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English Transcript

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Guest/Topic: Bettina Johnson on *Hammer and Hoe* by Robin D.G. Kelley

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[Intro context: Monica and Page reunite virtually to record for the first time during COVID, reflecting on the political landscape when they started the podcast versus now. They're discussing how in this season, they will use the intros of the episodes for time-specific local Chicago organizing updates. They briefly touch on the harmful budget being put forth by the mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot.]

00:00 **Monica Trinidad:** Hey, everyone! We're back with a new season of the Lit Review podcast. It's been a minute since we've recorded, right Page?

00:07 **Page May:** No, it - *[laughs]* It feels like a lifetime has passed. So much has happened, but here we are! We're back!

00:15 **Monica:** Well, I just wanna say that it's super exciting to be recording this podcast again with you. Our world has changed so much since our last episode was released in... February of 2019? And when I think back to when we launched this podcast back in 2017, I remember that it was released in response to the election of 45, right?

00:35 **Page:** Yeah! You know it might sound familiar. It was this moment where we had thousands of people all around the country mobilizing in the streets, and I remember this question that I think about a lot which is, you know, how do we grow our movements to scale? And a part of that work includes political education. And so this was our effort at offering one small tool to help folks study and learn, from the books and ideas that have come from before and that we can apply to today. So, here we are yet again with thousands of people *[laughs]* if - and many many more, right? Taking to the streets on a regular basis, and with 45, we're I think... 11 days out from the election as of this morning?

01:21 **Monica:** Yeah, I know. I really remember... I remember we were in these organizing

meetings together with a lot of our closest comrades at that time and just like exchanging ideas and like different ways that we could prepare for that backlash of white supremacy and authoritarianism that we were gonna be facing under this administration and... of course, you know, no spoiler, we all know how accurate that was and continues to be, and so it only feels right that we're relaunching this podcast as - right, like you said, we near the eve of the next presidential election, and we're finding ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic *and* a re-energized movement and uprisings for Black lives.

01:58 **Page:** You know, it's definitely overwhelming. I'm not gonna lie, it has been an overwhelming year, um... and there's a lot that's really scary. But there's also so much that I find hope in, and that's just this constant rollercoaster ride that I'm in, um, that I find myself bouncing between the highs and the lows - sometimes, between every hour. I mean, you've got... you know, we've been months into this pandemic and - and we're now seeing really - we're back to similar rates of positive tests coming in for here in Chicago and throughout Illinois, you know, I think we're all sort of bracing ourselves for another round of shelter in place, and it feels like we've taken just steps back. But at the same time, we've saw, you know, incredible mutual aid efforts pop up and mutual aid became this thing that more and more people were talking about and organizing around and I think it was... so important that that happened and it created this network and this - this politic of care for each other and an independence from the state that I think was really essential. And then we - you know, this uprising has happened where you have... people all around the world - I - I know, I don't want to ramble for too long, but you know, I'm from rural Vermont, and I was home for a very brief amount of time this summer and I saw farms in the middle of nowhere Vermont with massive Black lives matter signs. I saw multiple protests, like I just - You know, in tiny towns, right? Um, you know, it's been incredible and you have, you know, abolition and defund are popular mainstream ideas, but also, what do they mean? *[laughs]* Right now, right? Like you also have people saying yeah defund the police, but it doesn't actually mean cut their budget, so it's this interesting moment where um, you know, more - the problem of anti-Blackness, the problem of police funds, the problems of capitalism are much more on center stage, and we're in this really... It's important that we think through and define what these things mean, and so I'm excited that we're back with season 3.

04:07 **Monica:** Yeah, awesome!

