

Criticism Inside, Alternatives Alongside: Organizing
Otherwise to Intervene in Anthropology's Future.

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>> BILL MAURER: I think we're just waiting for people to file in now. Yes? We'll get started in just a minute or two here as people file in from the virtual waiting room. So thank you for your patience as we wait for people to file in from the waiting room and we'll get started with today's conversation in just a little bit.

Again, good morning. Thank you for your patience. Waiting for people to file in from the waiting room as we get into our session here this morning. This is the eighth installment of a series of conversations we've been hosting titled criticisms inside, alternatives alongside, organizing to intervene in anthropology's future. Today's topic is what does social change look like? Which we'll get into a little bit. Again, this is the 8th of a ten part series, the future of public anthropology and public-facing social science in general. I'm Bill Maurer, I'm the Dean of the School of Social Sciences at Irvine.

This event and the UC Irvine campus are within the ancestral and unceded shared territories of the Acjachemen and Tongva peoples. The region extends from the Santa Ana River to Aliso Creek and beyond. As members of a land grant institution, we acknowledge the Acjachemen and Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers whose efforts to steward and protect the land continue today. Taylor?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And I'm Taylor Nelms, the Senior Director of Research at the Filene Research Institute and the co-host for this series. We're really deeply excited and selfishly excited to be joined today by Angela Russell who has become a

close friend, I hope it's not too forward to say at this point, Angela, after the two and a half years I've been here at Wisconsin.

Angela is the Vice President of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at CUNA Mutual Group in Madison, Wisconsin. Angela's background is in epidemiology and public health, and prior to joining CUNA Mutual Group, Angela worked on issues of health equity and community engagement in a variety of roles with Public Health Madison/Dane County, the University of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin state government. In 2018, Angela was recognized by Black Enterprise magazine as one of the most powerful diversity executives in the U.S., and this past year, she launched her own Podcast, which I think is one of the most popular podcasts in local Madison media, called Black Oxygen, which I highly recommend folks check out. Angela, we've been talking a lot throughout this series about for those of us who are working around the edges of academia, outside much academia -- outside of academia, having been trained in academia in some form or fashion, who are fellow travelers, and in many ways I feel like you are a fellow traveler for me as I've entered into this world of kind of the nonprofit world or the credit union industry or kind of nonacademia in general and certainly Wisconsin. Rather than southern California.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yes.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Later on, we'll be joined in a few minutes by three PhD students: Kim Fernandes from the University of Pennsylvania, Nina Medvedeva from the University of Minnesota, and Nima Yolmo from the University of California, Irvine. Thank you to the

Wenner-Gren Foundation and the UCI School of Social Sciences. Please those folks who are on the line, please use the Q & A feature. We'll try to get to those questions towards the end of the conversation. Okay. With those preliminaries aside, Angela, thank you so much for joining us.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor. When you first told me about this, I'm like, me? I'm not a Ph.D. I'm just a Black woman that has a lot of opinions, you know.

(laughter).

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's all you need really to be an honorary social scientist.

(laughter).

A lot of opinions. Maybe, anger larks we could start with a little kind of biography or background from your own, you know,

your own narrative. Also what you do at CUNA Mutual Group and how you ended up doing the work apps.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Great. I'm the Vice President of diversity and inclusion at CUNA Mutual Group and you can think of it as a three-legged stool, someone the internal work force or workforce in terms of how do we increase representation of a variety of historically marginalized communities in our work. The other part is our community work and our foundation, how do we increase equity in our communities and our lens is actually equity as it relates to education and economic stability. And then also, this was kind of a surprise, it was kind of an unintended consequence I guess of being thought leaders in the space of diversity, equity and inclusion within the credit union space. So that was not what we planned to do when we first kind of went on this diversity, equity and inclusion path at CUNA Mutual Group but it seemed to happen. I've been at CUNA Mutual Group almost six years and what's funny for me is that CUNA Mutual was a corporation and when I was young I told my parents that I would never, ever, ever, ever go to corporate, lesson learned, never say never because here I am and what's surprising to me is that I absolutely love it. I didn't think I would love being in corporate and I also didn't think that being in a corporation is a place and that you can actually have really strong social change impact. So I'm sure that we'll talk a little bit about that along the way. My educational and career journey has not been linear and I think that as social scientists you'll probably appreciate the nonlinear path because so many times when you're in undergrad, people are saying you need to do this, you need to do this, you need to do this, and it turns out that life doesn't work that way and mine certainly hasn't. So I went to undergrad this little tiny college in Wisconsin called Boylston college, which has a pretty strong Anthropology Department which I love but I didn't study anthropology. I was very set on becoming a physician when he was in undergrad. In fact, I wanted to become a pediatric oncologist. I was really interested in working with kids who had cancer. The challenge is I actually didn't like being around sick people, so being a doctor and being around sick people, unless I was going to become a pathologist, it wasn't going to play out. In between my sophomore and junior year in college, I ended up having an internship at the state health department and that's when I got really interested in epidemiology. That internship was looking at the disparities between Black women and White women in Wisconsin related to breast cancer mortality. And I started

