigilant about seeing which forces, corporations for example, are taking advantage of this crisis.

We don't want to live in a world where a major part of the planet doesn't have the resources to deal with a pandemic like this. How will this pandemic hit the poorest countries? We don't know yet, but it doesn't look good in both the short and long term.

This entire situation really means we need to demand a more justice world. The question is what do we demand specifically, how do we communicate those demands. Right now people are really working on this in many places and this is very important.

I think that calling for debt relief is good, a global student debt strike for example. Also demanding debt cancellation more generally, for countries in the global south, is a good position. Debt relief is an essential demand.

In France this moment can also be understood as a good opportunity for activism, as people are so fed up with government driven injustice, the attacks on the public sector for example, the rolling back of the retirement age. Clearly there have been mass protests over the past years focused on this.

Right now there are possibilities for real change that can come out of this moment if social movements can reframe the debate.

SC: Thanks for that, we have also been talking about differences of reality, in regards to the global south and north, in this pandemic and how demands between two different parts of the world can be either

complimentary or contradictory.

ZM: Yes, for the south, the demands are not that different, but the situation is more complicated, because in the U.S. you can appeal to a candidate like Bernie Sanders, who does interact with social movements. However in Kenya for example, my home country, right now there are no major politicians who actually represent social movements.

Also in the context of Kenya there often aren't functioning systems, like a stable healthcare system or good public institutions in general. In this light, yes we could cancel debts for southern countries, like Kenya, which is good, but for debt cancellation to have real long term impacts we also need fundamental political and policy change internally. The demands of social movements, like calls for fundamental reforms to policing, or for real environmental protection laws, need to be recognized and then implemented, this would ensure real long term changes to Kenya's political and economic systems of relation.

I am worried about the future in the global south, about what is going to happen and what is going to happen in Kenya specifically. Obviously on a personal level I am worried about Kenya, but my family is not living in a day-to-day survival context so they are fine in this immediate moment. However I am fundamentally worried about many vulnerable populations in Nairobi and across Kenya.

SC: What are you hearing from your family in Kenya?

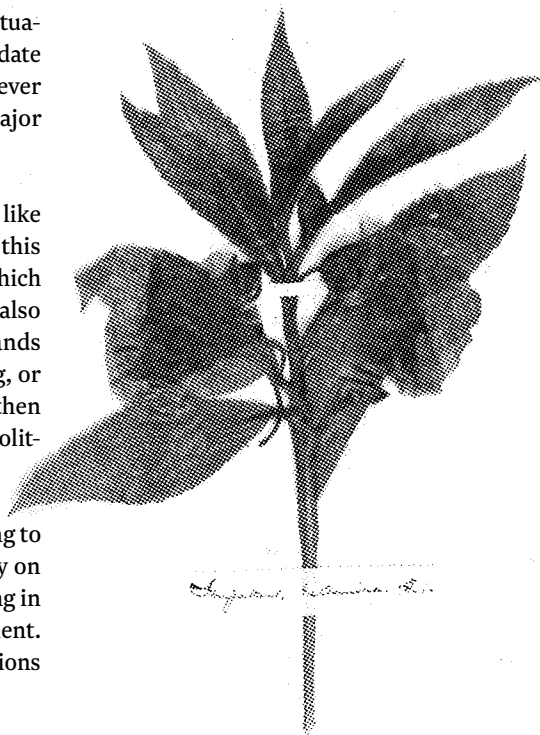
ZM: In Kenya, I am hearing from my family that cases are going up, that everything is shut down, also the police are involved in shutting down the streets.

Addressing the pandemic within urban poor areas is a really big deal and very difficult. In such areas people simply can't self isolate, they can't stop working because they are surviving day to day. This isn't a reality only in Kenya, but across many regions of the global south, especially within informal urban settlements, like you see in Haiti for example.

I don't know what people are going to do. Honestly, the health care system, in Kenya and in other parts of East Africa, is really struggling.

Even soap and water access is an issue within some informal city settlements.

Also in Iran the issue is similar, many low income people need to work to put food on the table, so if



everything is shut down for months, people will not have financial means at the most basic levels.

Al Jazeera English recently reported that the Iranian government can't shut down the economy indefinitely cause people need to work to survive and also the sanctions on Iran are hampering the fight against the pandemic.

In India many informal workers are going to homeless shelters now in the major cities, because they depend on day to day work, so they are struggling daily to keep things going. In this context lockdowns are very dangerous in regards to many communities surviving and this underlines the inherently precarious realities that so many face across the global south.

SC: Maybe we can speak on the role of the left and social movements. What do you think they can raise as meaningful critiques to the mainstream responses to COVID-19? Also I am wondering what you think activists can do directly to respond meaningfully? It seems there are different types of responses happening in different parts of the world.

ZM: Well yes activists are rightfully highlighting the possibility of debt relief, because that would free up a great deal of public funds for people to access. This applies to both the north and south. I am thinking about how debt relief would impact Kenya in a major way for example because such large amounts of public funds go to servicing international debt.

Now a lot of people are organizing online, which makes sense, but this reality also brings up issues of surveillance and the control of major tech companies over our online communications. This also needs to be fundamentally challenged.

SC: Yes, well activists are used to online for sure, but now zero actual meetings ...

ZM: Exactly, well imagine only online meetings. Surveillance is a real issue, there are some more secure platforms, but we really need to think about this.

Also, we also need to think about how these tech companies are benefiting from this crisis, how much stronger they will emerge from this crisis. Everyone is being forced to be online now, so everything is moving online, so we must address this point. Even for groceries, the major food delivery systems are often enforcing corporate power.

In India the crisis is potentially an opportunity for more surveillance and repression. I mention India

specifically, because the state has been becoming more and more authoritarian under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In India the surveillance state is getting deeper and more repressive over the past year, we must be attuned to this.

In Kenya people face police violence in terms of imposed curfews and this also speaks to the mistreatment of the urban poor by police and state security forces. All of these issues predate the epidemic.

Also in Colombia the paramilitaries are going out and assassinating many Indigenous and environmental activists, while the world is focused on the pandemic, so this is an issue now and will be for many years. Also in the Philippines similar dynamics are happening. (*More information in bulatlat.com*)

SC: On the role of corporate tech. giants, given it is a crisis, people are going to jump on more immediate options, but why is it important for people to support non corporate alternatives and take a few minutes to seek those out?

ZM: Do people know there are non corporate alternatives? I think some people do, but the alternatives need to be promoted. This is important for activists to have conversations without surveillance. Also these online giants simply do not need more cash.