04:08 **Page:** We're also - you know, I'm excited about how we're gonna be doing these intros. We are gonna try to add some local updates about what's going on that are time specific. And - because right now, you know, we're in the midst of our - In Chicago, our budget process, and yesterday, Lori Lightfoot, our Mayor, released her recommended budget, and I'm still getting a handle on the numbers. There's a cut to police in it, but it is mostly cutting vacancy positions so it's apparently been a pattern of funding empty positions in the Chicago police department that never actually have to get filled, but they get that money anyways, and so they're cutting that. So

it doesn't stop anything, and then actually the percent of - at least the public safety budget - the percent of that that is for police, as opposed to like violence prevention programs, has gone up. Um, hopefully by next week I have a sense of the overall budget if it's gone up or not. I believe it has, by about a percentage point. Um, and so what - you know, that's not - that's not defund, although we shouldn't be surprised; our Mayor here in Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, has said explicitly she will never, on her watch, defund the police. Um, and she repeated that again on - during her budget address yesterday. So now that Lori has presented her ideal budget, which is one of austerity and ongoing policing, it is now City Council, which has 50 Aldermen here in Chicago, that have to approve a budget. And so, as Aldermen they are able to suggest and make changes and vote on a revised version of a budget, and so that will be happening over the next several weeks and by law, they are required to pass the budget by December 31st, so it should be done by then. And so now, we'll be putting more pressure on Aldermen and continuing to do general outreach and focusing on building power with folks.

06:07 **Monica:** Wow, yeah, I cannot believe the... audacity of Lori Lightfoot. I also can't believe the audacity of people that voted for Lori Lightfoot. I think that we were, you know, during No Cop Academy, we were saying "Stop Lightfoot." Like, this - this person cannot enter office, it's gonna be worse than Rahm. And lo-and-behold, we are seeing that she is worse than Rahm. Let's get to the podcast episode. What do we got on deck for folks to listen to today?

06:37 **Page:** Okay, so in this episode, we are talking with Bettina Johnson, who is a Chicago-based organizer and she is walking us through the book '*Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*', which is by one of my favorite authors, Robin D.G. Kelley.

06:51 **Monica:** Awesome. And Bettina Johnson is a born and raised Chicagoan, an alumni of Chicago Public Schools, a co-founder of Liberation Library, which is an abolitionist book-to-incarcerated-young-people project, and she's a core organizing member of Chicago Afro-Socialists and Socialists of Color Caucus of the DSA, uh, and that's the Democratic Socialists of America.

07:14 **Page:** We also spent a couple years together working in Assata's Daughters, so it was great to kinda catch up and... talk through political ideas again. And so today, we're digging into this question, what can the Alabama Communist Party in the 1930's teach us right now about our social movements?

07:31 **Monica:** I really appreciated this conversation with Bettina because she really breaks down the tactics and the strategy behind a very complicated approach to community organizing. And I love that she ends this episode with her opinion on how that still could have looked different then, even in its very specific context.

07:51 **Page:** Yeah, there's a lot that I really appreciated about it. I mean, it has specific tactics that she lifts up as examples from the book that really stuck out to her, like how do you organize around really radical ideas and ideals in practical grounded ways in community. And then also... I really appreciated her take on the role of someone who's not from a place, organizing in a place. And like, what does that look like - how do you do that, what should you do, what should you not do? And I think that was really relevant to right now, especially because I know of a lot of people that were like "I'm gonna go to wherever the hotspot is", right, I'm gonna go to Minneapolis, I'm gonna go here. So this is gonna be episode 1 of the third season. I'm so thrilled to be back, we're gonna learn a lot together. Please tune in next week, It'll be - we'll be back here, same place, same time. And enjoy the show!

[MUSICAL INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music begins from the hip hop song "Chicago" by David Ellis]

***Monica:** You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.*

***Page:** We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.*

***Mariame Kaba voiceover:** "I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against..."*

[Protest Chanting and drumming] "CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [Inaudible chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"

***Page voiceover at protest rally:** "We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

***Young person voiceover:** "...I remember it, she was shot by my house -"*

***Mariame voiceover:** "...In sharing our ideas, we're stronger..."*

[Music Lyrics begin] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is the house, a generation filled in Audy homes..." [Music Fades]

[INTRO FADES OUT]

09:42 **Page:** Let's get into it! I'm so excited to talk to you, Bettina. We're gonna be discussing the book *Hammer and Hoe* by Robin D.G. Kelley. Thank you so much for being with us virtually

today! How are you doing?

09:55 **Bettina Johnson**: I'm super tired, but super excited to be with you all virtually to talk about this book.

10:00 **Page**: Yes, it's been on my to-do list to read for a very long time. To kick this off, do you mind telling us a little bit more about who you are, what you do, and why?