to learn about the influence of race, culture, on health and health outcomes. So I got really interested in that, ended up minoring in healthcare studies, and as a part of my minor, I took my first ever medical anthropology class, which I adored. I adored. I joked with Taylor before that if I went back and got my Ph.D. in anything, it would probably be med anthro, even though I have strong pons about anthropology in general as well. But the influence of culture and health and health outcomes became a huge interest of mine. I went on and got my graduate degree in population health with a focus on chronic disease epidemiology and towards the end of my graduate program I worked at the center for the study of cultural diversity in healthcare, again, that influence on diversity and health and health health outcomes, that center no longer exists but it was a really good experience in terms of understanding the contributors of health outcomes over time. So I left that, became an epidemiologist for the state, was looking at -- even though I studied chronic disease epidemiology in grad school, I ended up doing communicable disease epidemiology and they're very different.

And I actually had a specific focus on the incarcerated population as it related to hepatitis C and hepatitis -- hep C and HIV co-infection within the Wisconsin prison system. So that was interesting. I did that for a while. As you'll probably gather throughout this conversation, I'm not the type of person to just sit behind a computer, crunch numbers and do analysis. I actually have to be going out and doing more. So then I went from epidemiology, being an epidemiologist and took a really hard turn and went into politics for six years. I was actual a policy advisor for our previously governor Jim Doyle in his office doing a variety of policy advising on a lot of different things. And then he asked me to be a member of a three-member team to set up and create a new State Department, department of children and families, and then I ran the external affairs part of that organization. So our relations with our tribal nations here in Wisconsin, our communications, our constituent relations, our relationship with Congress and relationship with our governor's office and our Wisconsin state legislature. So I did that for about three years, then went back to the University, went to the local health department, and now I'm here. And then along the way, I've been doing a variety of things in terms of in the background of volunteers. So I was on the department of civil rights ad hoc committee for the city of Madison a long time ago before we had a department of civil rights and we created that. We helped create that

department. I've been on the affirmative action commission, been on the board of the urban league of Madison, been on the board of girls on the run. So I've been doing a variety of things here and there. I also have two kids that teach me more than anything else in life.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's awesome. What an amazing kind of like -- actually there's a lot in there that I hadn't heard about. So it's amazing what you've done. So I don't know if you remember the first time we met.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: No, I don't.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I'll just tell the story accident I'll be brief. I had recently joined Filene to run the research program there, Filene is a research nonprofit focused on credit unions and consumer finance generally and we have a very, very close relationship with CUNA Mutual, in fact, as a nonprofit CUNA Mutual runs all of our HR so I'm technically an employee of CUNA Mutual even though I work for this nonprofit so I went over to the CUNA Mutual campus which is outside of Madison a little bit to meet with folks at the organization and at the advocacy organization for credit unions, the credit union national association. And Angela was giving a presentation to a group. And I sat in this room and listened while Angela taught this group of credit union and financial services professionals and lobbyists about the history of redlining. And straight up, just sort of walked them through, showed them a little video, walked them through the history of like hey, you know, very gently, but firmly explaining to them how their industry and their institutions had systematically discriminated against Black and brown communities, extracted their wealth and undermined their future.

(laughter).

And I was like, wow! Okay. You can do this inside of a place like CUNA Mutual, which is, you know, a for-profit corporation, like Angela was saying.

So afterwards we had the conversation and Angela told me that if she ever went to school, she wanted to do a Ph.D. in medical anthropology but like what is it with anthropologists? You guys are weird.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Didn't say it like that.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I know, I know. What's really striking to me is that as you've made that transition from public health into politics, out of politics and into DEI work in the corporate world, you've really taken some of those lessons around kind of the social determinants of health and for me thinking about

the work you do now in finance, maybe you wouldn't agree, but for me what it seems what you're doing is talking about the social determinants of financial exclusion and socioeconomic inequality.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Absolutely. I think for everyone in their career, having a North Star in terms of what drives you is critically important. And what drives me in this space and how I see the connection of my background in terms of public health and public policy and economics is that I know, we know in terms of researchers, that the key, one of the key drivers to overall health is economic well-being of a community. And if you break that down and stratifying that down, economic well-being of communities by demographic group. And in order to create more health for Black and brown folks, we actually have to have opportunities for financial well-being, financial wealth in general for Black and brown folks. And for me, so this is very much aligned to who I am and what I -- the mark that I want to make on the world.

>> BILL MAURER: I would be interested in hearing you say more about that, that transition from public health to DEI work and then also maybe a little bit more about some of the financial determinants of physical well-being, you know. Financial wellness is kind of a buzzword that many of us can be quite critical of. And the financial infusion where I would just get you into debt and charge lots of fees and sell you more you can't afford and make you get a car loan but then you have to get even auto title loan because you can't make ends and on and on. How do you track that in your own career and the work that you're doing now at CUNA Mutual?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: That's a great question, and I'm also had, as you ask that question, I'm wondering if part of your question is, how do I hold integrity in term of what my beliefs are while working in this space? Is that part of your question?

