denisse andrade & Betty Yu

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Betty: Hello.

denisse: Okay. Great.

Betty: Cool.
This is the inaugural phone conversation.

[Laughter.]

denisse: I know, after I don't know how many years.

Betty: That's hysterical. That is really funny.

denisse: Too many years

Betty: Oh my God. Too many years.

denisse: I think, when I was talking to Hồng-Ân, I think there is some interest in thinking about common histories as all those prompts tell us. Then when we were thinking about you and me and our common history, it was really interesting to ... because obviously we didn't work side by side, but we crisscrossed a lot, and it was a moment when it really felt like even the concept of indy media, which at that point encapsulated so much, anything that had to do with either critique or actual practice that went intently against the mainstream ideology of ... It wasn't even talked about, white supremacy. I think it was talked in this very hushed way of white supremacy, but certainly corporate media. I think that was the term that had the more traction, what corporate media was. I think there were some ideas of ... I think what MNN [Manhattan Neighborhood Network] was doing was part of that mix, but it wasn't necessarily thinking about – it had the echo of the quirkiness of public access, but not necessarily what it meant in terms of issues of representation.

There were all these kinds of organizations. There was Indy Media proper, MNN, which was central for various reasons, including the fact that obviously it was where people could create content. There was Paper Tiger. I'm trying to remember in New York at that point, who else.

Betty: Deep Dish.

denisse: Deep Dish, kind of the more grassroots, and at that point, Deep Dish had lost a little bit of...I guess just overall organizational force.

Betty: Right.

denisse: When I started, it worked really closely with Paper Tiger, but it was even more of a shoe string than Paper Tiger type of operation.

Betty: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

denisse: But it played a huge role, sure, Deep Dish. There was somebody else. I'm trying to remember.

Betty: It wasn't Channel Zero, that I've only heard of through Cyrille. It wasn't that, was it?

denisse: No.

Betty: Another media collective?

denisse: Yeah, it was another. It wasn't even a collective. It was more like a group. I'm trying to remember. It'll come to me maybe. But I think the point was that there was just not a true racial justice focus or conversation. It was really interesting. I remember more characters and because characters played roles within their groups, and it was really interesting to be part of the conversation. Even Paper Tiger TV felt, not felt, it was a very white organization.

My struggle often was there was a very white organization and there was not necessarily a recognition of that. But there was this ... in the type of way that people recognize that there's racism. But it always felt like it was something outside of (the organization) and something to pay attention to, maybe through a program or something like that, but not necessarily something that was introspective and really thinking structurally what this means for the work that we're doing.

Betty: Right. I was just going to say, for me, I came at all this independent media and public access, community media, totally from a really different place. At that point, I knew I wanted to study – I was studying photography and filmmaking at NYU. I was like through that program and through my activism with Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, the worker center in Chinatown that Virginia got me involved in at the time, I was still probably in my twenties, because I think when I started working at MNN, I was 22.

But in my twenties, I was already training and working with young and older intergenerational Chinese immigrant garment workers, some restaurants, some who were super young like me at the time, a mix of documentation status, but we were training them on these super old school VHS cameras, probably, I think they still had, on how to create their own videos. There were some really talented folks. I literally came in just to help out. There was so much talent, raw talent there already, and I forget the guy's name. Oh, my God. Troy something. It was a white guy who was actually. He was a high school teacher.

This is 25 years ago. He was actually helping to train them as well, high school students and Chinese staff, how to create their own videos. And MNN, we got a grant for many years consistently-

denisse: Yeah, exactly.

Betty: The community media grant. We had our old school editing equipment, tape to tape and all of that. So in many ways, I sharpened my skills through the training of others and also editing for Chinese staff, their monthly show. I realized, I was like, "Oh, this is going on public access TV. What is that?" So I'm really learning about it through that means, through that lens. It was so significant to people in Chinatown at that time, because obviously pre-internet, before any of this social media stuff, where that was a way for them to get their message out, that they could control because a lot of the newspapers in Chinatown, almost all the dailies were controlled by a myriad of bosses, sweatshop bosses, restaurant owners, the police even.

The gangs were...the Tong families were very powerful at that time. So I just remember them being so excited about this TV show and getting it out there. They were winning awards nationally, like public access awards. So they were super excited. It was through that, that I have this deep love for MNN and public access. Then I was working there, and honestly, even though we overlapped a little bit, and me being there, most of it for the nine years, I was in community media mainly.

But I think that I was trying to make it something it probably wasn't really. In other words, we did some good stuff. We trained some groups and we distributed some grants to some really great grassroots organizations and all that, but obviously it's so limited still. I don't know about how you felt within our department even, but it felt very much like armchair people who are saying certain things, but they're not actually doing it, not even the training. They're not really community activists. They're not out there doing the work, a lot of talk. Then that's even within our five people, but then within the organization, it was even more conservative than that.

So looking back, I was like, "Wow." I think I was talking it up and making it something it maybe just – there was an ideal there that I wanted to work toward, or that, in my mind, was thinking that it would become. Then as we all know, everything kind of went to shit with MNN and then other public access centers with loss of funding and all of that.