Also Amazon.com is asking people to donate to an Amazon employee relief fund, this is ridiculous, they are taking advantage of the crisis, they have the funds to pay their workers and compensate them properly.

SC: Yesterday Bill Gates was on CNN talking about the pandemic and the host, Anderson Cooper, was addressing Gates as a rational and reasonable liberal voice who is also critical of Donald J. Trump, but why is it important to be cautious of figures like Gates. I bring this up because you have specifically done direct research into the problematic elements of the work of the Gates foundation in Africa.

ZM: The Gates Foundation has a huge interest in promoting vaccines. It is where Gates put a great deal of attention. However this is a very privatized model of vaccine development which views privately funded institutions, rather than public ones, as driving vaccines, or having the capacity to respond to key illness or major health crisis points like the one we are living. Today we must always remember to look at the systemic problems that got us to this point.

play, corporate linked projects like the Gates Foundation are instead pushing privatized models of health services.

SC: Yes, thinking about the systems at play and the ways that global corporations and financial markets can move to take advantage of the response to this crisis.

ZM: Yes, well this crisis reveals everything that is wrong with the system we live in, on a global level. The lack of funding for public healthcare around the world, the inequality in the world generally. There is a history behind this, in regards to the ways that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank over a couple generations have pushed policies that basically destroyed public health care systems in the global south.

I am just so worried about how the global south will deal with this. People often just don't have the resources to deal with these types of situations, people can't self isolate, in many cases and in many busy urban areas don't have easy access to water and soap for everyone. In this context accessing good social security, access to good public health care and good jobs with benefits is all key and must be the demands of social activists. It is very worrying and I am wondering if people will survive when it really hits many countries of the global south.

People are not making the links to the global systems of injustice, the reason why this virus has come about in this way has so much to do with the ways that we treat the natural world.

MOSTAFA HENAWAY

Community activist speaks on confronting corporate bailouts and supporting public responses to the pandemic

In this exchange with community organizer and author Mostafa Henaway we focus on economic critiques around the COVID-19 fallout. It is important to consider these reflections in the context of when this conversation was recorded, spring 2020, as it speaks to the ways that grassroots activist movements in recent decades have always had to struggle against a political and policy orientation of austerity measures that defines the hegemonic frameworks of western economic power.

This economic policy equation, that was first strongly solidified in the 1980s in the Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney era, placed the burden of any possibility of long term economic stability on the poorest, forcing the poorest to pay for budget deficits that were a direct result of deregulation policies. This economic era, which was revisited again in the past decades right after the 2008 financial crisis, essentially allowed for the most wealthy and corporate classes to strive for reckless policies of limitless growth for their own benefit. A policy framework that was only possible through the lower classes and the environment carrying the burden and facing the fire.

On this note it is important to recall that at this time of this conversation with Mostafa it wasn't a given that the immediate post pandemic reality wouldn't be massive austerity measures, impacting poor and working class communities. There was a major push by community activists to fight against this possibility and push that was ultimately successful. This is important to underline.

In this interview Mostafa also points to the ways that the pandemic crisis is impacting the Global South and that impact must be understood in connection to neoliberal policies of structural

adjustment, as pushed by the World Bank and IMF, policies that decimated the public sector in many Global South contexts in the last decades.

This interview can be read also in conversation with some of the ideas expressed in the previous discussion with filmmaker Zahra Moloo.

Also Mostafa speaks about the reality that migrant workers were facing, including here in Canada, as they continued working, often in very dangerous conditions, within the context of this pandemic crisis.

Stefan Christoff: I am wondering if you could first speak to the big mistake that happened, the fact that the Canadian government didn't move swiftly in January or February to begin arranging early testing and more detailed safety protocols ...

Mostafa Henaway: Governments made big mistakes early on, politicians like Justin Trudeau delayed the question of shutting down big parts of the economy due to political fears, although it was clear in late January through the World Health Organization (WHO), that this was a serious global health emergency.

It seems that politicians thought it would be similar SARS, but it was clear to everyone who was going through the first waves of the pandemic, in China and also to those dealing with it at the WHO, that the infection rate was very high. Even Bill Gates sounded the alarm early, despite the many issues with Gates as a corporate figure, even Gates clearly stated that this was going to be a global emergency, not just a problem in China. Since SARS and also with the Ebola outbreaks people have been sounding the alarm about such situations taking place.

Leaders, including Trudeau, took economic considerations more seriously than the virus and this impacted human health, on a massive scale. This is totally unprecedented. Also this situation shows how fragile the globalized economy is, as this situation has essentially shut down many elements of global capitalism, this is astonishing.

Now we are seeing in front of our eyes that major policy change is clearly possible, health care for all, basic minimum income, policies that care for the homeless, the existing violent pre pandemic policies around these points, that undercut human life, are political choices that governments make. As activists we have to highlight this and demand that these measures remain in place permanently.

This is kinda like a financial crisis point that spilled over to all areas. It was clear over the past decades that

this type of pandemic was a real possibility and ensuring readiness was important, but governments weren't ready, the public resources simply weren't put in place to deal with this despite warnings from health experts.

Instead of being prepared in some ways to address a pandemic virus like this, politicians were instead dedicating a great amount of energy to supporting the free market, not prioritizing public health institutions, this policy reality has left major gaps in the capacity of governments to respond.

Before the current crisis hit so much political capital was dictated to the logic of the market, even within the Canadian early responses to the pandemic, a push to keep things totally open despite the serious reports that were coming out of China. It is amazing to now reflect on how this all has unfolded, to witness now the fact that western governments have to come around to this level of social distancing and lock down, as advised by public health officials.

Overall the political class in the west was unprepared to fully respond to the seriousness of the pandemic situation earlier, to isolate impacted people early, to provide the necessary support for them also, to create protocols for mass testing and all of these major oversights took place despite government officials and even the WHO at the highest levels issuing alerts. The immediate impacts have been much less intense in South Korea, in Taiwan, in Japan and in Singapore, despite the geographical proximity to China, because serious public health precautionary steps were taken earlier. Today western governments, including Canada, are responding to the pandemic in a rushed fashion, trying to sweep up the mess. This isn't preventative policy, this isn't serious health policy, it is the highest level of governments acting only in emergency modes.

SC: Given you work so much on migrant rights and also hold important critiques of international free market policies, I am wondering if you could share some reflections on this front?

MH: In regards to migration, the fact that western governments have become so reliant on cheap migrant labour within the process of globalization must be underlined, this is a fundamental element of the economy.