>> BILL MAURER: That's where I was hoping you would go, yeah.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah. I mean, I think that's really, really important. And I actually had to take a really critical eye toward that when I was thinking about going corporate. One of the things that is helpful for me is that CUNA Mutual Group grew out of a space of credit unions, which are cooperatives. If we were like a Citibank or U.S. Bank or Wells Fargo, I wouldn't be here. Wells Fargo, if you look at their DEI work, it's phenomenal, on paper. But it's at the expense of historically marginalized populations. It's still continuing to exploit. And it's fundamentally looking at their bottom line instead of

the overall well-being of communities.

So if I cannot do this with a sense of integrity at my work, I'm not the right person for the job. Even when I was interviewing for the job, I asked as a part of my interview, are you all committed to this for window dressing and PR purposes or are you committed to doing this for real? I'll be honest, for the first couple years I was there, I wasn't sure. I would do the work, I would still be me but I was still like, hmm, we'll see, we'll see. A couple things that have helped me along the way is they -- I don't want to use the word allow. They are pushing me to continue to be myself. And if I'm continuing to be myself, all of this stuff is going to come up, right? So a couple of milestones that have said oh, God, we are actually committed to this in the real way, even though we've got a long way to go. So historically in a lot of corporations, DEI is housed in HR. When we started, I was in HR. I was the first person that was hired, the only person doing D & I and I was in HR. Also, a lot of times in corporations, corporate social responsibility is in PR and marketing. So if you're doing corporate social responsibility from a PR and marketing standpoint, that has me question the authenticity of what you're trying to do. And that was the same for CUNA Mutual. Our corporate social responsibility was in PR and marketing. In 2018, we made a structural decision. We took D and I out of HR, took corporate social responsibility out of PR and marketing, and combined them together to create its own department. So we have D and I in one side, corporate social responsibility on the other, and what's in the middle is equity. So I intentionally asked, can I add the word equity to my title? I don't want to just be D and I Vice President. I want to be diversity, equity and inclusion. Equity in our communities and equity in our workforce. So that's one thing. That's a signal to me that we're committed to going on this on the right path. Another signal, and Taylor, you and I haven't even chatted about this, we have a ventures fund, which is great. Right over the past six months, we have decided, this ventures fund, has decided to allocate 15 million to focus in on ventures of fin tech that are bipoc and women run. We know there's not a lot of women in bipoc getting venture capital for startups particularly in fin tech so we're allocating 15 million for that.

The other thing we're starting to do is looking at our overall investment strategy. Are we investing in things that we say publicly that we're against? One of the big questions that I

had a couple years ago is, so we know that the prison industrial complex makes a lot of money, quite frankly, it just makes a lot of money. If we are committed to, and we know that incarceration impairs financial well-being for folks in the community and quite frankly the family they've left behind, so we were committed to creating a financial -- so if we're committed to creating a better financial future for everyone, we better not be investing in the back end in things like the prison industrial complex and thankfully we're not. But the fact I'm able to ask these very direct questions and folks will sit with it and then go research it and say are we doing this or are we not is a big deal. Did that answer your question, Bill?

>> BILL MAURER: Yeah. I would be curious to hear about, like some of the moments along the way where you're like, oh, wow, maybe I'm actually having an impact. Or oh, wow, maybe they are really taking this seriously and it's not just window dressing.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: I'll be honest, and Taylor, I'll love for your reaction to this. I have a hard time acknowledging those things because I know that they're having impact. I think one time that I'm just like oh, okay, right after the murder of George Floyd, within a week, our CEO did an internal video that went external and at the end of the video he said Black Lives Matter. I was stunned. I was stunned! Because I adore our CEO, but we are very different politically. He worked for a previous Republican governor, I worked for a previous democratic governor, and we literally talk about that. We kind of have open and honest conversations about that. So to come out and say Black Lives Matter was a huge turning point for me. Another turning point is we have this really robust DEI learning series, and last year my colleague Burt Hanton and I kicked it off and the way it kicked off our CEO introduced us and one of the things that he said just nearly brought me to tears before I went up and started speaking. He said, I trust Angela. So again, for a White guy, a White male executive to get up in front of hundreds of employees to say "I trust Angela" this Black woman, he didn't say that, but that's what I'm hearing, is huge. It's really, really huge. So go ahead, Taylor.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I was going to ask the kind of inverse of that question is, you know, have there been moments where you've questioned yourself? And the organization. And like what have those, you know, what have those limitations or challenges or questions been like for you?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: I'll be honest, I question myself every day. I really, really do. I was on this conversation with a group of D & I colleagues here in Madison yesterday, and one of the challenges about being on this work is for me, if I feel like I'm doing my job, again, with integrity, I always feel there's a risk of I'm pushing too hard, I'm at the edge and I could get fired any moment. Did I push us out of the growth zone into the panic zone? A few things along the way is, gosh, there are so many, actually. Knowing that sometimes I'm not the right messenger for what I'm saying, so I have a White colleague that it's very helpful to have a White colleague that's been in the industry at this particular company since he was an intern, I'm new, he's a White guy, and I can say one thing and it will be heard differently if it comes from him. To this day that still happens. That tells me we still have a long way to go. I have another guy a guy who works on a D & I team, we give a presentation, people defer to him even though I'm his manager, they're like hey, let me ask you. And he's like, uh, what? Or so again, I try to push the envelope a lot. Our last DEI speaker of the year was Walidah Lmarisha, coedited a book called Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements, that pushed the organization, because we literally talked about can we do racial justice and I'll say racial justice intentionally within a corporation for real and she's like maybe but you're still, it's still embedded in capitalism. And I'm like, yeah, we are a capitalist organization, we are part of the financial services industry. So getting that and getting that pushback when we receive feedback of why are we talking about this? Why are we talking about this in this kind of way? But knowing that this notion of if we cannot imagine a different future, we're not going to be able to get to that different future.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I love that.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Go ahead.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: No, go ahead, Angela.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Are there other things that you see from your vantage point of the types of resistance this I get?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: This is hilarious. Can we talked before we went on screen about how you were going on turn the question around. From my perspective, I was surprised that you could even have the conversation with Walidah Lmarisha the way you did for the audience you did and I was going to bring that up because that for me was a turning point. The DEI conversation series I had seen previously, they're often oriented for a