But I don't know. It's so interesting to hear what you're saying in terms of – because I still – a lot of people assume like that I know more about the history of the convergence of Paper Tiger and Deep Dish and all these other media entities, I guess. I'm just like, "No, I actually came as a community member, someone who was, like got involved with my mom, who's a garment worker and my sister." It was like really coming from that end.

So I actually don't know all the sequences of how things – I know just from what people tell you, but I didn't experience that. That wasn't my way into the work.

denisse: Right. For me, it was. For me, it was. I came into this position and having been an admir-

er of Paper Tiger from afar. I had done community radio. That was what I came from. I'd worked with a feminist radio station and a national shortwave feminist radio station, of all things, and had worked in popular education using media and photography and so forth. So I came to Paper Tiger, thinking this is the platform that allows for all of these things to happen. I really always thought that, and I haven't thought about it in a long time. But I really always thought that this type of media, both in the production, but also in the distribution, was key to organizing.

I really thought that that was where I was meant to be in terms of how I thought about those things, of the learning of the two. It was, and I think this is maybe to what you're speaking to. Maybe not because there were different things, but it was in many ways an amazing space, and you wanted it to be what you wanted it to be. In other words, I think that for me, I looked at it from these goggles of, "This is exactly what is needed," but I also very much knew that it was an ideal because in reality, there were so many issues, including the makeup of Paper Tiger racially speaking and also class-wise.

I got paid peanuts. The work was amazing, literally. There were a lot of pieces to the work, and on top of that, you had to coordinate people that were, everybody had a lot of commitment because there was something that Paper Tiger brought. It was people that were super committed, but super committed also meant that they had other things. Nobody got paid. So they had all these other things that they were doing. So there was always these holes that I felt that, in order for the work to be political and in the way that I thought needed to be, it couldn't be, because the structure itself of Paper Tiger, including from founders to all the different people that came after it was founded, it really respected this idea of the young and most people were white, came from certain schools and had all this time to dedicate to making this happen.

I constantly felt a lot of resistance to really addressing these more structural issues. Not to say that I had the key to undoing all the things that I felt like Paper Tiger needed to think about inside and outside, but that there wasn't necessarily, there was always, as one could imagine, there was always this urgency to produce what we called tapes.

Betty: Yeah, I know. Yeah.

denisse: That the conversations that should have happened around these tapes and the positives behind those tapes just weren't present. So I think what ended up happening, and how I felt was that it just – you produced something and you moved on to other things. Whereas I feel like in terms of being a political organization, that just shouldn't have been. I'm not sure how they operate now. It does change and different people come in, and different people come out. But there was a certain way, I think, that it just felt impossible to undo.

I didn't feel that I had enough power or agency or that there were enough transparent alliances where something could be done to change that. For the longest time, I was the one speaking to these issues alone. I'm trying to remember if there was someone else. Nobody would have said, "We don't want to think about those things." It was just like it wasn't necessarily the-

Betty: The priority.

denisse: Right. The priority.

Betty: So wasn't there a period when you were involved that there was like, and again, everything mushes together in terms of time, but where you all were, I guess, mainly with your leadership and pushing it, was becoming more diverse or addressing some more of the racial justice issues.

denisse: Yeah, I think -

Betty: Or am I just imagining that? Maybe mid 2000s? Oh, my gosh. I don't even know the years. What? Seven, eight? I don't even know.

denisse: Yeah, and at that point, I remember. I'm trying to remember. There was some board that they were creating that I was brought into -

Betty: Oh, right.

denisse: - to kind of advise on.

Betty: Yeah! That's right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

denisse: Yeah. But it didn't really gel. I think the demands again on people that were on staff were huge, and it just needed more. It needed it more coming from other directions, and it needed more. I haven't been in nonprofits for a long time, so I don't know, even in terms of funding, it seems like that would have been a good way to push organizations to transform internally and to do a real transformation because I do feel there's a fault, like, on foundation money to have people just say what they want to hear and not necessarily do the work. Not that people want to lie, but the work. It takes a lot of work!

[Laughter]

Betty: Yeah, yeah. No, totally. I remember them. I think I remember. Well, there was, yeah, there was that. Anyway, I won't say it on the record, but there was some funny stuff that was happening with one of the staff members and anyway, in terms of signing of signatures, that-

denisse: Yeah, and-

Betty: - signing of papers.

denisse: Yeah, go ahead.

Betty: No, no, no. I can't remember if she worked there at the same time with Hillary, but I remember being on some calls with, as an advisory role. It was really weird, because meetings would happen maybe once a year and then they would stop. It just fizzed out.

denisse: Yeah, yeah. Exactly.

Betty: But, yeah, there were some really unethical things, of course, that happened.

denisse: Yeah. It's interesting that Hồng-Ân talked about mentorship because at that point, I think it would have been interesting to have actual people of color committed to these ways of being reflective or critical of, which is not to say that you ultimately don't want to support the organization, but to really think about who is part of these organizations. I'm being really broad because Paper Tiger was one of them, but there was Deep Dish and all these other – Indy Media. Forget about it. They were all guys at Indy Media.