Migrant workforces are getting a policy pass around the lockdowns, meaning that many migrant workers can move and work despite the lockdowns and this speaks volumes about priorities. Western governments, including the Canadian one, are willing to take the risk to allow migrant workers to keep working despite there being no vaccines yet because the economy fundamentally depends on them. This risk is being taken because this economy needs these

workers to be active on a daily basis, workers who produce food, who produce manufactured goods and critically who are the frontline hands in warehouse distribution centres.

This point isn't really about a specific food item or an industrial good being produced being put under focus, but to highlight the fears of Canadian authorities to hold up key local elements in the logistics of modern capitalism.

The fact is that global supply chains are just so important, they are still moving, but now are relying even more on migrant workers now because they are simply seen as more disposable. This point also illustrates how fragile these systems really are now in the context of the pandemic. Right now we are literally watching parts of the global supply chain break down in front of our eyes, while migrant workers are literally holding up some of the key elements that continue to work right now.

Who is staffing Amazon distribution centres in Montréal that remain open and extremely active? Largely immigrant workers of colour.

One thing that is very tragic and this will be an issue that will be more discussed once this virus has subsided here, is that as a result of the relentless privatization of public works in general and defunding of health care in the Global South, when and if this crisis of pandemic really hits many southern countries, we will see a big impact because public health care systems have been so destroyed by structural adjustment policies, pushed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

Let us remember that these policies that created chaos for public institutions, including healthcare, across the Global South, took place in the interest of servicing debt to institutions like the World Bank and nations that are largely represented within the G7.

The fact that many economies in the Global South are dependent on remittances from migrant workers must also be underlined. Also these same Global South economies are increasingly dependent on the very same global market frameworks, that were and still are at the centre of establishing at the highest global policy levels the basis of economic policy disadvantage to the Global South.

The purchasing power and investments from the global north are now rigorously underlined by political forces in the south, that intentionally or not, are only working to prolong dependency toward this unbalanced international capitalist model on local levels for a long time. Through corporate globalization policies,



that have pushed such market frameworks of production in the south, national economies simply haven't been allowed to develop their own independent economic models and now will be hit with this massive slow down due to dependency on exports.

So this situation will be devastating for the south, because as we go into recession, many countries in the Global South will face mass unemployment. In this context, the fact that many people lack reasonable health care and shelter is tied to these economic models that are totally unfair. In many examples workers for many major western corporations, like within the textile industry in Bangladesh, will face an economic recession locally due to an economic model that relies on exports, of both products and human beings, to the global north.

The World Bank has already indicated this point, as they have said that they will need to push structural adjustment and pro-market policies even further as a response to this economic crisis. If this type of policy is enacted it will only reinforce these types of damaging realities in the global south. I think that it is important to speak directly about what the goal is here, it is to keep the bulk of global financial currency, that propels these international market dynamics, heavily within the G7 and also now within the elites of all the G20 economies.

If you look at countries in the Global South, I am thinking particularly about how these dynamics will impact India, in the Philippines, China who rely on this manufacturing model in globalization. There will most likely be a reinforcement of elite structures within those types of specific Global South countries and also the enforcement of the dominant global financial institutions if there aren't radical changes to global financial dynamics. This will result in increased tensions and mobilizations within the Global South, in India particularly and places where there is a strong social movement history.

SC: In terms of the economic recession that these types of policies would create. How can activists and social movements around the world respond to this movement, because it is a transformative moment. I am wondering what you think are some of the things that people should be raising in terms of political critiques toward how power is responding to this ...

MH: I think that we are experiencing a moment that we have never seen before, this is a moment that could bring major change, when people say there is no going back to normal, I think that this is true, but also I think that we must take action, as activists, because things could go one way or another. Our intervention is critical.

this moment, for the first time in a long time people see themselves all connected, unfortunately though a pandemic, but connected as a globe, which is good. There is a sense of social solidarity on a basic level, the fact that people are willing to be distant from each other, the fact that people are putting up rainbows, the fact that people are putting up activist banners and finding other ways to connect. I think that for the first time, there is a broad sense of connection for a great many people that goes beyond the market and for many their job doesn't define their lives for the first time in many years right now. The fact that most people are saying that all human beings have value and that they have a right to stay alive across the board, across borders is important. Now the policies at official levels don't reflect that right now, but we must push for that.

I think that this is different than anything that our generation has ever lived through and that even how governments are responding, they are printing money, to varying degrees. It is important to underline that despite the rhetoric there has been no real implementation of socialism, but the fact that governments are taking steps to augment wages, that they are willing to helicopter money into people who are in need are big points to underline. The fact that the government is saying that we will give healthcare to almost all people at this time, or the fact that the government can just shut down big parts of the economy, this all shows that another world is really possible.

Also this moment is weird in many ways as activists, as these types of mass collective policies are all things that we will need to defend after governments try to go back to "normal," all of these policies are possible right now, unfortunately because of a virus, but these policies are possible after the pandemic also, policies like; free transit, less work time, more time for family, health care for all, housing as a right. All of these things became possible and they exist in some way now as realistic and real, we need to defend these types of policies as the new normal after the pandemic shifts.

A key element to thinking about this moment, as the left, as activists, is that after this all subsides, is that we are seriously going to have to defend anything that was handed out by the government, while in response, we might witness next level austerity, because the government will claim that we have to pay for this all now and this will lead to some politicians on the Conservative side aiming to privatize more services within the healthcare sector, along with other public institutions and resources.

It is also clear that the private sector wasn't truly dynamic, that it now requires, while it also required before the pandemic, real public institutions to carry anything

through. So I think that after all this and also in this moment, we, as activists, have to articulate to society and say look, we need these things, these public institutions to carry the fundamentals, that rights for workers are an essential part of this and it is a matter of life and death.

The other thing, in terms of a global picture, is that it is clear, the campaigns to drop the debt in the Global South and campaigns to end sanctions on governments that hold points of political conflict with the US, all need our support. Because the other thing that is going wickedly unnoticed, is that the U.S. is using this moment, not in a conspiratorial kinda way, but the U.S. government is openly using this moment for extreme foreign policy and it is getting less media attention then it would because of the crisis. The U.S. is going to attack the government of Venezuela economically and politically, they are going to go after Iran even further, fight to keep a heavy presence and influence in Iraq, to support the Israeli siege and bombing of Gaza. All of these policies need to be challenged because obviously they deeply harm the populations of each respective place mentioned.

I think that people are identifying this moment of pandemic rightly and saying to the Israeli government, look, you have to stop bombing Gaza forever. Also people are importantly saying to the US, look you have to fully lift the sanctions on Iran, there has to be a permanent ceasefire in Yemen with no more military interventions by the US or indirectly through Saudi Arabia.