particular audience. And you and Jualita had a conversation that was not intended to cater to that you had audience put really intend to do challenge and outright question, are you doing the work that you think you are doing? And it was high level, I mean, it was, you know, as complicated and challenging as any Ph.D. level anthropology seminar that I've ever been in. Right? I mean, it was tough. So I was really, for me, that was like a moment where I was like oh, wow, not like how has Angela been able to do this, but it's impressive that you have been able to carve out a space of trust within the organization such that, you know, you can have those really -- those kinds of conversations.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: What's so interesting, Taylor s literally during these conversations I am sweating bullets, like oh oh, this could be my last day, I don't know. And someone a while ago, this was a couple years ago, because we haven't had anyone push us as hard as Jualita but we've had some folks who pushed us, Robin Deangelo who wrote White fragility, we've had Jane Elliott, we've had a whole variety of folks that have been pushing, and someone asked, how do you get -- how are you allowed or how do you get permission to have these speakers? And I literally, I'm like, I don't know what you're talking about. Like what do you mean by permission? Who do you have to run this by in order to kind of get approval? And I was so new in this space at CUNA Mutual, didn't even think about needing permission. I just did it. And that's kind of the way that I operate in my life. And unfortunately, so does my daughter.

(laughter).

But that's a whole another conversation.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I actually think in some ways that's a really useful insight because that's something I've seen here at Filene as well and maybe this will transition us into another part of the conversation, that we often think that there are limitations that aren't actually there. Right? Or we create them in calling them out, right, and identifying them to ourselves and to others. So I guess the kind of transition question might be something along the lines of like, you know, you've brought social science, you've brought humanist, you've brought really strong critical thinkers and, you know, critical theorists, right, analysts, into CUNA Mutual and into the credit union world, you know, by bringing literally their persons there to have a conversation, also by bringing their ideas, you were talking to us about a book you were just reading, you know, that was about marine biology and Black feminist thought and you

bought a bunch of copies to give out to your colleagues, so what, in your mind s the role of kind of critical social science at a place like CUNA Mutual, or what might its role be?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Oh, gosh, that's a great question. And I think one of the biggest roles of an organization, not just corporations, in a lot of organizations that are quite frank well built in a White supremacy and linear thinking is to help people broaden their notion of what they think is possible, right, and really lead to transformational change.

Transformational change is key to how I approach the work of DEI. So you'll see, just Google DEI and you'll see top ten steps of this, top 20 things of this or top five things. That is, I'm going to use a very intellectual word, it's stupid, because it doesn't get to real transformational change. One of our speakers earlier last year was Darnell Moore, who is a Director of inclusion content for NetFlix, and he has this incredible, incredible book, but he talked about the role of self-reflective analysis in leadership for being able to do the work of DEI well. So I think the role of social scientists is helping broaden that perspective and I think one of the challenges with social sciences in academia is that the language and rhetoric can be unapproachable for a lot of folks. So what's the bridge in between what you're studying and application? And I like to play that notion of bridge builder, one foot here and one foot there and kind of creating that path weigh to understanding.

The other thing that I think is valuable about social sciences in the space of corporations is that I think that -- again, this is a very explicit bias on my part, but it helps human beings slow down and think critically as opposed to just going into this rote machine robotic type of way of maneuvering, that notion of slowing down to change our decision-making is really, really big. In the space of DEI, in the practice of DEI, there's been a lot of conversation over the years of do you change hearts and minds or do you change systems and structures? I see it as both. You need to change hearts and minds and systems and structures, and I see it as like an infinity loop that feeds back on each other. That being said, I've let go of the notion that it's me that has to change hearts and minds. I can provide content, I can provide language, I can provide a space for people to learn, but it's up to the individual to change their own heart and mind. There are so many people that said I just want to change this person. It's like, you can't, that's out of your control. Once I let go of things that are completely out of my control it makes my job a little bit easier. I don't know

if I answered your question at all, Taylor.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, absolutely. I think there's something really important there about understanding -- being strategic about the intervention, I guess is the way that I've thought about it in the past, is that like you can't, you know, simply handing over the book isn't going to do everything, right? But you can kind of inflect conversations in different ways.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah. I like to think of my work as planting seeds. Again, I can only do so much. I can only do what I can do. I think that sometimes in the space of DEI and activism, it gets to be a weird power flux and if you're coming at this notion of power in and of itself, you're just changing the power dynamic, so receipt now we know that historically marginalized communities are here, but sometimes activists want to go here and like subpoena preps the dominant culture and then you're just creating another marginalized community over centuries, and that just replicates a system. So how can we have literally a shared sense of power in which it's hard, it takes empathy, compassion, a lot of medication, and I'm still a work in progress in all of that.