10:11 **Bettina**: So, my name is Bettina, born in raised in the city of Chicago. I've done a few things, but one of the things that I lead with is that I'm a co-founding member of an organization called Liberation Library. We send books to young people who are incarcerated in the state of Illinois. We're in all of the IDJJ prisons, those are just youth prisons, and a growing number of detention centers across the state. And it's an abolitionist organization, and so when we talk about abolition, we mean it in the expansive sense. Especially in the sense of like, we're building alternatives, but also... when we come together, we view it as like, almost... an insurgent abolition. Like an insurgent action. Yeah, we're not only thinking like theorizing abolition, we believe that like when we show up and do what we say what we're gonna do for young people, when it comes to like, material provision of books, journals, games, like whatever they ask us, that it's like..., a prefigure in the world, where it's like police-free communities and a world where prisons eventually will be considered completely obsolete. So anyone that comes through for any type of programming with us will get a dose of some kind of abolitionist thought, and like, participate in some kind of practice, right, that's like rooted in showing up for young people that are incarcerated.

11:36 **Page**: So yeah, can you tell us more about what lead you to read this book?

11:40 **Bettina**: Because it is about the Alabama Communists during the Great Depression, which is the subtitle of the book, but, from what I had heard from other organizers, is that this was a great book to think through what it actually meant, and what it actually looked like to build a multi-racial, working-class consciousness that was rooted in cultural practices of Black folks in the South, and was centered on actual, like, working-poor, and poor people, which is very different from, I think, what a lot of... at least, for me *[laughs]* I'll speak for me - Which is very different from the ways that I was being exposed to communism, and so, I wanted to... to read more about that. And also there was this really striking in, I think, Charles Payne's book on guns, where he opens the book, talking to somebody in the South, and their theory of change was like VI Lenin's what is to be done, in a gun. And so I was like, hold on, why - why is he reading like - *[laughs]* You know what I mean? So I wanted to know more about how that actually happened, how there were a bunch of Lenin reading, gun toting, older people, like in the South talking to a new generation of civil rights folks, um, about their theory of change.

13:08 **Monica:** Yes, that sounds incredible. So, let's dive into this book. Can you just say a little bit more on why Kelley thinks that this history is really crucial for all of us to know?

13:20 **Bettina:** Not necessarily in preparation for this book, but for whatever reason I encountered a... an essay that was written by Kelley... like maybe in the 80's? And he opened this essay with this really amazing quote, and I wish I had it in front of me, but he was talking - the quote was talking about how a lot of things are missed when you only see the like, spectacular aspects of, of like, movements, or - yeah, of movements, basically. And the person that he's quoting is saying that it's like the cliffs where the shores of the continent but, the actual like... like you're - when you only focus on the cliffs and the shores of social movements, which are these like spectacular, um, like crests, right? Um... You're missing the continent of all the other stuff that had to happen, including like the, all of the hidden, or unrecognizable forms of resistance. And so the thing that I got so much from this book, and it was apparent that he was digging for this, um, for these things, and the reason why there are so many abbreviations, there are so many - *[laughs]*

I mean, it's like, super well-researched and he's citing everything and he's going through so many main like, main primary sources. And I feel like the reason why he's doing that is cause he's trying to uncover like, this continent of resistance that's so frequently overlooked or misrecognized. So that's what I get a lot out of this book, is... like he's - and he even talks about it, so the... chapter one, is an invisible army. Um *[laughs]* so he's talking about all of these forms and ways to resist that folks who lived in terror - who were terrorized, not lived in terror, but who were terrorized, their forms of resistance, basically. And, yeah. And it's a whole book full of...including strategies like super interesting strategies, tactics, and things like that. So, it's a really impressive history.

15:42 **Monica:** Why Birmingham? Why did Birmingham in Alabama - Why was that chosen by the Communist Party to sort of settle in to do this organizing? What made them choose that city?

15:57 **Bettina:** So, at the beginning, at the very beginning of this book... um... Kelley talks about the... So, I don't know if Kelley's a communist, but he seems to be a materialist, like in the Marxist way, so he actually sets out the basis of the book with the situation, the historical and material situation of what was going on in Birmingham, specifically. And how Birmingham was industrializing, how people were coming from all over the South to Birmingham, and how just, basically, it was a burgeoning city.