I think the one thing that will need to be focused on after this crisis, after the pandemic subsides, is that active solidarity with the global south, for us to move against US imperialism, is going to be very important.

SC: In terms of directly countering the argument that governments will put forward re: local economics. They will say that all these steps that have been put forward in regards to the pandemic situation, in terms of supporting workers, in terms of many policies that have been adopted, even in terms of the healthcare system in the U.S. in terms of this emergency moment.

I am wondering how you respond to the Conservative argument that says “well this has to be paid for!” We will hear this from the Conservative policy in Canada after the pandemic of course. I mean there are different arguments right, like governments saying that one way to pay for this will be to decimate public institutions and public spending, but what are other approaches? What is your critique of this framework that sees austerity as the only way out?

MH: I mean the anti-capitalist framework is important here. It is important that we outline that capitalism is a system in which the ways that things are organized gives privilege and wealth only to a few. This is unacceptable. Given that in this system a lot of the wealth and surplus profits are privately recuperated in exploitative ways, which is why we see rising numbers of billionaires, we urgently need this system to change.

It is key to challenge this system, because if there is the political will to change at this time of crisis, to think about the health of people, then these changes could happen anyway, beyond the lockdowns, beyond the pandemic, this is true.

Say when country A says, we are in so much debt because of this, then we have to challenge that there is another way to get out of this, paying for the debt doesn't need to come at the expense of people. Who is the debt to anyways? The debt is to the banks, but the government controls regulation for the banks, so change the regulations. Also in response to the crisis, we must question, why bail out the banks ever again? As we saw after 2008 bank officials were just mobilizing huge amounts of wealth, this continues and it is unacceptable.

SC: Can you expand on this point?

MH: I mean if the government expands the public budget, then the debt is to yourself, if the government is borrowing or printing money, then it is in debt to themselves. I mean there are economic considerations in capitalism, because if you are printing more money, then the value of your money becomes more shaky and that is now inflation happens. However these financial laws aren't natural laws, they are laws created by the powerful that can be changed..

It is clear that it is possible to just cancel the debt, or when the government hands out near universal basic income, that when people are give value first, over money, the right to eat, to do the things they need to do, to pay their rent, simply because they are a human being first, not valued because they have a "X" or "Y" job. Then the logic of the system starts to change, we can see the cracks opening more widely now because of the crisis, we must as activists underline this.

I think that this is the other thing that has been clear throughout this crisis, is challenging the idea of what is essential. It is fascinating to watch because there are other things, beyond the jobs that people hold, that are being celebrated right now. Before this moment we have given so much value to bullshit jobs, which David Graeber wrote about, but now with this crisis people can see

more clearly what points are the basis of life really are, which are not our modern jobs.

It is clear now that many of the people who produce actual value, this is the labour force that is being valued in this society, because these workers hold things up, people who are making food, driving buses, delivering mail, cleaning things, making things and these are the people who don't get any financial rewards most often, this is so important to think about.

SC: Yes, who gets the financial rewards, what do bankers and CEOs actually do to help society, beyond managing how to exploit the labour of people and the environment.

Yes, so you're talking essential workers, people in the healthcare system, people keeping transit going, keeping food supplies going, people who are producing and sustaining agriculture, keeping the city clean and running.

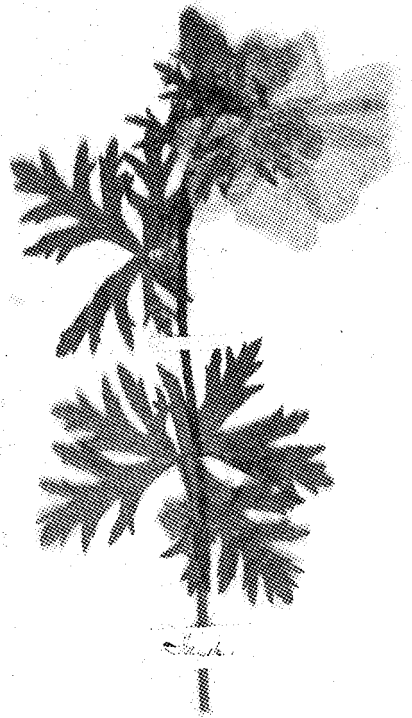
MH: Exactly, these are the people who are producing and maintaining things that are actually valuable to us and people are starting to understand this, while many other sectors aren't essential, but are very celebrated. The frameworks of understanding around these points are starting to shift a bit and this is good, but we need to underline this as activists.

SC: Like financial services?

MH: Yes, people in financial services, in marketing, in stocks. This is what is considered as producing value and making society advance? Come on. This framework is just driven by the laws and logic of the market, but it is all going up in smoke right now.

But to go back to the question "who pays for this?" it is a political question, it is not a question of the market right, because at the end of the day, even if governments are borrowing from investment banks, or institutional funders like pension funds, it is the government that still dictates the terms and this is a point that we need to be loud about afterwards. In the end we can force a situation that changes because we have the power to make these decisions as the people, not the other way around where we are largely locked out of these decisions. Post pandemic we must demand that the response isn't austerity and that such policies aren't imposed on the most vulnerable in society again.

SC: To ensure that the response to this financial crisis coming out of COVID-19 isn't dictated by big finance and banks ...



MH: Yes. We shouldn't simply bail out the banks and oil companies. It is also about properly monitoring the money that a government borrows and allowing the public to say that we have alright to shape the policies of what happens with the public purse. For example, for us to say that we will not pay exorbitant amounts back to the banks at this time of crisis here and all around the world. Boosting bank profits isn't fair or just as they have never been responsible around looking out for the public good, for the majority, so let them take smaller profits and not make huge amounts from this crisis.

SC: Can you break that down a little more about the choice, or not, to pay the banks back exorbitant rates ...

MH: I mean the government, if it has to borrow, it can do it two ways, by printing money, but then that lowers the price of the money, or it borrows from banks and other institutional funders, right, so then we (public funds) are always paying interest on those loans, like governments in the global south having to pay interest on debt to the World Bank or the IMF for example. The way that most governments operate now is that they pay back the banks and allow for super high interest rates, this boosts their profits which means that they profit from the crisis in major ways without the banks having done anything, really, beyond maintaining their corrupt institutional presence.

Although we control as a government, theoretically in a democracy, as a state, public funds, so those interest rates the banks are charging, we are allowed to say no we will not pay those on loans to government financial mechanisms. The government can dictate what those banks can and can't do, simply put, at the end of the day right now, we are paying them essentially to manage the public purse, while they walk away with a great amount of the money, money that belongs to society, not the banks. This scheme needs to be made clear, denounced and never be allowed to happen again.