>> BILL MAURER: Can I go ahead? I want to underscore something that was really powerful for me just now Angela that you said, which was you were saying the social scientific kind of mindset and critical theory mindset should stay in possibilities but that often the language is inapproachable or the theoretical apparatus is too hermetically sealed and I think one of the issues is so much of our training in the academy is to identify causes, structures and systems, which is good, but then that turns into a story about inevitably. Right? Or necessity. And once you have inevitably or necessity, then you're closing the door to possibilities. That's why the term science fiction is so interesting, a bunch of us are secret readers of science fiction for that reason.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: You know, Bill, I want to riff on that for a second because academia and I really only have it from UW Madison perspective because that's the one I'm most proximate to, we are a well-known, world renowned institution, an R1 institution, and that sometimes gets in the way of how we do the work actually because if you're an R1 institution, a lot of the researchers are trained to be the smartest person in the room. I want to show you how smart I am all the time. I've got the best innovation. I've got the best idea. I'm the strongest in this particular thing and that's ego driven, that's

really still not coming from a sense of shared -- I'm such a cheese because I'll tell you why, it's not coming from a sense of shared humanity that we are all necessity in creating this new and right future. I want to be the best at what I'm the best at but I don't want to do it at the expense of you, Bill. I want to do it because we can imagine a radically different place and we need each other to get there. And the reason why I'm saying that my notion of shared humanity is cheesy is because I literally I have tattooed on the inside of my arm. This goes back to when did I know that CUNA Mutual was a place that I could actually be myself and impact change? This is my first and only at that too. I didn't get -- tattoo. I didn't get this until after I was working at CUNA Mutual for a while. Again it's challenging these notions of you have to be a certain way in order to work at I certain place. Nah. One of the first things within a month I'm like hey Bob our CEO look at this tattoo I just got and he looked at me like I'm not normal and that's fair, I'm not normal compared to his circle of friends, and that's okay.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: The other thing that really strikes to me Angela, it's something you said to me before, it's about so much of the work that you do is about expanding the possibilities for thinking otherwise within systems and kind of bureaucratic cultures where there's some pretty clear kind of scripts that people follow, right, in mundane spaces like meetings but also in like strategy for the organization. But other things you said to me are part of, forgive me if I'm putting words in your mouth are helping other systems die. I'm really struck by that kind of like yeah, we can be caretakers for new ways of thinking and also caretakers for things that need to tie.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: That's one of my favorite things Taylor, this two loop theory of change. You can Google it. There's a great video on it. I think initially the Burkana institute started talking about it and now there's a more refined video on it, we think about systems change, it's not as if all these systems are going to stay the same as a time. When a new way of being is emerging, something else is dying off, and if you think about hospice, I don't know if anyone has had a loved one die, hospice really helps that person die with a certain dignity over time, right? And it's interesting because my dad passed away about eleven and a half years ago, he was in hospice, and I had this notion of hospice as, oh, you're going to die with dignity, it's going to be a beautiful, beautiful transition, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's not. Death is hard. It's

hard to see kind of the demise of your loved one. So having hospice be able to create a container for that, for not only the person that you love to die with dignity, to be that support system for people around, for me, my dad, was really helpful. But it was still hard while other areas are creating something new.

So if you take that at a systems level, we see that the system, the dominant system of White mail supremacy is dying off. White male supremacy is dying off. Right? But the question that I have is who are the caretakers to allow that, to die off with dignity even though, pardon me, it's shitty, it's very hard, it's horrible, people are acting out in very bizarre and yet predictable ways. But what is that space around that system to say you are dying, it's okay, let's acknowledge that, let's get out of this denial area and die off with dignity, while this new system is emerging. I will say I'm not a caretaker of the dying system, so know what, your role is is very important. I literally don't know who is the caretaker of this dying system or the hospicing of this dying system but I think it's important that we're aware of that so we can have a little bit or an ounce of compassion and empathy towards what's going on. People are terrified. They're in denial. And they're fighting, fighting, fighting the reality that is happening.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: It's a more generous interpretation, I think, than, you know, I often allow myself, for example, but I think it's a --

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: This is being recorded, Taylor.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: It is a very important way, at least for me it's really opened my ways to thinking about the diversity of kinds of systemic care work that's necessary, right, and thinking about organizational and social change.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: I see it even at the organizational level. Still, as far as we've come, and I think we've made some impact, but I still think at CUNA Mutual we have a long way to go, as far as we've come, we see resistance on a regular, regular basis, and I know it's not my role to take care of that. There are other people in that organization who are better equipped and I'll underscore and make it plain, who are White, that can better care for the resistance that we receive on a regular basis.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah, I think that's the critical point.