But the reason why the CPUSA came to the South was because there was the Third International of the Comintern, and that just means the Communist International, and the Third International is just like the third formation. The first one was like, Marx, Bakunin, and - you know, like the first workingmen's union international conference. I don't know what the second one was. *[laughs]*

But the third one, the third one included a decision by the Comintern, which is the body that guides the International Communist strategy, and so a decision was made there to invest in the idea of that there's a colonized Black nation within the United States, and that it's on the Communist International to help like, seed revolution and to specifically emphasize the self-determination of those Black people in the American South.

And so there was a strategy to send a bunch of white people *[laughs]* from other parts of CPUSA down South, but those particular organizers, like - and then this was another reason why I've wanted to read this book too, is because I've been told repeatedly that the people who could actually organize were the Communists. And so when there was the Red Scare, that like, militancy and actual knowledge of how to build power kind of got squashed with the Red Scare and McCarthyism for labor - for the labor movement, basically. So anyways, they actually sent pretty decent organizers that didn't think that poor Black people in the South were idiots. *[laughs]* Very simply. And so they were actually really good at finding people that they wanted to build with and who may - maybe were informal leaders, like in the community and started there with those folks. And, weren't condescending and actually like in good faith, were building with people, and had this flexibility. So anyways, I'm answering more than the Birmingham question though. *[laughs]* But yeah.

19:01 **Page:** My follow up question is around - Yeah, can you describe what that organizing looked like? How are folks organizing? I don't know if that includes the invisible army piece, like was that a shift?

19:12 **Bettina:** So, it talked about how the Communists seized a bunch of opportunities. Because it was during the Great Depression, that's what this history book is mainly talking about. And so during the Great Depression, there were people that were all out of work, like severe unemployment. Folks wanted either wages, or food, or work, and even when the government was coming through with support programs, they were not equitably like, you know, appropriately, that's not right... they weren't equitably dispersed to people. Especially if you're like, poor working class Black people, right? In the South, in Jim Crow South. And so the Communists were very savvy in talking specifically to, like, recognizing that there are class interests that are different within the Black community, and building with sharecroppers, or building with actual poor folks.

And then - they weren't just building as if there was nothing there. There was social his- sorry, hang on I'm sorry *[laughs]* Just - There was social history of resistance and building that had already exi- like, a memory of reconstruction basically, that folks were leaning on. And there was just building that was happening with the sharecroppers union that they could - that the Communists could then build on top of, or build with.

And they had several tactics, basically. And so some of them that really stuck out to me was they did youth Communist programming for the children sharecroppers, right? And they also did like night schools for folks that were interested in learning more, they circulated... press, newspapers. And these newspapers, when I say circulated, like Black folks in the South would basically be writing to these Communists as they were going back and forth to the North to just ask them could you just bring more newspapers, and basically these newspapers would travel through communities. And because they were eventually considered contraband, they would hide them in trees, they would hide them behind fence posts, and then of course not everybody could read, so they would gather together and read aloud these newspapers and some of these newspapers specifically had like, stories about the Caribbean and Africa; and so it's really interesting because Kelley was able to find people reminiscing about the papers that they like to read. And it was like oh, you know, 'this particular publication had stories about our people', was like one of the very super interesting quotes. So yeah, there was the reliance on publications, they also started their own publications. What else did they do?

Oh, some of the really interesting stuff that they did was they have - the Communist Party had an international labor defense that had two branches, so there was the martial art - or like the armed, and the unarmed branches, and these people would like, get into gun fights with police, and win. *[laughs]* And so, when they would do things like that, that would drive up, you know, a lot of interest and a lot of excitement, basically. I'm like, who are these people that are armed and fight the police and win??