Then at the end of the day the banks, and also major companies, just use that money, often without a plan or public oversight. Then whenever they need to be bailed out due to financial mismanagement they then come running back to the public purse, in all the cases, banks and corporations, then end up using these public funds to cover their tracks and continue to get rich on our backs. Then what ends up happening is that the banking and corporate sector pisses it away and mismanages what they can't steal through buybacks and bonuses, which is why we keep having repeat financial crisis points.

Bombardier is the clearest example in Quebec, the fact that it was able to take billions of dollars from

the government and then Bombardier just moved, without accountability, to sell off most of the company to other multinationals, with the tops at Bombardier benefiting in major ways. They became financially viable to make those sell offs only due to public financing, but then there is no oversight, it is extreme corruption at the highest levels.

Or generally when the financial sector was bailed out, after the financial crisis in 2008, these moments are often used for share buybacks, or CEO payouts and benefits.

It is interesting to see in the US that in this bailout there are actual limitations to what the government and corporations can use the money for, the bill limits CEO pay, limits share buybacks theoretically, lets see if it is actually monitored, this has happened largely because of the intervention of Sanders who is responding to long standing demands of social movements.

So the thing is that what is clear is that it is possible for the public sector, the state in a democracy, to dictate the terms on finance, and the fact is that we shouldn't be giving banks and major corporations these funds openly, or allowing them to make money off public debt. As activists we need to sound the alarm on all of these things. We need to reject these frameworks now and by extension to reject austerity after.

This moment, the pandemic, in fact illustrates an argument for a policy change by underlining the collective needs that are actually at play. It is clear that only through socialized policies can we actually deal with this moment and by extension in the long term save ourselves as a species from environmental disaster. This is crazy to think about because the unwavering logic claimed by the market is that the market is dynamic, that governments need to give the market space to produce innovation and that the free market will create the most rationalized responses, the most efficient, etc. but none of this is actually true or took place throughout this current crisis. It is a giant scam, a ponzi scheme at the highest levels.

The only thing that has mitigated this crisis to date, to ensure that it wasn't even worse of a catastrophe than it already is, was the balance of forces that leans on actual non market oriented policies and institutions. The interventions of the public sector, the existence of public health care institutions, the social welfare policies and overall public policy intervention from the state using public funds to carry people through the crisis in many ways.

So it is totally possible to reorient things beyond the pandemic. This crisis shows the blueprint of what

another world could be in terms of economic policy, that these types of real public policies are not an impossible utopia, but are a policy response that shows a glimpse of other worlds. This moment also plainly illustrates how the corporate and banking sector is simply taking advantage and exploiting almost everyone all the time and especially right now, we must fight this.

SHANICE NICOLE

Poet speaks on narratives of activism, resilience and finding your voice in a time of pandemic

This is a conversation with community activist, educator and poet Shanice Nicole, who offers reflections on resilience at a time of pandemic and the importance of sustaining solidarity at moments of crisis. Shanice also speaks on this moment as being an opening for self expression and critique.

Stefan Christoff: Allô, yes, so how are you doing with everything?

Shanice Nicole: Everyday is a new day.

SC: Yes, right on to that. First, this moment has brought forward a lot of discussion about community action, solidarity, discussions on the ways that people can support each other. At the same time the government is playing a huge role in regards to income and people's health also, so given that, as a community activist, what are some reflections you have had about this moment in relation to people supporting each other? Also I would love to hear your thoughts on the complicated relationship with the state and big public institutions, acknowledging that they are important right now, but also need to be critiqued. Do you have any reflections to share in this area?

SN: Yes. Well right now things are all wrapped up, complicated and layered, but these are all really important points to reflect on, question and critique.

What does it mean to critique the state, but also realize that people need the resources and support that the state holds? Some of us can access certain resources, which allow us to support each other, but some simply can't, so it is complicated.

I think that witnessing the ways that people have come together to support each other in direct and tangible ways, has been really powerful. It has been really interesting to witness all that has been happening virtually as well. Also it is interesting because many of us already spent a lot of time together, connected together, in the virtual space, but then for many of us, there were opportunities to come back and re-connect together in person, but right now many of those moments aren't happening.

So right now there are so many layers to the ways we are connecting and everyone is trying to figure it out and it is really hard. So I am just really trying to tap into that compassion, for self and for others, cause it is a wild time. It is really easy to get caught up in everything and to sorta forget what is happening to us, to the world and also to the many communities around us. The entire situation is pretty massive and so it is quite important that we don't underestimate the gravity of the situation.

However I also understand that a lot of people are in survival mode right now because they don't have access to the resources that they need, so the reflections that I was pointing to are also in some ways a luxury right now, because sitting back and reflecting isn't possible right now for those in survival mode.

SC: I guess also this is a time that people feel more connected to their families. Are you thinking about your family a lot these days?

SN: I feel really grateful that my family is doing well, both here locally, but also I have some in Ontario and lots of family in England and the Caribbean, so I feel really lucky that everyone is doing well. My partner's brother plays hockey in France, so he was stuck there for a little bit, but got back safely, so I was really happy to receive him and have him home.

SC: I feel like in some ways, there is this idea that the actions the government is taking to address this crisis are taken in this sorta benevolent way. There is this idea within Canada that shows the government as compassionate, this idea that says the government is taking action to look out for the interests of the people of Canada first, that the government is working simply with the goal of supporting people who have lost their jobs.

Or the fact that people feel that the public healthcare system has fared relatively well as compared to the United States, makes the Canadian state look good, because of the public elements of the healthcare system. I was wondering if you could reflect on any points that are maybe missing from this narrative, all the community activist history and work that happened over generations to push for the creation of Employment Insurance, for the creation of a public healthcare system. Thinking on the fact that these things weren't just given, that there is a community narrative of activism



that is important, but is maybe lost in the mainstream narratives.

SN: Totally, yes always, thanks for framing that. I mean I think that right now because we are often in this virtual space and all the information that gets to us in particular ways that are filtered. I do think that the media narrative really puts forward this idea that the government is simply saving people, that all these public institutions are kinda gifts to the people and again even within this framework, it is not all the people who have access. It is just important to highlight all the community and grassroots activism that forced changes to be made in the past and that is happening right now. Many groups of people who have access to these types of services and institutions, have so only because of intergenerational struggle. It is important to highlight how activism helped create these institutions and services.

I think it is really important to think about who the government identifies to be a person worthy of support, because this definition doesn't include everyone. So even seeing the ways that more and more people have gotten access to resources, these institutions, like public health-care, often through struggles that involved many people pushing. So I think that it is important to fight against these activist stories from being lost, because these institutions aren't just free, there is a history involved. Also right now we must underline, most importantly, that not everyone is being supported by these programs, this is dangerous because a lot of people are being ignored and erased. How are we going to deal with the complicatedness of all of these points of being true?