>> BILL MAURER: I just imagined the pitch now to like a donor agency or philanthropic organization, hi, I'm Bill Maurer, I'm starting a nonprofit to help systems die.

(laughter).

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Right.

>> BILL MAURER: We actually while we're on this topic, we have a question from Heather in the Q & A just wanting the name of the theory that you just referred to in relation to the dying system and the growing system.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Okay. It's a two loop theory of change.

>> BILL MAURER: Two loop theory of change.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, if you Google that or put it in YouTube and search it up, it's beautiful, and it's been very helpful for me.

>> BILL MAURER: Great. Thank you.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Maybe what we'll do --

>> BILL MAURER: Turn it over to someone else, yeah, go ahead.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah. Let's transition to a kind of, you know, open conversation with Nina, Kim and Nima. I don't know if you all have some initial questions that you have for Angela and we can start that back and forth.

>> KIM FERNANDES: Yeah, absolutely. Angela, thank you for all of this. I really enjoyed listening to you think through so many things methodologically and in practice. I was also thinking when you were speaking of mention of brick walls in diversity work, Sara's, where she talks about it feels sort of like banging your head against a brick wall job and that this is sort of more than a metaphor, kind of these processes that have historically been put into action and are more solidified over time and wonder if this continues on resonate with you in some of the work you're doing or if there are other ways you're thinking about it and would like to speak a little bit more about this.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, I like that notion of brick wall. I can't use that metaphor for me, that's not one that particularly resonates with me because if I felt like I was hitting myself or banging my head against a brick wall, that's not a sustainable model for me to be in, right? This is something I've learned over time, that's part of the reason request I let go, of it's my job to change hearts and minds because it's not, because if I put that on myself, it is going to feel like I'm banging my head on a brick wall. If I think of this work as more relationship based and creating sacred containers for people to process and change which then will influence systems and policies, that's something that is more palatable for me. Even though I have a long vision of where we want to go, I try to be practical in terms of what I can do

and what our team can do on a day-to-day basis. Does that answer your question?

>> KIM FERNANDES: It does quite a lot. Thank you for refocusing how this was framed.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, because literally, if I thought that this work was just about banging my head against the wall, there's no personal incentive for doing that. That just sounds like a death sentence, not to be overly dark.

>> KIM FERNANDES: That's a super-important point. Thank you.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, no problem.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: Thanks. This is all really great. I especially liked it because for some of the things I'm like yes, I'm going to nod vigorously and for some of the things I'm like I don't know if I agree with that. So I appreciate this exciting conversation into the space. I had a question about backlash because you seem to kind of talk about it's like oh, how far can I go before I get fired? Within this institution. Like how far can I push? And I'm kind of thinking about like how do we think about institutional backlash against people who are pushing at those limits? So I'm just going on mention Dr. Timnit Gebru at Google who was fired for sort of calling out racist research practices, I'm sure there's a whole lot we could think of inside and outside of the academy who have pushed too far outside these institution's walls, two part question. One, how do you navigate backlash institutional backlash and then how do you also sort of build safety within institutions so that there is an ability to push back, there is an ability to be well you're lashing back at me but I still have a firm base here?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: That's a great question, thank you for asking that. Number one, I'm lucky that I have a manager and a mentor and a coach that is super helpful, and I will tell him on a regular basis, like hey, I may get fired today. And he's like, whatever, stop. And he's like, or I'll just give him a heads-up, like if I have a conversation that goes completely sideways, I'm like hey, just so you know, so and on was in their feelings, there were some tears, and you are going to hear about it. That's literally the reality of my job. So in terms of backlash, sometimes even before you get to that point of pushing, and I think that this comes from being in politics for a while is knowing that -- knowing strategy and knowing relationships and building relationships so when you do push and push and push and push and push and push, you've got

a -- you're surrounded by institutional power that can help protect you and will challenge you to say hey, is this the right direction? And if you are strong in feeling that this is the right direction, help explain it to me. I can't tell you the number of times where I literally have sat in people's office and they were asking me to explain, explain, explain. And I'm literally drawing diagrams to say what's in my mind. And then they're like, oh, oh.

So over time, I feel like I've built a certain level of institutional trust that allows me to continue to push. But I will tell you, I have made so many mistakes along the way. It's been ridiculous. So at one employer doing equity work, they were asking me my opinion on something, White woman asking me my opinion. And I said honestly, do you really want my opinion? Yeah. I said well, you know, I feel like you're making decisions out of a place in power, a place of power and privilege that are inconsistent with our intended equity practices. That did not go over very well, at all. You know. And it just didn't. I didn't get fired, but I certainly was not in a place, I was placed in positions where I could not have much influence anymore. And I was with a White colleague, this White woman was asking my White colleague and I the same question together. So after I said my answer, she looked to the White colleague and said, well, what do you think? And the White colleague said I think the same thing as Angela. In future meetings they separated us intentionally so we couldn't be together, so we would strategize behind the scenes and say okay, this is what's going to problem happen in this meeting. What are you saying, what are you saying, and how can we come to a consistent message regularly? But yeah, the backlash, potential backlash is there.