Oh and then the other - the major thing was that they came through... they were already present when the Scottsborough Boys scandal happened, and basically that was a handful of Black boys that were accused of rape and very much under risk of being killed by a mob. So it's Jim Crow South, they were accused of raping two white girls, and the NAACP and a couple of other organization were vying for who's gonna represent and who's gonna tell these boy's stories, and who's gonna work with the families, and it's the Communist party that was able to negotiate with the parents and ended up defending, arranging the lawyers and also uplifting and making an international case for the Scottsborough Boys, and they - part of it is kind of like, okay it's obvious that this is a tactic to talk about Black people in the South and the Communist Party, not just in the South, but internationally. But at the same time, they were doing what they could and eventually got the boys off.

So yeah, so I feel a little bit complicated reading that history and I appreciate that Kelley is forthright about that. But also it's very clear that that was a tactic, so they were thinking on multiple levels of like, you know, we're gonna talk about wages and work and unemployment lines, and we need food, like that - that very instant material need. We want to develop people and invest in people in terms of like, information, training, programming for young people. And we wanna appeal specifically to the class interest of poor Black people and make it very apparent

that we are for poor Black people.

And I guess the final thing that I wanna - I just remembered this and it's such a huge detail *[laughs]* in the book. The thing that drove up Black interest in the Communist party was their unabashed anti-racism and pro-Black self determination. But when they did that, they alienated white people in the South, and other - and even other socialist organi- like, so they're not socialist, but they even alienated other organizations that had more socialist tendencies. And it's just very interesting to read about, there are even splits within socialist organizations in terms of - on the race question, basically.

And they even were talking about like miscegenation or like, interracial things. And so it's just interesting to see that they were really committed to Black self-determination to the point where they were alienating not just white people, but other Black people that also didn't agree with miscegenation. *[laughs]* So, it's all very interesting.

26:34 **Page**: So let me make sure I'm hearing all of this. You had - cause I don't know this history, so in the 1930's, you have - It sounds like - not necessarily Black folks, but like folks who were a part of the Communist party going to the South and organizing around Communist ideas with poor Black people to support and foster revolutionary movement, right? For Black self-determination. Uh, and that - you know, they're using all these various tactics that include youth programming, newsletters, blah blah blah. First, am I hearing that right? That it was folks coming in and doing place-based Black organizing with folks?

27:22 **Bettina**: Yeah. So, it was... white organizers that were coming in from the North, meeting Black people and then doing - it was also culturally relevant work, too. *[cat meows in background, Bettina laughs]* Um, hold on, I need to get this cat out.

27:39 **Monica**: I hope - I hope we leave that meow in.

27:43 **Page**: I hope the cat meow makes it in. *[laughs]* Um - That's really fucking cool.

27:50 **Bettina**: And it wasn't even necessarily that the white communists understood what they were doing *[chuckles]* was that. And it was because they were really smart about organizing. It was that the Black folks that they were encountering were skeptical and had questions, and were inserting like - 'okay but you don't know what it's like down here', you know what I'm saying? And like, doing that type of education and work for those organizers to understand what would actually work there.

And so it was very much these Black folks and... Kelley is really interesting in this too, where he talks about mythologies. And so some of these myths that would come up, that Black folks

would have in terms of why they would be open to white people from the North coming down, and it had to do with like reconstruction - memories of reconstruction and civil war where they hadn't lost faith, necessarily, that the North would come back and finish reconstruction, right?

And so, this idea about these white folks coming through, like, it's not - you know what I'm saying? So it's not like white saviors nec-? Well it kind of is white saviors, but is rooted in experiences and stories that they heard from their own elders, or you know, that come out of their own experiences in terms of, 'the white folks are gonna come back from the North and they're gonna, like, finish things off.'

And so layering on top of what the Communist Party was telling them, that there's like this international proletariat and they're totally down to work on your issues *[laughs]* you know what I mean? To liberate you all, cause this is like an internal colony, basically, to the United States. It's a nation of Black people that's being oppressed. Like... Yeah! Okay! *[laughs]* Like, there's gonna be an international proletariat revolution and we're gonna be a part of that? It seemed like it fit in with these other myths and mythologies that folks already had in that area of the United States, and out of those experiences.

They're very much injecting, though, what they knew is gonna work. It wasn't these white people thinking hey Black people you guys are really amazing at, I don't know, songs. Do songs. *[laughs]* Do whatever you like.

