



The Lit Review Podcast

English Transcript

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Guest/Topic: Christian Snow on *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*, edited by Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, and Charles Payne

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00:00 **Page:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of the Lit Review. How are you doing today, Monica?

00:05 **Monica:** I'm doing great. I'm hanging in there. How about you?

00:09 **Page:** I'm OK, I'm actually, I'm really excited. We're sitting here and we will -- not in person, of course. But we have two wonderful, brilliant, amazing guests with us right now. Hey, how y'all doing?

00:19 **Damon:** What's up? What's up?

00:21 **Daniel:** Hello! We've called so many people brilliant on the show. It's nice to get it in return. They're always calling people -- that's my most overused word on this show.

00:30 **Page:** Same. I think every time I start an intro, this is how it goes. So we have Daniel and Damon on with us. If you don't recognize their voices, these are the two co-hosts of another amazing podcast, Monica. Do you want to explain who Airgo is?

00:42 **Monica:** AirGo, I mean, AirGo -- if you're in Chicago, you gotta know AirGo Radio. So AirGo -- Page and I have both been on as guests and have talked about our lives and our organizing and our theories of change. And it's just a really great podcast that really dives into our people who are we and what do we do? You know, and so I think, yeah, I would love to hear Damon and Daniel tell our listeners about AirGo.

01:10 **Damon:** Hey, thanks for having us y'all. It's such an honor to be here in the Lit review. I feel like I'm in my natural zone of like being a really attentive but unprepared student in the back of the class. I'm really happy to be here. I feel like I'm back at my zone, but we are proud to be here from Airgo. We consider ourselves movement documentarians. So we have been archiving and building a living narrative of the people, places, spaces and emergent themes of our progressive and radical movements, not only here in the city but throughout the country.

01:42 **Daniel:** So each week we have a longform conversation with an artist, organizer, culture worker, someone reshaping the culture of Chicago and beyond for the more equitable and creative. We've been doing it since 2015. You're on episodes 59 and 60, and we're now in episode 270, so we've been going for a minute and it's been really fun to also watch you all do the work that you do and feel like we're not, you know, alone in these podcast streets anymore, so.

02:10 **Damon:** So we're really excited because I think similar to your space, in addition to covering and archiving some of these stories, we do view Ergo as an educational tool and a space for learning and consciousness raising. So after folks come here and check out these books, we can get a little bit more deep dive on some adjacent or connected themes over here at Ergo, we love y'all, check us out.

02:32 **Page:** Yeah, I can say being a guest on your show, the conversations I've had have been some of my favorite over the years. I think they've happened every year, like, there's an annual one, and it's been this really cool sort of like marker of things that I'm thinking about and I have really appreciated the questions that you asked in the conversations that you're holding. But also just, I mean, it's almost at this point three hundred conversations with so many incredible artists and you know, organizers, and they're organized into like tracks, which is phenomenal, like y'all are really goals. And I really love what you all do and how you do it, and I highly encourage our listeners to go over. There's a lot of people I'd love to have one day on the Lit Review, but they're probably already on Airgo.

03:15 **Daniel:** Well you can double up, it's fine. We don't have, like exclusive NDAs with our guests, you know? *[laughter]*

03:22 **Monica:** Can you let our listeners know where we can hear Airgo radio?

03:25 **Daniel:** Absolutely. You can find us on all the places you find your podcast at A I R G O. It's also at Airgo Radio on everything, and airgoradio.com.

03:38 **Page:** Hey everyone. Welcome back. I know it's been a minute since we've had a new episode. We really, this year with everything going on, I think been extra trying to give ourselves

grace and not stress too much about arbitrary deadlines and schedules. And so we hope that you'll understand that we are just, we're doing the best that we can and wanted to get this to you as soon as possible. But if it was a week late, but yeah, how are you doing today, Monica?

04:11 Monica: I'm hanging in there. I'm moving through it and I'm ready for some non screen time. Yeah, how about you?

04:22 Page: I feel you. Yeah, same. I'm definitely looking forward to a bit of a break this winter. I, yeah, I'm excited. I feel like will actually be able to take one. Today, though today is a lot. There's just so much going on and it's an extra heavy heart today. You know, we're recording this on the Friday before this episode is going out. And last night Brandon Bernard was executed by the state and it's just awful for so many reasons. I think I'm really struck by the fact that he's the youngest -- he was the youngest person to be charged or sentenced with the death penalty in nearly 70 years and a part of my sort of story of coming to abolition was the story of George Junius Stinney Jr, who was the youngest person ever executed by the state, and he was 14 years old. And that this is just really horrible. The literal death making of these institutions? And yeah, I wanted to just make sure we made space for his name. And I think just take a moment of silence in honor of his life and the struggle for real justice, which means a world where he could have lived.