Betty: Yeah.

denisse: Most of them were at least. A lot of them were connected to Democracy Now! And mostly were white. I do remember that case of somebody signing for you. I thought about it today because I was thinking about this call and I was like, "Oh, I bet that never would have happened, had you been a white guy."

Betty: Oh, God. Can you imagine?

denisse: No, exactly.

Betty: Totally, totally, and it was just -

denisse: There would have been a lot of shame, and respect. I know that it was like, because I know this person, and I worked with this person. There was this dual thing that I think is very interesting in terms of these nonprofits. Paper Tiger was a nonprofit, but by no stretch of imagination, did it operate like these nonprofits that are so strict and loyal to their routines and so forth. But based on what I'm saying, I think there was this dual thing happening, where she really wanted to be this champion and this excellent worker. So in that, she felt absolutely entitled to do this. On the other hand, she felt absolutely entitled to this because she was doing it to you and she was using your name.

Betty: Yeah. Absolutely, you're right. If I was a white guy, that wouldn't have been the case. It was just like, "Oh, yeah, Betty will understand. She'll understand. She's someone who's just going to be totally okay with it, as an Asian woman who – she gets how it goes, the hustle of things." It's just like, "Whoa." Okay, there are certain, honestly there's certain things that ... Yeah, cool. I'm not all fucking a hundred percent "you got to follow the rules," but, dude, that was taking it too far. I'm like, "That's like going from zero to 100. I'm sorry."

But it's funny. It does feel so long ago, all this stuff with MNN and now, as you know, I'm still in touch with a few people who still work there. It's not even a skeleton of its former self. It's like a mini CNN over there or a mini CSPAN. MNN is just like, Dan is still making – he's making a lot. I think he's making like $400,000 a year now, if not half a million. And what are they doing? Who are they serving? It's crazy. It gets me so angry. There was so much potential there.

denisse: Yeah, and there was, and I think *my* wanting to work there was exactly that, that I felt-

Betty: Right. Exactly, right?

denisse: And it was in a moment really that – I mean, it's hard to believe, but there really was this transition into the editing software being more available, and people having access to that, and being able to learn, and being able to produce. And everything was moving to digital at that point. So, things became lighter, in terms of what people could take out. I think there was a moment in New York where it did feel like making that media and distributing, whether it was through MNN, which everything had to be broadcast anyway, and in their communities, whatever people were doing with their membership. And I think it did have an impact, and so many people were being consistently producers of their own media, regardless of what kind of social justice group it was. And I think-

Betty: Yeah!

denisse: I think a few of us kind of kept that going, but there was a little bit of a transition, even while we were there, of changing a little bit that – of whose content really should be seen. And it was more about numbers and really kind of paying attention to –

Betty: Yeah. Oh my God. That's right. That's right.

denisse: There's something to be said about certain analysis that just get dated. If you're not really understanding kind of the needs, the language and kind of how you need to respond to certain ideas, and just you can't think – how we talk about social justice even 10 years ago, is not the same way that we talk about social justice today.

For all of these kind of OGs that were part of Deep Dish, they were thinking of '70s and '80s social justice ideas. And, by the time the 2000s came around, they were so set on these ideas that, I don't think it was like, I don't want to change my ways. It's just they thought that, that's how it was. And, it had to do a lot with that kind of mentality that you think you've done the work, and this is where you are at, and that's how you're going to run things. And also it has to do with the fact that you go unchecked, because a lot of these organizations were just so – I don't say autonomous in a political way, but you really operated kind of floating around. So, there was really no accountability.

Betty: Right, exactly.

denisse: And so, and you got away with it, and because you produce good content. I think that's the thing, you produce good content that, that didn't mean that you were necessarily – this is what I mean. I think it's if you're just thinking of certain things externally, and there was a lot of kind of, there was a lot of attention to kind of political economy, or international issues that were affecting, that were important, and that's a very different conversation. So, of course, great that they did a show on the Zapatistas in the 90s.

Betty: Exactly.

denisse: Politically from the outside, it's really great, but I think that there was a lot of missing notes there, and no one to push back, that they would get these younger people to do a certain kind of work, you know, all the interns. This is again back to, we really love the idea of a lot of these organizations, a lot of us did. And we wanted to be part of them because we loved the idea, but we knew, well a lot of us knew that there was a lot of work to be done. And I felt really lonely. I felt super lonely. I mean, not in an emotional way necessarily, but I do remember feeling like – yeah, I was coming into something that wasn't necessarily, there was a lack of recognition of certain things that were really obvious to me, and no one to really talk to about it.

Betty: Yeah.

denisse: In the service is really protecting these great, "great" groups or organizations, we just kind of remained silent.