30:27 **Page:** Dance and sing for us, yeah, yeah. Yeah, what's striking me is another sort of - when I think Communist in addition to the like, the white old man, or like, white man trope that I sort of have in my mind, or impression, or stereotype, it's also like, people who are obsessed with comparing papers that they've read, and like how much theory do you know, and it becomes this very, like, purity-based ideological in some - in rather quickly and helpful ways and it sounds like this was much more about holding space around shared values and ideals. Aand that this was an era where the Communist Party was clearly like thinking through a lot of things, I don't mean to like dismiss theory, like I think ideas are important, but that it was about it being rooted in actual practice of struggle as opposed to just like, what I experience a lot of now, of just like, talking about Lenin. *[laughs]*

31:27 **Bettina:** So it wasn't all of CPUSA then and it wasn't necessarily all of the Communist Party, um, it was specifically the Alabama Communist Party that was this open and actually radical and actually thinking about what was practical on the ground. And also, what you had just said too, reminded me that there were people from Alabama that were sent to Moscow to get political education, going to school there to be developed as Communist Party leaders and then sent back. So there was like - there was investment in theory and ideology, but also even before the comintern decided to do this, there were Black people already um, like, inserting themselves,

right? Into this international proletariat and having these discussions and making the case that there is an oppressed Black nation within the United States and then that's the reason why the comintern - the Third International like, made this decision to like, send resources down to the South. So, it's all very interesting - It's like nothing comes out of the blue, basically.

32:43 **Monica**: Totally. And I know that we know from history and from our lived experience currently, that all of this incredible organizing, right, like putting an international spotlight on, you know, racism in the U.S. and having militant action with, you know, clashes with police. We know that this organizing work - this militant organizing work is met with repression, right? And so what were the ways that the Alabama Communists –What did they face? What sort of repression did they experience in their daily organizing?

33:24 **Bettina**: So, it's really interesting because it was coming up from multiple angles. So obviously there were super racist white people who were terrorizing Black folks, and non-Black people, basically other white people that were sympathetic to Black self determination. But there were also like, the bougie Black people who didn't appreciate people - especially quote, 'outsiders stirring up the pot' and bringing up class consciousness for like, poor Black - the poor Black people. And so there were instances of repression from the churches, from even the NAACP, or business owners, these kinds of more traditional, "conservative" Black folk *[laughs]* that basically were - didn't appreciate this 'stirring of the pot'. So, yeah. So the repression was particularly brutal, but like I said, this uh, international labor defense group got into gunfights with the cops, called out the KKK, defended Black people against the KKK, and it wasn't just like white communists in the ideal, it was, you know, Black people, like they were training people up to like... *[under breath]* This cat's trying to get back in, I'm sorry. *[laughs, shuffling sounds]*

34:47 **Page**: Uh, you were saying these were Black folks resisting and defending against the KKK?

34:55 **Bettina**: So because they were... Okay with quote "race mixing", and even if it wasn't quote "miscegenation" or like sexual race mixing, that was something that, like, stuck in the craw of so many people to the point were it was just like a huge deal. It was a big deal. And even the anti-Communist like... rhetoric was all around 'do you want Black men to sleep with your daughters', it was like that level of appealing to that really, base, of disgust or whatever that white and Black people in the South might have had towards race mixing.

So yeah, there was that level of informal, it's like a social repression and stigma that got heavily laid onto the Communists. So it came like, from the government, it came... interpersonally, it came from like, socially, like all these different ways of being attacked or discredited or having these ideas discredited in some way.

And eventually towards the end of the book - and there's reasons why the Communist Party started declining, at least in Alabama, and a part of it was repression, definitely. But also it got to the point where people weren't out with their party affiliation, but they were committed to the work, to the point where they were in unions.

They would like, situate themselves in change-making positions but they might not have been super out as Communists, and that also happened with publications. So there's a publication that got started that wasn't explicitly Communist, but it's very clear that the people that were writing had those sympathies, basically. But the effects of the repression was that folks weren't as out as Communists but they were still doing the work and still had those values. And a part of the reason why the beginning of the decline for the Alabama Communist Party was uh, World War II, and this attempt at a united front with liberals and socialists, and to do that, you needed to disregard, like, the Black self-determination stuff, it's too divisive. Yeah. *[laughs]*

37:31 **Page:** The Liberals. *[Bettina laughs]* So, what was your main takeaway from the book in a few sentences?