You have to be strategic and subtle, and I've talked to other folks in this space and think of things as a chess board and know that while not only chess boards but chess boards with humans. And humans are much more complex than chess pieces. So knowing that the biggest backlash sometimes is going to come from institutions, sometimes it's going to come from people who are deeply insecure. And knowing how to navigate the insecurity of human beings is something that I pay a lot more attention to than people realize.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: I have a quick follow-up. I really appreciate this sort of way that you're talking about sort of both like strategically thinking about how you're having conversations and then also how do you like -- I hate the word

leverage but how do you bring institutional allies that you have in order to like more effectively get your message is cross and things like that. But as we've been having this conversation, one of the things I've been thinking about is sort of like what about folks who don't necessarily have the sort of like executive level, I don't know if you're executive level, but the same level of role that you do in the organization, like what are some of the -- like my mind goes to unionization, unionization isn't necessarily always perfect but unionization is one way to create that sort of like block but what are some of the other ways you're thinking about diversity and equity and inclusion but also just like how do you make sure that people who don't necessarily have the same institutional resources as you do are still like able to be protected?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, that's a great question. I'll come back to your question directly in a minute, but there's been some research about the role of grievance systems in organizations and how grievance systems and employee relations while they say they want to protect the employee, and the institution, they still have a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities. So when I first started at CUNA Mutual Group, people would say well, if folks are facing racism or bigotry, they just need to report it. I'm like, do you all know about the history of reporting of historically marginalized communities to any institution? There's no trust there. Right? So what is the incentive? Well, we have a no retaliation policy. I'm like, do you all know human beings? Because human beings don't act within the confines of a policy, per se. Right? So that's one aspect of how do we look at our employee relations systems, our grievance systems, from a place of, I'll say, restorative justice, as opposed to penalty. That's a whole another category. Now, in terms of folks that don't necessarily have positional power, which is what I think you're talking about, that's a big deal. So my boss and I can say things that other folks will not be able to say in the organization, and I think our affinity groups, I'm a part of an African American engagement resource group, we see that a lot. So creating that space for affinity where people can actually share what's going on and you have a certain level of trust, where people in positional power can then go advocate on this. So if organizations don't have space for affinity groups, I would say that it's really, really important for then to have relationships across the organization, across the hierarchy, and that building of the trust over time. I'm

just trying to think of a time when I was earlier in my -- and I feel like I've been very lucky, I have been very lucky throughout my career. No matter entry level or not entry level, I've been able to have key access to resources at all levels of the organization and that's been huge. It's been actually a game changer for me. So having mentors and sponsors within whatever organization you have is really important. And I think that the mentors and sponsors cannot only help protect you when you speak out, but they can help you strategize and kind of be invisible, the invisible walls that are all around you that you wouldn't necessarily know until you got in the certain positions of power.

>> Thank you.

>> NIMA YOLMO: You kind of answered my questions. My question was thinking about strategies and solidarities, also how you navigate like the workspace, and you answered part of it. And my question is also prompted by the earlier point you made about being -- assessing who is the right messenger for a particular message. If you had like quick tips and tricks as advice from all the learnings, would you be able to share some of that?

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah. Check your ego. I have to do that on regular basis. I get so mad that I'm not the right messenger sometime. I get so mad that I actual have to teach the right messenger the stuff I know in order to carry the message. Taylor, you've probably seen what I'm talking about. I literally have had to teach people to say this is what this means, this is how we should talk about it or whatever. So that's very humbling for me. And then I'm going to say something that sounds bad. So not only individual to teach, but I've had to be open to being taught as well. Like okay, you know this organization more than I do, what do I need to know, and you know this product line more than I need to know. You know this business. So what is this mutual relationship look like? But it is frustrating in knowing that I can't just go in and say, hey, here is what I know, here are all of the books that I read, believe me, right? The other thing that I notice when I'm putting up a defense a lot, when I start citing research, that's when I'm trying to prove my worth in certain conversations because I know it won't be heard if I don't do it. And that is good and bad. The bad part of it is that I'm literally pushing people away and distancing myself because clearly you don't believe me, I don't want to have a relationship with you, so I'm going to just talk data, data, data, data, data,

but that closes me off to actually having a relationship with that person where I can be open to learning as well.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's such an interesting point about the -- we've heard from other guests in this series about the power of just simple empirical description in getting, in allowing social scientists to have a foothold within organizations outside of academia and I think what's really interesting here is that you're pointing out the potential unintended consequence of that, which is that it can also be used to distance you from that organization, right? Because now all of a sudden you're a channel for empirical description rather than being a person inside that org, right? It tethers to that organization.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: The other thing that really strikes me about what you've said Angela is that it seem to me like the positive outcomes that you've identified in being able to navigate some of the complexities of doing the work that you do at CUNA Mutual relies on a certain amount of good faith engagement from your colleagues as well as from you, right? And I think that in the broader political and social sphere, we've seen the Dane engineers of assuming good faith engagement, right? Because it opens up the possibility for bad faith engagement, right? In the guise of good faith engagement, if that makes sense. So I'm wondering what you do when you see bad faith interactions. Right? When people come to you and they're clearly not actually interested in engaging with you in good faith, but, right, leveraging the opening that you provide by being the generous person that you are to undermine the work that you do.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: You know, that's so interesting, Taylor, my thought goes to a lot of different directions. Number one, if people are coming it me with that space, the unfortunate part of my face is that it shows that I can tell that you're bull shitting. I don't have a poke r face at all, Taylor knows it, it's really, really bad. So I'm giving you feedback in ways instantly. The other part is this notion of heartbreak. I think that, and in my podcast Black Oxygen it's all about love right now, love of people, love of systems, love of populations, all of that and in this work, when you're in this work, it's because you love it and anytime you love, you risk heartbreak. So that notion of good faith effort is how much am I going to protect myself from heartbreak? So I actually don't go this with good faith effort that people are putting in a good faith