SC: Also internationally, I was thinking about how the virus, the pandemic has impacted different parts of the world, the Caribbean, the UK, here, so wondering how you think this pandemic is impacting different communities, was thinking about the Caribbean community specifically, in Toronto, in the UK. In the last couple of years there has been that attempt by the Conservative government in the UK to revoke the citizenship rights of the Windrush generation, while medical workers from the Caribbean, or with roots in the Caribbean, have played such an important role in public health care systems, in both the UK and in Canada.

SN: This resonates, given that my grandparents migrated, from the Caribbean to England, so my family is really connected to that living history in terms of what has been happening over the last few years in the UK, around who is considered by the government to be a full person, who is considered to be worthy. These are very much ongoing questions that unfortunately keep returning no matter where you are, so the struggle continues.

up, in that it doesn't matter where you are, there are similar trends happening and people are being affected in similar ways everywhere, which shows how scary this global reality is, but also it shows who we are all connected in particular ways. This is important.

Also it makes me think about the fact that it is very rare that things are new, so none of these trends are actually new. So what does it mean to remember that? In a sense it means you can look back and say, well if I can remember that this type of policy, these types of things have happened before, what does that mean for the present moment? It means there are answers, there are resources, there are tools that can help us respond to such situations, the history of movements. So that side of connecting to history is important to respond to, this process can be empowering and grounding in ways, but then there is also the other side, which is like, your saying, makes you think: "Holy shit, how are we here again?" "How has this not changed?" "How are we still having the same conversation?"

It is nuanced. It is complicated. I think that we all really need to have a lot of compassion as we unravel all of this and try to figure it out.

SC: One thing that you have done really seriously in the last years is articulate your voice through the arts, through activism. Today I see a lot of people reflecting on how to share their voice, questions around how to best express the urgency of this moment. People reflecting on what is going on, of course some people have a lot more space to reflect, others not so much, like factory workers who are still at it.

I am bringing this up because of the process of articulating your voice, artistically, politically. I am wondering if you have any thoughts about the importance of figuring out that process, because I am seeing a lot of people sharing you know, for example, what politicians are saying, what celebrities are saying, not as much seeing what many different people, living different experiences, are thinking themselves, on what they are going through.

So I am wondering if you had any thoughts about the importance of that process of articulating artistically, politically, your voice, given that's something that you have been doing these past years.

SN: I always say that it is always a good time to speak your truth. So it is always powerful to witness people moving into that, speaking that truth, from the different places that they are coming from.

Also sometimes there is push back toward people who decide to speak up, I reject that and reject people

giving that attitude that says, “oh well you’re late to the party,” because I think that we need more people, not less speaking up. If my articulation inspired someone to think about something differently, or question something differently, then that is good. If these moments can allow people to see inequities really clearly then that is a good thing. So it is great whenever people decide to speak out, to speak up, it creates openings.

I am always really grateful to see that happening and also to see it occurring in different ways. I am thinking of friends, who have been creating so much art and sharing that with the world, challenging what we think of as political content, or whatever, and of course art is political. So I see this in terms of the power of sharing what we create, which can be transformative you know. It can shift the way that we live.

One of the really cool things I think about social media is that—although we are intensely saturated with it right now because of the entire quarantine situation—we, as in we the people, we can create the media that we want to see and engage with. I think that it is really cool and awesome that this opportunity is becoming more and more accessible to different types of people and the way that many are engaging with social media has kinda allowed that, given that possibility and opening for a lot of people, opened that door a little more widely. Now we can kinda start to imagine different ways and media is so important for that process. Important for which stories we hear.

Overall the stories we tell often do come from that media, so social media has created different platforms and different possibilities, which has been pretty incredible, so see people using that space to talk about and share politics in new ways and this is good.



SUNDUS ABDUL HADI

Artist speaks on Iraq's protest movements, COVID-19 and global justice

During the first pandemic lockdown I called the awesome artist Sundus Abdul Hadi to speak about the current pandemic, to share reflections. Sundus spoke at the time about the connections between this past year of protest, the wave of youth-lead uprisings that questioned the system in Iraq, looking at these uprisings as a warning.

Stefan Christoff: Could we start by getting a sense of what you have been hearing from friends and family in Iraq?

Sundus Abdul Hadi: Now there is a curfew in Iraq now, to limit the spread.

SC: How related is the U.S. invasion of Iraq to the struggling public health-care system in Iraq today?

SAH: The U.S. invasion impacted the healthcare system of course, but also the Iraqi government hasn't done anything to sustain the medical system, even though there are very good doctors and medical professionals, but the working environment is subpar, the hospitals aren't updated.

SC: Not enough cash?

SAH: Yes because of corruption the hospitals don't have what they need.

One of the reasons why the revolution happened is that people were protesting for a better health system.

SC: Did the government ever respond in any meaningful way? The protests have been massive ...

SAH: The government didn't

respond in real anyway except with bullets, tear gas and assassinations against activists. The Prime Minister stepped down for around five minutes and then came back.

SC: So today, China sent people to help in Iraq, health officials?

SAH: Chinese officials have come to try to limit the spread, but I think it might be too late, because the deep connection with Iran and Iraq is so strong and the government is so afraid to put any restriction on Iranian travel into Iraq. The flow of Iranian money and government interests from Iran, so the Iraqi government didn't close the border, or stop flights, or take action to stop the pilgrimage that is happening right now, which is dangerous, they (*the Iraqi government*) has done nothing major to address the spread locally in the region.

So bringing Chinese officials in, without taking local actions to protect their own people, isn't impactful, the local work hasn't happened.

SC: Bulgaria asked for help from the E.U., but Turkey and China stepped up, not the E.U. For Iraq, wondering if the past year of protests are still being discussed, or, are we in another era?

SAH: Now the whole world is in the corona virus era, we are fixated on this.

I feel that it is all connected. I feel that what is happening right now, speaks to cause and effect. It is capitalism and climate change, our over consumption, the mass use of fossil fuel, pollution that got us here. It is all part of a system problem that leads up to this health crisis that speaks to a larger system crisis.

The revolutions this year are connected to what is happening now, they were almost like a foreshadowing, or a popular warning, for what is happening now. It was a warning.

In Iraq, one of the symbols of the revolution was the tear gas mask, a symbol of the uprising, because people wore them to protect from the tear gas. Now it is a global symbol, not for tear gas, but for people to speak to the pandemic globally. So in my mind it was a symbol of the Iraqi revolution, but now it is a global symbol, so symbolically the events are connected.