Betty: Yeah. I mean, and again, this could be my outsider kind of looking in, but obviously during its heyday of the IMC [Independent Media Center], and especially during the Republican National Convention, all the media stuff. Remember all the anti-war protests that, like Democracy Now!, like you said, IMC and all these other people that were big players in getting information out. I'm very grateful that I was a part of these organizations at that time. For me, that was the height of, "Okay, this is how progressive media can work with people on the ground." And all this stuff.

Of course there were flaws, but I also always felt this feeling. I had this feeling that there were certain people who – and this sounds so awful – but there was this archetype of who would get involved with particularly IMC, or certain people who were, again, generalizing here, more educated, white, coming from maybe a more sort of intellectual, sort of intellectualizing socialism or these theories of change. But maybe it was a choice for them to actually get involved in this, rather than coming from a place of being directly impacted by oppression, that forced them to be involved.

But it was a choice, which is fine, which is not – and again, I compare it to myself, because for me, it was actually in the process of seeing my mom getting involved, and what she was going through as a garment worker. For me, it was very much of this – I always say to people, I don't feel like I had a choice not to be involved, because of what was happening to my immediate family. I was thrown into it, because I'm part of an immigrant family, and it completely disrupted our whole entire family, these conditions. As opposed to what I was seeing, these white guys who are coming from Brown or Columbia University, NYU, who knows? And there was a choice to get involved in this work.

And there was some arrogancy too, because I don't remember exactly what campaign, but I remember when I was still really involved with NMASS [National Mobilization Against Sweatshops] and Chinese Staff there were various people who wanted to just – the extractive stuff, parachuting in. And it was always weird, because I was also working at MNN, and I was also still involved. But people just expect you to just give up your information. I'm like, "Dude, you got to put in a little time. You can't just expect to come in, and for people to just trust you, because you're IMC or whoever the fuck you are," like Paper Tiger.

Because these people in Chinatown don't know who you are. You think you're hot shit, you think you know who you are. You think everyone should know who you are, and they don't know who you are. And so, I just remember these, again, I don't remember who, but I remember having these conversations and being so frustrated. And it might have been right after 9/11, when it was all this organizing happening in Chinatown. Especially exposing how particularly undocumented immigrant folks, and how workers and residents were being completely left out of everything. And I just remember some folks from these indy media, these media organizations wanting to just extract, and thinking I was just going to hook it up and stuff. And I'm just like, "No, that's just not how it goes. You have to ... "

denisse: Yeah.

Betty: I don't know.

denisse: Yeah, I think that's interesting, what you talk about extraction, because I remember the conversations about working with groups. I always felt like there was this – and even coming from a place like Paper Tiger, who wasn't, like really knew the numbers, were not necessarily – I mean, funding needed to happen, and of course numbers had to be revealed and we supported some of them. It was this idea that you just kind of go into a community, and the principle of building relationships, which is kind of foundational for organizing, nothing was there. And it was this thing like, we can get a grant if we just go into these communities. And I was just cringing, and I would be like, "Wait, what are we doing? And, why are we doing it? And how are we going to do this again?"

Betty: Oh my God. Wow.

denisse: I think that was, yeah, I think it was a way of, it really was a way, and it still is a way of doing things. You just kind of walk into a place and say, "We know what you want and you're going to love this."

Betty: Right exactly. Yeah.

denisse: So, and because there wasn't necessarily – yeah. Go ahead.

Betty: No, no. You go, you go. Sorry.

denisse: Yeah, because there wasn't necessarily a lot of resources in terms of people. So there was some justification around it, you know?

Betty: I'm so glad that you were in those spaces to push, right? And there's only so much as one person, right, that you can push and challenge.

denisse: I didn't push enough.

Betty: It's bullshit.

denisse: Yeah and I just remember, I mean, I think I remember a lot. Thinking about it I do remem-

ber walking into, when I got that job, that I was comforted that you were there. And I don't remember exactly how we had met, but we had met before that. We had met years before that. But every one of these spaces, they were such masculinist spaces. I mean, I'm not talking about kind of a frat culture, but there was just this high fiving, passive high fiving between men.

Betty: Oh God totally.

denisse: And I really felt, even the most self-proclaimed radicals that – just you would walk into these spaces and there would be an immediate kind of – and I don't know if it was immediate – but it was definitely a shutdown culture of what women had to say or could do.

And that was the time, and I don't know how privy you were part of this, or if you knew about this. But there was a time that because there was all this technology, like hacking just kind of started becoming a thing, and thinking about servers and all these things. So there was a lot of kind of tech knowhow, that people were trying to figure out. And by people I mean men, because they really thought that this was their thing. And I remember these conversations, because, I mean this was pre-YouTube.

[Laughter]

denisse: I remember these conversations, and you couldn't even be part of these committees that were intensely figuring it out. It's not like people knew. So technically, I mean, there were some people that had a little bit more technical knowledge than other people.

Betty: Yeah, mm-hmm.

denisse: But even in that journey of, let's work together, it was this thing where men were kind of leading it.