effort most of the time. I come in mentally and emotionally armored up so I'm not heartbroken and disappointed time and time again.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's incredibly insightful. For someone who spent, you know, prior to my work with Filene a lot of time thinking about left politics, alternative politics, alternative economic political organizing in Latin America and here in the United States, you know, that cycle of trust, excitement, aspiration and disillusionment is really familiar to a lot of folks, you know, who are in activism and organizing. So I think that that really, that resonates powerfully with many of the conversations that I've had with other activists and organizer and the need to find the space where, you know, you can armor up, as you say.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Which isn't necessarily great. That goes against everything that Brene Brown talks about, right? So I've actually had to learn on how to be malleable and live with nuance, and it just takes so -- I think one of the things that I did not know in undergrad or grad school or even at the beginning of my career, I did not know how centered emotionally I needed to be in order to do this work with integrity, going back to Bill. I have to do my daily practice regularly, check my ego regularly, be open to learning from like my kids, be open to saying I don't know and still saying oh, my God, I've still got so much to learn, and honestly, this is probably more personal than folks need to know, I learned a lot about how to approach the work by going through a terrible marriage and a divorce. I went through the stages of denial, bargaining, all of that kind of stuff until you get to acceptance. I see the same thing happening with people resisting this to work. They're going through their own stages of grief because the world is not what they thought it was. How can I have compassion for that person, that system or whatever going through that cycle of grief while pushing for the emergence of something new.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's incredibly insightful, and moving too. I wonder if at the end of this conversation we might bring it back to a question about kind of the future of public social science, right? And I really do see you, as I said at the very beginning of a kind of fellow traveler, someone who is practicing kind of critical social science inside of an organization, outside of academia. There's many, many, many folks like me who have trained in academia, maybe imagined themselves being tenure track professors at one point, right, and have found themselves outside of academia. Are there

things that you would recommend to those who are like our Ph.D. students on the line here, who are training and maybe thinking about that movement into the edges of academia or outside of academia, are there things that you would recommend professionally in terms of training or just in terms of preparing themselves for making that transition and being successful? As social scientists outside of academia.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yeah, gosh, there's so much that comes to mind. But one of the things that comes to mind is how academia sometimes really represents colonization at its biggest form, so being thoughtful about how you're training -- how your training really represent the status quo of White supremacy in so many ways. So as you think about going out and making a difference and making a change, thinking about what automatically res that's with you in your own comfort zone and why? Is it because we've been trained in this certain way time and time again, or is it because I'm uncomfortable with something different?

So being mindful of how we've been brought up from an academic standpoint sometimes represents a status quo in ways that we don't necessarily want to admit.

The other thing, and this is again my own learning, is sometimes when I came out of grad school, I just thought that every other human being was stupid and didn't have anything to offer. My son, he's twelve, he actually does think that, and there are days where I think he's right, but it's actually not true. Understanding that if you're in academia, if you're not in academia, that every person has something to offer, every person, no matter who they are, has some wisdom in them, and sometimes it's been so suppressed that people are afraid to offer it or they don't even know that they have to offer it. So as social scientists, based on what you know about people and how society and systems work, how can you create an environment where people can tap into their own wisdom. And I think the skills that you're gaining could be a super-power.

>> BILL MAURER: That's terrific and that's a great place probably to wrap this up. Angela, thank you so much for this conversation today, it's just been super-interesting and a bunch of kind of practical tools to go out with to try to change the world. I totally now want to start up a nonprofit to assist in the dying of systems that ought to be let to die. And it also makes me think that we should talk about kind of the University in that context as well. What parts of it need to be let go? But Taylor, do you want to wrap us up?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Yeah. I'll just say thank you, Angela, again for joining us. I know this is maybe outside of your comfort zone, so I appreciate you spending the time with us and having this really open dialogue back and forth, and I look forward to future conversations.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Yes.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: For those folks who are on the line, we'll have our next conversation on February 26, Friday, February 26, same time, 9:00 a.m. Pacific, 11:00 a.m. central, 12:00 p.m. U.S. Eastern time and this will be with Federico Neiburg, University federal do Rio de Janeiro. Angela, we appreciate it.

>> ANGELA RUSSELL: Thanks for having me.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Have a good morning or night or wherever folks are.

>> Thank you.

>> Thanks.

(The webinar concluded at 10:02 a.m. PST)

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