What people were fighting for in Iraq, for environmental justice, for social justice, for a fair system, all still is important. Iraq is an illustration of the global ills that everyone suffers from, Iraq was this extreme example, but the system that impacted Iraq so seriously, impacts us all globally.

Disrespect for the environment, failing capitalism, this is at the heart.

A very egoistic way of living life instead of being focused on community and well being, are points that I feel were key to the underlying messages of the revolution in Iraq. There was this underlying message of community care, within the Iraqi uprising and also in the uprisings around the world.

SC: Global interconnection. Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share?

SAH: Totally, yes another point that I wanted to share about is how the corona virus makes me realize how insignificant money is. If the government can, with the banks and all these financial institutions, who are still there despite these recent policies, can, with the snap of the finger, change all these things that we thought were unchangeable, that says a lot.

Points that were presented as facts are being challenged at a fundamental level, like the idea that if you don't pay your rent, you get evicted, that if you miss too many hydro bills, you get cut off, that if you miss many credit card minimum payment, your interest rates rise, the fact that all of these things were shifted shows that simply the way that money is managed is just a system of elite control.

So this entire construct of laws and regulations are made up and can be challenged, this crisis illustrates it clearly. It is opening people's eyes to whole other realities and hopefully other possibilities for change.

SC: Totally, so this underlines the importance of systemic change?

SAH: Yes, like here, the movement for Wet'suwet'en Access Point on Gidimt'en Territory, against the pipelines.

Everything that the Indigenous people are calling for are key points that need to be addressed and underlines the problems that we face, the greater systemic ills. The earth is saying stop what you're doing, you need to reassess, reconsider how you treat the earth, how you treat community, how you treat yourself.

SC: Well, Bernie Sanders is raising some of these points. U.S. establishment politicians moved to cut Bernie out. Unfortunately a lot of people will die if things like widely accessible public health care are made real, especially in the U.S.

SAH: Yes, a lot of people will die.

America is going to break, I feel so bad for my American friends. What's the value of an American dream if you can't even have healthcare? It feels very unstable. This situation will lift the veil. It is a matter of life and death, of sickness and health, the most basic human experiences of suffering.

Hope that this leads us to have a serious conversation about what we are all going to do.

SC: What's going to happen for the next generation?

SAH: I am excited for the next generation, because they are going to witness a great change.

Change is never easy and things become worse before they get better, but we need to teach them the right coping skills, to teach them survival and resilience.

You know we protect our kids, but only for so long, then they start protecting us. This interconnection between generations is exactly what the Indigenous resistance is all about, it is about what world your children will live in, our collective futures. Will we live in a land that is poisoned, that is unsustainable, that is at risk of turning on you one day because of a disaster, or should we all live truly sustainably. This message of changing direction is so central to the Indigenous movement and they are so clearly right.

All the movements that have been happening these past years have always been driven by youth culture, because they are the ones that are going to inherit this world and we need to make sure to give the next generation a safe and healthy earth. For this to happen we need to listen to them right now.

SC: Do you feel that connecting the climate strike actions and the protest movement in Iraq, to this pandemic moment is important?

SAH: Yes these struggles are all connected.

SC: I was thinking about the exhibition you worked on "Take Care of Yourself" in this context ...

SAH: Totally, yes this exhibition was really trying to highlight these issues, perhaps ahead of the time. Now, everyone is thinking about community care, collective healing, it is good people are talking about this, it is what the world needs.

مکتوب
(it is written)



BRIAN ABOUD

Educator reflects on the pandemic, risk society and why considering the refugee experience is always essential

During the first lockdown I spoke with Brian Aboud, a friend and professor at Vanier College, for the Free City Radio interview series. Brian stressed the importance of thinking about how this pandemic will impact vulnerable communities, particularly Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as many families in Montreal are directly connected to communities in the impacted region.

Also at the time I noted that *Médecins Sans Frontières* / أطباء بلا حدود في لبنان was sending doctors to the front lines in Iran and also was working to provide direct health support for impacted communities in Lebanon, Turkey and beyond, for people who don't have access to health systems. I personally have visited the MSF office in Beirut and have friends who have worked with the organizations who are excellent, dedicated and extremely hard working. Their work continues today.

Brian is a community activist and researcher, who has worked for many years on issues of migrant justice, both contemporary and historic, including the documentation of the living history of Montreal's Syrian community, dating back to the late 1800s.

Over the years, when major events happen, I have really valued speaking with Brian, who always has meaningful, kind and pointed insights. I documented this exchange for the Free City Radio series on the pandemic.

Brian stresses here the importance of thinking about how this pandemic will impact vulnerable communities, particularly Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

Also Brian highlights the ways that modern capitalist practices, in relation to the environment, will lead to more and more extremely dangerous scenarios. In this context highlighting the work of Mining Watch Canada which has been consistently documenting the malpractices of Canadian mining companies around the world and within

Canada's colonial borders in regards to indigenous lands, all mining practices that contribute to the destruction of the environment and natural areas.

Stefan Christoff: How are you feeling about what has been happening?

Brian Aboud: This event is a product of the last century.

I have been very influenced, in regards to interpreting threats and hazards within the contemporary time, by a German sociologist named Ulrich Beck, who published a book in the 1980s called *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. It has become a much bigger influence than expected. It was published right before the Chernobyl disaster.

It is an account of how societies were changing as a result of the impacts of modernization and industrialization, during the period of increased industrialization in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century of course.

This book looks at the unintended consequences of this industrialization. So looking at the risk society, which was emerging throughout this time, replacing the scarcity society that emerged in the industrial period and the class society.

Not that class is disappearing, not at all, the circumstances of most individuals today are still most strongly determined by class, but the vulnerability, exposure to unwanted occurrences of danger are shifting all over, facing many. Of course class circumstances can expose you more, working classes are exposed to more vulnerability, especially now.

With the welfare state, the vulnerabilities lessened a little in the second half of the 20th century, as compared to the early 20th century, although major vulnerabilities still exist, especially in the Global South, the production zone of the western world.

SC: So in this context we must understand that reckless policies that are expanding, risk is becoming larger in scale, first for the working classes there were these threats, but now that threat is becoming more across the board?

BA: Yes.

What is emerging, in late modernity, is the mass exposure to industrial risks, all the ways we are exposed to toxins, pollution and pesticides, are among the new risks related to

industrial life.

The quintessential example is radioactivity, this was even before Chernobyl. These are unprecedented risks that human beings at large have no clear strategy of fully protecting themselves from. Chernobyl was the greatest disaster from industrialization in the 20th century.