37:38 **Bettina:** My main takeaway from this book is... not coming to an area thinking that you have all the answers, being super open to the traditions and histories that folks already have, and the cultural memory that folks already have, and really doing work that is relevant, even culturally to folks, and is materially addressing and relevant for their interests.

So yeah, I think that's my main takeaway and the book gives you a lot of details and a lot of examples of different tactics. I think that it's really good to revisit, it's really good to think through, wow, they did this in the 30's *[laughs]* when we're still like, trying to hone in and do it again, you know?

38:40 **Monica:** Yeah, and I think that there's something really beautiful when... I mean, from what I took away from the little that I read from this book, is that it really was organizing people that just had everything and nothing to lose, right? Like, people were facing unemployment, people were facing horrible work conditions and we saw just like this mass movement of organizing workers, organizing the unemployed, and we also saw a lot of Black women in leadership positions in the Communist Party there and the ways that we saw them in leadership was mostly around the relief committees that they were organizing in communities and it really makes me think of a lot of the organizing work that's been happening today in 2020 around mutual aid efforts with people needing food, groceries, clothing, masks, hand sani- you know, just anything that is essential right now for people to get through their daily lived experiences. So yeah, I just wanted to hear a little bit more about how has this book and this history really influenced the ways that you personally organize, or aspire to organize in your work today?

40:04 **Bettina**: Yeah, it's definitely aspirational, but also it's interesting to think about the work that I've already been doing in light of this book. Things that are practical and relevant. So with Liberation Library, we send books that are requested by young people. We don't pick some –no shade on adult programs that do books-to-prisoner projects—but the capacity that they might have, is like they'll get a request for a genre and they'll pick a book for you. Whereas we felt like, you know, we really wanted to get what the young person wants, and so they just give us the request, and we'll do our best to fill it, verses like trying to assume or dictate what young people wanna read, basically. So it seems like... I mean, the Communist Party in this books was like addressing, you know, people starving and things like that, so it seems like it may not be comparable, but in terms of being confined in a place where you have so few choices, the fact that we can at least give young people a choice and fill a direct need that fills their soul or their imagination, as they request it. It felt connected to me in this way, where it was like okay, we're doing something very minor, but something that kind of is in this tradition of self-determination.

41:39 **Monica**: I think that's totally connected to the book. *[laughs]* I think that that's a very clear connection between what does it mean when you work with and listen to and follow the leadership of people that are directly impacted by oppressions, right? Like, that's what it means to, you know, provide and collaboratively create printed publications, political education together, right? When I thought of relief committee's, I immediately thought of the, the um... the pandemic that we're facing today, so I immediately thought of that relief, but I think that there is a sense - there is relief - is also connected to the political education and the access to telling your story, right? The access to being able to share your story on a larger platform. So I think it's super relevant to what Liberation Library is doing.

42:39 **Bettina**: Yay. *[laughs]* But also, snap snaps on bringing up the role of women in the Communist Party, and also the role of young people. So young people were especially elevated and wanted to be invested in by party leadership, and women were not turned away, basically, for providing leadership and emphasizing the things that they wanted to work on. And so if that was around material relief, or these committees, then that was what was going on.

But also, like there's a really amazing story in here about a mother who wanted her child to basically go to the Communist youth camp, and not necessarily the NAACP one, and it was because she recognized and knew that the Communists were for poor people like her and she wanted her children to get this political education, this political development. It's not accidental, it's not unintentional, in terms of Black people coming into formation with the Communists and making it relevant for them, and using - and knowing and seeing it as a vehicle for their own liberation.

So I think that that is something that's extremely prescient for me, because I'm also - these are

very new commitments for me, with the Democratic Socialists of America, and the Afro-Socialists and Socialists of Color Caucus in the DSA, so this book specifically is something that I'm like, getting a lot of people to read with me again because I want to look at truly, what does it mean to build a multi-racial working class that affirms and invests in the leadership of Black people - of poor Black people, and does it in a way that like, honors the traditions, the culture and the skepticisms of poor Black people. Like this is what I'm gonna be reading again and again, basically. And have centered in conversations with a bunch of people. So, yeah. We're gonna take over DSA.