Betty: And it's like you said, it's so gross, because they're like, "Oh, but I've been to Chiapas and I have basically been in the trenches with the Zapatistas." All this stuff. Right? And then you realize their true colors, and they are well meaning, but there are misogynistic as fuck, and have some weird gender and even racial shit. Right?

denisse: Mm-hmm.

Betty: I remember, like you're saying at that time, I mean it's all kind of mushy in my head. But even on the public access side, remember when they were trying to create – this is right at the beginnings of the internet, like, "Okay, how are we going to ..." Whatever term they used, "Use our CMS websites? How do we wire programs to each other super fast? And how do we share ... " All that shit that they were creating. It was such dude culture that it was like – and then you would even inquire. I remember I even inquired about stuff, and talking to you like you are just an idiot. Right?

And it's like, okay, yeah, I may not know that stuff, but I know some other stuff. You know what I mean? So condescending, and I think that between that, between how the cul-

ture of that institution became, with that whole sort of dude culture, it was either him or another person who was just out of it, out to lunch all the time and was the head of the department. And you were just like, "How is this happening?" If this was a person of color who was doing this, they would have gotten fired 10 years ago.

. . .

Betty: Obviously me and you are doing really different things, but not really different. Right? I have completely moved on from public access and independent media stuff, but obviously carry those things with me, those principles, those fundamental principles around the collective spirit and all that stuff from organizing and community media, but it feels like such a different life, to be honest. It feels so different.

It's been 10 years since I left MNN. And then five years since I left CMJ [Center for Media Justice], five or six years. Yeah, and I h aven't really worked for a nonprofit. I mean, freelance stuff here and there, or contracted, but not full time like that. I think CMJ really just burnt me out to the point where I was like, hell no, I can't do this anymore. I think I shared with you – love and respect the people there, but…

denisse: That's so interesting.

Betty: It's really crazy.

denisse: I mean, those are the kinds of things, right? Because then you're talking about people of color led organizations. We want to support and protect these organizations and what they stand for, but we also hold these, for lack of a better word, secrets of things that we really don't believe in and deeply, deeply want to change, and we know that are absolutely fucked up.

Betty: Yeah.

denisse: Yeah. There's a lot to be said there because I think power operates in these really interesting ways that it's not just about changing the faces of places, but it's really about thinking about what it means to be part of something bigger than you, and part of something bigger than what you think it is that you want to do. And that means obviously thinking about all the things that we think about. And now you have, I think this question that you have around navigating -

[Laughter]

Betty: John just came in. I'm sorry.

[Laughter]

denisse: -navigating that art world and doing all the other stuff that you're interested in is something that I'm constantly thinking about and struggling with really.

Betty: Yeah. For Chinatown Art Brigade, now we're in this weird place where it's like these museums and galleries, because what started off as holding other galleries accountable in Chinatown and morphed into stuff that we were doing with DTP [Decolonize This Place] around the Roosevelt statue, all that stuff. Now, with the Museum of Chinese America receiving $35 million as a concession, community give-back for the jail in Chinatown. And it's so not the work that we want to be doing where it's like our work came from working with CAAAV [Organizing Asian Communities] and around amplifying tenant issues and housing rights and evictions and what was going on with displacement.

And then it got to this weird place the last couple of years, which I think a lot of us are not necessarily wanting to be in that position. We're not the fucking – I'm not the art museum police, not like that. Honestly, I don't give a shit. It's not like – for us not wanting to change the leadership of these places. They're fundamentally rotten to the core, on the board and all these things.

Anyway, it's just so weird how you get pigeonholed and then it's like for us, we're now super wrapped up in a lot of that stuff. And then now all the infighting between the groups. There's so much infighting. In the last month, two months between all these groups, everything just completely fell apart and we're kind of like bystanders in all of it. And there's
: all these casualties around us. And I'm just like, oh my God. Between all the FTP [Fuck the Police] protests and all these different groups that were involved and people were not given proper warning. All these people who got arrested who didn't want to get arrested, but just got wrapped up in it.

It was really fucked up, to be honest. You don't put young, Black and Brown folks in the line of fire without fully having them understand what the hell is happening. And then hundreds of them get arrested. This is late last year. So I've gotten really, really jaded from that stuff too, some of that coalition work, because these groups are not necessarily base building, they're just direction oriented. Direct action oriented. You know what I mean?

denisse: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Betty: At what point are you building towards something?

denisse: Yeah. That's another interesting –

Betty: I know that's a whole 'nother thing. It's a whole 'nother thing.

denisse: I was going to say another aspect of the work that's happening today. Yeah. I say it's interesting because going back to the point of this intersection between art and organizing, I feel like they sit in the middle of that, but they've kind of – I mean, I think it's also the formation that they come out of because they come out of Occupy.

Betty: Exactly.

denisse: That base building wasn't something that was strategic. Eventually, they decided that it wasn't necessarily foundational for the work that was happening. I think that the theoret-

ical analysis is there. I think that there's some pieces that are really interesting, but then because they lack that, it's too amorphous to really be able to disrupt in the long-term ways that they might envision.