05:42 [*moment of silence*]

05:49 **Page:** You know, thank you for taking that space with us. It is heavy and want to acknowledge that there's at least five more people that I know of that are scheduled to be executed by the state before the -- either the New Year or inauguration. Actually, I'm not sure about that piece, and there are hundreds of thousands of people that are serving life without parole, which is another form of the death sentence, and that this -- is this is the quote unquote justice system, right? And this is how it has always been. This is not new and that this is a piece of it, that of which the whole thing has to crumble.

06:26 Monica: That's right. This this, you know, all of this is so devastating. And I think this is -- no, I believe this is why we are abolitionists. This is an abolitionist podcast where we believe that this whole system of state violence, whether it's the prisons or policing, has to end and it has to be replaced with actual support and real resources for our communities. And you know, the only alternative we need to prisons is to build the kind of society that doesn't need prisons. And this makes me think about this really critical question that I read recently in a new book by Maya Shenwar and Victoria Law and it's called *Prison By Any Other Name* where they're talking about the harm of prison reforms and alternatives, which we're seeing so many pop up this year, especially in Chicago. And so the question we as organizers should always just be asking

ourselves is, are these reforms building up structures that we're going to need to dismantle in the future? So that's what this made me think of.

07:28 **Page:** Yeah, and I think that that speaks to, you know, the importance of organizing and that a lot of times when we talk about abolition with folks that maybe haven't thought about it before or are new to -- yeah, are new to thinking about the world in that way, there's a common like, but wait, what, what are you going to do with, you know, the people who hurt people? And that's the -- first of all, to be very clear, there's nothing about the current system that we have that's actually focused on, or trying to address the hurt that people have experience. There's nothing about it that offers relief or healing for those people, it's purely about punishment. Secondly, and connected to that is that we need to get to the root causes of these problems, right? That abolitionists are actually usually very -- are concerned about violence, first of all, and oftentimes are survivors of different kinds of violence. Sexual violence have lost loved ones to gun violence, been, you know, survived gun violence, things, all kinds of things, right? And yet we live in an extremely harmful, violent world, and that abolition takes that very seriously and says this system isn't working and we need to actually address the harm that we're experiencing. And I think there's -- the words of Mariam Kaba are really fitting where she said, you know, no one enters violence the first time by committing it. And I think that there's the layers and layers and layers that we could probably spend the whole episode just going back and forth about this. But this again, this is part of why we organize. And I think this episode gets into to some points that maybe we'll make later about, you know, yeah, we've we organize to try to change things and make demands and win campaigns, but also to work with other people and the struggles that that brings, right, to learn how to make decisions together and to learn how to make decisions about how we want to respond to conflict and harm and how we want to -- and what we need to get to the root causes of those conflicts and harms. And that's so much of how we organize, is with this horizon in mind, with this north star of we are moving towards abolition every step of the way. And so I think the question you posed in that quote is really important.

09:36 **Monica:** Absolutely. And I think that this work isn't easy. And I think that's why I really love this conversation with Christian, and I love this book because it's going really deep into like the really hard day to day spadework, right, of organizing. And it's really fucking hard. And I think -- and it's heartbreaking. You know, there's this poster that radical emprints created that I just purchased, and it's -- she's an artist in the Bay Area and it's this poster that says organizing will break our hearts. But then across it, it says, save our lives. And I love that because this organizing work is so heartbreaking, but it's also so necessary for the survival of our communities. This is the second to last episode of the season. This conversation with Christian was phenomenal, and also since our last episode, we got 10 new patrons to help us sustain this work. Ayyy, shout out to y'all, thank you. Thank you so much. It really, really does help to keep this podcast going. But yeah, what did you like about this conversation with Christian?

10:45 **Page:** Yeah, I mean, I love Christian. She's one of my most favorite-est and greatest thought partners, we work together within Assata's daughters and I just love the ways that she thinks and always grounds it in people. It's like whenever I feel like I'm lost, I know Christian will re-anchor me. And there was a lot in here, it's a really rich conversation. I think that she has this line at one point in the interview where she talks about how people fail most of the time and that it's full of losses and that it can be overwhelming and point to the question of like, you know, is it worth it? Was it worth it? And that's a, that question and the way that she framed it ultimately in the optimistic side of things was really important for me to hear and think about. And it's something that I feel like we don't talk about a lot, that I, and I really appreciate, those moments where we're real about how often we lose and how hard that is, but how it still matters that we do this fight in the ways that we do it, where it's slow, slow, steady speed work.