Now we are seeing something on the same level, but global, although the impacts of the nuclear disasters also continue to impact.

SC: Like in Fukushima, Japan?

BA: Yes. Fukushima was also so highly destructive and dangerous, it continues to be actually. Chernobyl was far greater in proportion, but both incidents were bad, both disasters.

Today, COVID 19 makes me think about the ways that Chernobyl was experienced, because people today and in 1986 are facing death from a source that you can't face, you can't see and that you can't exactly understand. In Chernobyl the proximate zones of radioactivity equaled mass exposure to radioactivity and many were in very serious danger.

I keep thinking about how people faced the threat, Chernobyl, and how people are facing the threat now.

SC: How are they similar for you? Why is this reference important?

BA: People have a similar emotional reaction, in a way, because you can't see the threat, but you know there is something out there.

SC: Both COVID 19 and Chernobyl are products of modern society. Well, of course radioactivity is much more lethal immediately and in the long term, obviously. With this virus it seems most people will survive, but many will not, while it is also truly a global situation.

BA: Emotionally there is a connection, in terms of the social impact of an invisible threat.

SC: Thankfully today information is shared more quickly and people are more aware.

BA: Yes, people are more aware of the threat than in April 1986.

SC: Why is it important to think about COVID 19 in regards to industrial society?

BA: My query is how this might be the product of industrial society. I am trying to figure this out. What is distinct today is that COVID 19 is different from the general types of risks that we are used to in industrial society.

SC: This risk presents a different framework?

BA: Yes. In the industrial societies that we have built, that we have constructed, that are impacting nature so deeply, but we don't have the biological defenses now to interact with animals in this way because we in the cities are so disconnected from many natural environments.

SC: Also we don't have the social and institutional tools to adequately address situations like this pandemic.

Relating to urban areas encroaching into the natural world more and more, with so many areas on earth also becoming scenes of massive industrial scale projects, mines, industrial corporate farming, these projects are often done without regard to the surrounding environments that balance life.

MiningWatch Canada tracks in solid detail the ways that these types of malpractices are carried out by Canadian mining companies.

BA: The unbalanced relationship between human beings and the natural world is at the root of this. Even though the use of animals and plants is related to the human production of culture, generally speaking, these frameworks of human culture are totally different in the last decades, as compared to any other point in history.

SC: And this has real consequences right now?

BA: Yes.

SC: It makes you think about the changes that happened to laws in China around the consumption of wild animals. There were actual changes around the ways that wild animals would be consumed, legally in the 1970s due to mass poverty.

So the framework of time has changed, first trains, and now then planes. Human conceptions of distance, place and time have all changed, and this shift has become global, across all societies, and it just feels like this shift, shaped by contemporary capitalism, can't be sustained.

BA: Yes, there is that recklessness in this cultural framework that is now global, in human beings dealing with the natural world. A pretension about the human relationship

with the natural world and how the needs and desires of humanity should take precedence over everything. This is the basis of the climate disaster also.

SC: Given you have worked so much on supporting human rights and social justice in Syria, in Palestine. How do you think that this virus will impact communities so deeply impacted by war, in Syria and in Palestine, people in the refugee camps on the border of Turkey and Greece.

BA: Today, there is this sense of worry in the western world, people wanting products they don't want to run out of, products that make any life a little easier, I get that. So refugees in Europe, who are fleeing war, will largely be less supported by public healthcare institutions because they don't have status. But the pandemic shows the contradiction and the interconnection here because refugees in detention centres are getting sick, or those in displacement camps at the borders are getting sick that will end up impacting everyone. So the pandemic illustrates interconnection.

SC: This point also illustrates that beyond the pandemic that propping up this system in the west equals many communities globally being disregarded. This includes those who die in wars that benefit the military industrial complex and disposable workforces that for example are key to the supply chain of fast fashion in Bangladesh for example.

BA: Yes. Many populations are disregarded.

The response here that conservatives have been mobilizing is totally understandable, even if we disagree fully. When people here are faced with unknown experiences and unknown people, through refugees showing up on their doorsteps, there is a massive reaction because most people don't have or understand the context as to why people are fleeing war, poverty and economic injustice, even if the system here largely depends on those realities existing.

I keep thinking of the Syrians who have faced so much peril and much of the world hasn't acted to stop the war that has threatened and taken the lives of so many people. This type of policy, around allowing the war and most importantly the flow of arms to continue has massive consequences.

SC: These western policies all have consequences for so many at fundamental levels that must be understood in relation to refugees and this interconnection can be pointed to in the way that the pandemic impacts us all?



BA: Exactly.

For example, in Africa, the threat of Ebola only became an emergency when it seemed that it might touch western borders, less when it impacted people in Africa, Western Africa particularly.

All the suffering that people in Syria, in Palestine, have faced is something to consider now because many people are taking the dangerous journey to try to get to Europe because they are trying to escape death, very simply and some are getting through and showing up here or in Europe. These people are the face of the stories and elements of the system that are silenced for people's comfort in the west.

SC: That threat of death has been constant for many over many years, outside of the pandemic and this needs to be underlined? I see this point because now the threat of the pandemic can allow for a window into understanding the threat that many were facing in regards to war and military injustice. The situation is very different but the pandemic can be an opening for people to be more compassionate as to why people would risk their lives to flee from a situation that could kill them and their family.

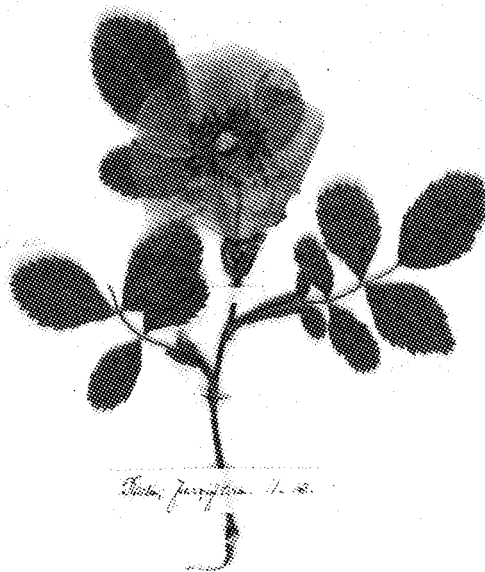
BA: Yes.

*Voices beyond lockdown:
Collective action and care across borders
in a time of crisis*

Free City Radio zine 5

A series of conversations facilitated
by Stefan Christoff in the spring of 2020
during the first pandemic lockdowns
in Montréal

Design by Léon Lo



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