Betty: Yeah. No, you're totally dead on, on it. Yep. And I'll tell you, the last couple of – I've had to step back quite a bit because of the egos involved. I have so much respect for some of these folks, but they can't even see. One of the core people I called, I said, "You guys are great at direct action. You are amazing, but you guys aren't base building. So when you come into..." Because they clashed with some of the tenants. Because they were inserting themselves in anti-police, in policing stuff. And then anti-gentrification stuff. And all this stuff, right? So they're really good at direct action. They're really good at putting materials out.

A lot of us look to them, but then it's like, you've got to be accountable. You can't just say, "Oh no, no, that wasn't me," when you have these base building anti-displacement groups who we've worked with that we really, really value tremendously who are like, "You just put us out there. What the fuck? You can't just not take accountability," basically, right? And you guys have to be open to taking feedback and criticism, and just hear people out."

denisse: Yeah.

Betty: Things are fine. We're working through stuff, but I think there's so many divisions right now.

But you know, I have a lot of empathy for folks who were targeted by the media, all this stuff. A lot of empathy. But when people try to actually tell you why people feel that way about you and be truthful and try to struggle with you and you don't want to struggle because you think your shit don't stink, that's a problem. That's a big problem.

denisse: No, I think that is a problem, of course. Yeah.

Betty: It's like, what the hell? Yeah. I've gotten to these stages where right now I'm just like... Honestly, the pandemic came at a time for me with that stuff where it was actually perfect because everyone was getting on each other's nerves and screaming at each other. It's like, okay, let's all just recenter. Because at that point the FTP3 had happened and all these people who got arrested didn't want to get arrested. They were just penned in. It just got so ugly.

denisse: Yeah, totally.

Betty: Anyway.

denisse: I don't know if you want to say anything specific that you want to ask me or that I should ask you, like more personal, not personal like ultra personal.

[Laughter]

Betty: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

denisse: Not like things we don't want others to really know.

[Laughter]

Betty: Yeah. Well, I know, right? I know. Well, this is totally a nonsequitor, but in terms of – and this is just selfishly wanting to know – how are you doing with book writing and dissertation? I know that's a sore spot for a lot of people when they're at the stage you're in. They're like, "Don't ask me. I don't want to talk about it." But of course, selfishly, I'm curious.

[Laughter]

denisse: Yeah. I am, let's see. This stage of dissertation writing is really hard because, for most of us at least, most people that I know, it's not for everyone, but for most of us it becomes just a task that you need to complete, but it's not a task that you move through with ease. I think it's a task that it requires a lot of – not just in terms of your intellectual ability, but the commitment of having this project that you've been working towards, see it to the end and having the time and having the mental space and not fighting against exhaustion from thinking about the same things over and over and not necessarily producing them to a level that you want to produce. And thinking about where your work lives in terms of intellectual history and what that means for your career.

And I'm not in my early 30s, so thinking about job prospects. All of this is happening at the same time. I'm saying all of these things not because one follows the other. Literally, as you're writing all these things are flooding your head. There is a real thing called imposter syndrome, which I know happens to everyone in every field, but in the Academy you're constantly being asked to perform in ways that you are proving to the world that you're indeed as smart as a PhD should make you. And that also becomes really tiring internally. Obviously that external performance is tiring, but the internal struggles of thinking whether you are – if your work is or not a reflection of your smarts, if your work is or not as smart as it should be. I've been moving through it and I plan to finish in the Spring. This is being recorded, so hold me to it.

[Laughter]

denisse: I feel like in these times of – there's the stress of COVID. As you know, I also deal with health issues. There's a general stress of COVID. There's the general stress of stress of my own mortality, given that COVID exists in places that we can't see. And then the way that racial violence has become so extremely visible to all of us. I think most Black people say, "Well, of course I've lived under this my whole life," but I think that the visibility of it is something that does strike a nerve and it gets deeper under your skin.

By the way, I've never watched and will never watch the video of George Floyd being murdered, but I think that there's all these things that you can't ignore. They're such a part of your psyche. And the way that your dissertation lives, at least in my case I should say, there's this intellectual – If you were to slice your brain and there's an intellectual level, there's an emotional level, and there's the psyche level, which is a level that we all exist

just by surviving. I mean, technical terms, I'm not sure what that is called, but our psyche, what dictates our emotions and our ways of being.

All these slices are really competing with each other and trying to take priority. And we as people, as human beings, are emotional beings. These two slices that manage your stress, your psyche and your emotional slices of your brain are constantly competing and wanting to take over that intellectual part. I'm here, I'm away from my home. We came here thinking that the space and the change of environment and all that stuff would be good. And obviously I want to dedicate a lot of time to writing, but I also need to unplug, and I can't. After I hang up with you I have to write. I have a deadline that I was supposed to turn in something on Friday and I didn't.

Betty: Oh, no.

denisse: It's not that I've taken all this time off. Yeah. I don't know. I just feel really like I just want to get this done. Yeah. I think a lot about when you're interviewing for a job they really want to know about what your next project is. I really want to get to that point. I try to fight it constantly, because it's really easy to go down that path and trick yourself into thinking that there's this other project that's so exciting, that you're going to be able to work towards. I can't move forward unless I really finish this.