45:01 **Page**: Oooh! I think in a lot of ways I think you've already spoken to how the book is really relevant to 2020 and so I don't wanna go even further into it, but maybe just echoing some of the stuff that I'm hearing too. As you were talking, all these images and moments of the last year have been flashing in front of me, everything from AOC and the DSA being lifted up. We're seeing, you know, all around the world people going out and marching and protesting and fucking shit up for Black lives, right? And that it's important to recognize there is a history here, and to bring it back to that quote you shared at the beginning, I think I either read the intro of the same book or it was another quote about when you only focus on the shoreline you miss the ocean. And just - that there are lessons that we can learn from and apply today, this isn't brand new even though it feels unprecedented.

When you take it to the local - what people have actually lived through and survived and resisted and there's so much that we've inherited in terms of lessons and struggle. I'm rambling now! But I guess there's obvious connections of how it applies to 2020. Is there any more nuance you want to bring forward around how this book, if more people were reading it, how it might impact the work that is happening right now? And how might it be useful?

That was a long way of me saying like, all these people that moved to Minneapolis, right, like all - *[laughs]* Don't - This isn't saying move to Minneapolis, white man, with your Communist ideals, and work with young Black people. What can folks - especially folks that are like newly radicalized and in the streets that care about Black lives, what does this mean, and what does it not mean?

46:44 **Bettina**: Awesome. Yeah. Definitely that... what Black folks in this context needed was investment. It didn't need leadership, necessarily. They didn't need leadership, they just needed investment. And so when the comintern, when this third international said that we are going to invest and build there, that's like, just give people money. Give people leadership development, but not in a condescending way. Like literally... invest in their path of developing these ideas, and bringing their histories, their cultural traditions, bringing those with them into this container that could hold multiplicities, basically, multiple ways of being and doing the work.

Don't come into a community expecting to tell people or like, I don't know - I've just been hearing some really intense things about these people that only read books trying to say that we're gonna go into poor communities or poor Black communities and teach them about class consciousness, and that - whenever I hear that, I like, want to scream because it's like, yo they can - *[laughs]* poor Black people can explain and grasp these concepts faster and better than - or articulate it better than you. You know what I mean? If all your experience is just reading books, um, so that type of condescension really needs to be checked at the door. You cannot be going into communities thinking that you're some kind of savior. This really is not a book about white Communists coming to the South and teaching anything to anybody, it was about collaboration and seeing what would actually work, and practicing those things. So, practice I think is the emphasis for me, too.

48:46 **Monica:** I think that's a great answer. Well, thank you so much Bettina for being on our show today. It was a really incredible conversation. I learned so much about Black communism in Alabama in the 1930's and I feel like there is a lot of connection to what is happening in 2020 today and how we can organize in really authentic and impactful ways, and so I really appreciate your nuance and ideas around this book. As always, we'd love to close out this episode with one of your favorite passages from the book. So, if you could do us the honor of reading your favorite passage.

49:26 **Bettina:** Sure, and it's just two sentences. So - *The Communist movement in Alabama resonated with the cultures and traditions of Black working people. Yet at the same time, it offered something fundamentally different; It proposed a new direction, a new kind of politics that required the self-activity of people, usually dismissed as inarticulate, and for this reason, Communists bumped heads with the African-American communities self-appointed spokespersons, or the better-class Negroes.*"

[OUTRO: Instrumental music]

50:11 **Page:** Thanks so much for listening to another episode of the Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about books to help grow our movement. We are your co hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionist organizers. We'll be back next week with another episode. Next Sunday. Same time, same place. Wanna learn about a specific book? Email us your suggestions at thelitreviewchicago@gmail.com, or find us on Facebook. And if you like this episode, give it a shoutout on Twitter or Instagram. Our handle is [@LitReviewChi](https://www.instagram.com/LitReviewChi). Financial support for the production of this podcast is thanks to our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patreon, at [Patreon.com/thelitreview](https://www.patreon.com/thelitreview). Keep reading!