So, yeah. And this is not necessarily answering your question. I feel like I've answered your questions in many ways. I mean, I think the short of it is that it's a struggle, but I am writing. I do feel like when it – I think for people who have gone to school their whole lives in this sequence of events, just without a break, but you've finished your PhD by the time you're 32, right?

Betty: Oh my god. Right.

denisse: Or earlier. There's a formula already there. You go into the Academy. But I think for me, it's like, okay, so we are about to face probably one of the worst financial crises we've ever, in history we have ever experienced. And it's going to be awful. Obviously jobs are not going to be abundant. Forget about the economy because the economy's going to be struggling with all sorts of issues, including the fact that many people might not want to go into college because why?

Betty: True, yeah.

denisse: Why even take all this debt on, that is not going to produce anything? I think about my trajectory and all the things that I'm interested in that have never left me. The fact that I'm doing geography and writing about Black radicalism doesn't mean that I'm not interested in art, deeply interested in art or that I'm not interested in visual culture or I'm not interested in film studies or filmmaking. All these things that I've done.

So there is a moment of, when I have time, to think about it. I'm like, okay, so how do these things coexist in terms of what might be my job? I want to move through this also because I want a fucking job. If it's not in the Academy, then what does that look like? And

right now, I think for all of us, we're trying to imagine what our life will look like. And for those of us who are going to be launching ourselves into the job market, whether it's the Academy or not, there's a lot of moving pieces in it. And I think the same uncertainty that pervades every other part of our lives is part of this. If you're not 30, you're also thinking, dude, I got to make this happen. I got to find something that this is where I'm going to retire from eventually.

[Laughter]

Betty: Yeah, yeah. No, that's real. Yep. I mean, you have so much – and I know you know this. Forget about me and I've been on and off doing shit and it's the same anxiety. But the trajectory that you have of stuff –maybe I'm wishing that for myself too. It makes you an asset, right? It makes you someone who – it puts you on the top of the list rather than – you know what I'm saying? Right? Because it's not like you've trail blazed through from undergrad to grad to PhD. There's life that was lived. There's lots of stuff that you did. You know what I mean?

And I hope that that is working in our favor. I really do, because you do look at the youngbloods who are 29 and 30 who just finished their PhD. Wow. Or the MFA even. And they're out in the world. Even in the MFA, they say, "Oh yeah, the MFA world is not as rigid. You have your MFA. You're out there. You can make work. It's all about showing, where you've shown. And then you can come back and still try to find a job." But I'm still competing with people who are literally 15 years younger than me who have their MFA. So it's the same shit. People are like, "Don't worry about it." But I'm like, come on, who are we kidding? Especially in New York. The amount of people that have MFAs in New York is ridiculous. I have no idea what the fuck I'm going to do, to be real.

denisse: Yeah. Is that really something that you're thinking about?

Betty: I don't really know. I know that I'm in a lucky position to not have to immediately do hand to mouth. And in so many ways there's so much guilt I have because I always see my mom's little voice, how much she struggled to even just get her and my dad, to get us, to just get food on the table for four kids and nonstop working, nonstop working for 40 years to the point where she has all these ailments. And then I'm here like, "Oh, what do I want to do? What am I going to do?" I have so much of that fucking baggage guilt it's ridiculous. And I have to try to get rid of that.

But all that to say that I just have felt so lucky to have had this year to like – the photography program that I was in that – most of it was scholarship because it was fucking shit load expensive, but I was still able to pay the remaining balance and realizing how privileged everyone around me was in that program. But really opening up my eyes to a lot of just different modalities of storytelling and different ways of storytelling, integrating a lot of other online web-based, but just even more so. And even with the photography, being able to dig into that more. And of course, COVID changed everything because we weren't able to touch anything. We weren't able to develop film. We weren't able to do any of that stuff really. And I was so excited about digging into the analog piece of the film developing, getting back into the dark room, but we couldn't do that. So all that to say I really don't

know. I've been able to get by a little bit with different shows where they reached out and you get an artist stipend, honorarium. I've gotten grants here and there and residencies, but how long can I do that for? You know?

denisse: Mm-hmm.

Betty: I mean, I've been doing that for a good five years, maybe. Four or five years. Knock on wood, I've felt very lucky and feel like – I'm feeling very lucky about that, but I don't know. I don't know. And then part of me is like, okay. You know how they say, that whole thing of – and I don't know if it's true – but if you adjunct for a certain amount of time, you're just not that desirable to do anything else.

And that sits with me. I think I was saying, last semester, when I was doing a full time program and taking six classes at ICP and teaching three and a half classes at different campuses. And it was like, wasn't sleeping, very bad mood, unhealthy. It was very bad. And then this past semester, I saved up money. Obviously, John is there to support and then the pandemic happened so I was at home anyway, doing classes.

But I'm just realizing that a lot of my time has been just kind of creating and editing and working on stuff. Like, right now, working on this – I think I might've mentioned this thing about gentrification and Flushing for the Queens Museum. And then this other piece for this show in Tribeca at Apexart. So it's equivalent to teaching two classes, basically. There's a budget, but you get to create. And the other thing with Apexart is that I'm curating it. So I was able to actually reach out to my dream team of folks that I wanted to put together across the country to show their work. Then the pandemic happened.

So in a way, it's like, I'm doing that. And sometimes I feel like I have no idea what I want to do because I love the teaching, but there's no way I'm going to get a full time teaching job right now. It's crazy. There's no way. I mean, there's absolutely no fucking way. And I don't-

denisse: Some people are getting it but it's –

Betty: Yeah. I mean, I don't say it to put myself down. I don't mean it like that – I'm just a realist. I didn't get my MFA at RISD or Yale or, you know what I mean? I didn't. I got it at Hunter College and I love Hunter College, but it's Hunter College, you know?

So I totally get it. And even at Pratt, when I interviewed for that MFA, whatever teaching thing, I realized how way unprepared I was. Not that I was cocky, but I went in like, okay, because it was a community – they were looking for someone who's more community-oriented, community-based, but solid to teach in the MFA program, media and a mixture of things. And I was way not prepared, put it that way.

And I learned a lot from that. A lot. I pretty much blew it, but it's okay. You know, that was a couple of years ago and I got a teaching – I mean, I got a job just teaching one class in the MFA program there, which I was thankful for, but there's so much ego. There's so much selling yourself. And I mean, you know, this more than I do, of course, in terms of how much you have to be out there, but I just don't like it. It feels icky. I don't like it.

Betty: Well, we've been talking for a while. Wow.

denisse: I know. For our first ever conversation on the phone, I think we did-

Betty: I know.

denisse: -really great.

[Laughter]

Betty: Totally. And I'm actually really glad that we caught up on some – I was like, "Can I ask about ...". I'm like, it's cool to talk about the past but I'm like, "I actually want to know what's happening with denisse with stuff now." But it sounds like it's so awesome and exciting that you're so close, though, with the dissertation. That's super exciting. Again, I don't know all the elements involved, but rooting for you. I know that it's going to be so gratifying and you have to have a big party and all that stuff.

denisse: Oh yeah. I mean, the party that I was going to have is not going to happen because by the spring, we're not going to -

Betty: You don't think so?

denisse: I'm definitely not going to hold a party.

Betty: Yeah.

denisse: Let's just put it that way.

Betty: So you think the fall will still be weird, right?

denisse: I highly doubt it.

Betty: I mean the spring, I mean. Yeah.

denisse: Yeah. I mean, I think, will it be weirder than now? Probably not, but just this kind of weird is already too weird. And even a slight change in that, it's still going to be weird.

Betty: It's going to be that whole gliding into whatever normalcy was.

denisse: Exactly.

Betty: That period is going to be so odd. Like, "What do I do? Can I hug you? Can I not hug you?"

denisse: Well, it's just not going to be normal. Yeah. It's just not going to be normal.

Betty: It's not going to be, right. It's not going to be normal. Exactly.
Well, we'll have to do something to like -

denisse: Yeah. For sure.

Betty: Something, something.

denisse: I'm definitely celebrating. But maybe I –

Betty: But I think you're right. I think you're right. I think it's going to go into – I love the time by myself and doing a lot of stuff in seclusion, but I'm also ready for this to be over a little bit. I was going to say, when I saw Camino those few times, I like, so wanted to play with him and hug him. And I was like, "Oh, I can't do that." When you see kids and you're just so drawn to them and I'm like, "Fuck, can't do that." Soon, I hope.

denisse: Soon things will change. Yeah, we'll figure it out. We'll figure it out as time allows us to. We'll see.

Betty: Yeah. And I know you guys have so much on your plate dealing with that whole piece, with having a kid and navigating the fall. That's like a whole nother – I can't even imagine. I can't.

denisse: Yeah that's another conversation.

Betty: It's like a whole 'nother animal you guys have to deal with.

denisse: For sure.

Betty: Oh my God.

denisse: For sure.

Betty: Well, this was a good convo.

denisse: I know.

Betty: I felt like we started with 2004 and then ended on today or something.

denisse: Yeah, that's good, right?

Betty: Yeah.

denisse: For something that we didn't plan, I think that's a good way of narrating our lives and not sticking to the past and thinking about our trajectories.

Betty: Have a good rest of the stay there.

denisse: Thank you.

Betty: And thanks for reaching out to me for this project.

denisse: Yeah. Thanks. I'm glad it worked out. I'm really, really glad.

Betty: Yeah. Yeah. Me too. Me too.

denisse: Okay.

Betty: Cool.

denisse: Have a good night. Go to sleep.

Betty: You too. Well, not really, but yeah. I'll talk to you later.

denisse: I know. You too. Get some rest.

[Laughter]

Betty: Bye.

denisse: Bye.