11:51 **Monica:** That's right. That's right. And I really love just like, this focus, like hyper focus on the ground, movers and shakers of the civil rights movement versus who we typically hear about in the past decades, right? And I think it speaks to our growing dedication to acknowledging that a lot of that, you know, quote unquote unsexy behind the scenes work is what really pushes our movements forward. And so I really appreciated this conversation. Christian brought so much to it. And I'm just really excited for folks to keep tuning in.

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]

12:27 **Monica:** You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

12:29 **Page:** We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from "Chicago" by David Ellis]

12:33 **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."

12:40 **Protest Chanting:** "CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [Inaudible chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"

12:49 **Page voiceover:** "We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"

12:57 **Young person voiceover:** "I remember, she was shot by my house -"

13:02 **Mariame voiceover:** "In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."

13:06 *[Music Lyrics]* 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 a house, a generation filled in Audy homes -
[Music Fades]

13:16 **Page:** Welcome, Christian! It is so wonderful to see your beautiful face today. I can't wait to hear your brilliance. How are you doing?

13:26 **Christian:** Oh my god, I'm doing all right. I really want some chocolate, but it's too early for that.

13:33 **Page:** What? I've already had chocolate today. And pie, thanks to you. *[laughs]*

13:40 **Christian:** Oh, you're welcome. I want some of that too, actually.

13:44 **Page:** Yes, I support this. Can you start us off by sharing with us? Who are you? What do you do and why?

13:50 **Christian:** Yeah, I am Christian Snow. I am a daughter of Chicago. I always like to say I love my city and especially the West Side, which you're probably going to hear me talk about 20 thousand times today. I am on staff at Assata's daughters, I also work for the People's Law Office. And the question is, why do I do that work? Honestly because I can't think of anything else to do other than work for freedom and liberation of Black folks, my people, my family. And I think that anything else would probably cause me so many... You know, internal conflicts. So I do this work. I'm really lucky to have fell into Assata's daughters in particular with so many amazing people who have directly impacted me and my growth and my understanding. And to be able to be a part of a tradition of liberatory work that not everyone has the ability to actualize. And so I'm really grateful for that. I work with the People's Law Office because I believe in holistic defense and being able to both build and dream, but also protect people in the current realities of today. And so I find myself at the People's Law Office, or PLO, because they give me the opportunity to practice that and to live it out in real life. And, you know, I couldn't decide. So I just do both.

15:44 **Monica:** Well, we're so grateful to have you on the podcast today. Christian, thank you so much for making time to be with us. So the book we're talking about today is called *Groundwork*, and the foreword is actually written by Charles M. Payne, who is the author of *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, which we talked about in our first episode. And so in this foreword, he really mentions how often we only hear the civil rights movement narrative between the 19th -- or yeah, between then mid 50s to the mid 60s are also known as the Montgomery to Memphis framework, but that this book really actually branches out and gives a more local on the ground

overview of key individuals and the place based work that followed. Can you talk about what led you to read this book and why did you pick it to talk about today?

16:33 **Christian:** Yeah, I, uh... What led me to read this book is because I'm obsessed with grassroots movements. I'm obsessed with place-based organizing, particularly because I'm obsessed with Chicago. And there's not another story of Chicago that's not rooted and grounded and place-based organizing for change. I struggle a lot with, um, what I feel like is this drive of some folks and movement to catapult to some national stage or what I see as a kind of infatuation with folks claiming certain politics that can be seen across the nation. And just this big, top down approach to movement work, this collaboration of folks all across the country to form some uniform understanding of politics. And it has never sat right with me. It's never resonated with me, I should say. In particular, not because it isn't important to see what's happening across the nation or across the world and be able to see the things that are the same, the things that tie us, the different forms of oppression that we're fighting, that have roots in the same systems. Not because that isn't important, but because I'm kind of obsessed with how we how we get free, and the how we get free, for me, is a story of context, a story of location, a story of yesterday, today and tomorrow in the sense that we take stock of every hour that we're moving in and how they impact us and how it brings us further or farther away from freedom. And so because I'm obsessed with the how, I'm obsessed with the local, I'm obsessed with the neighbors, I'm obsessed with relationships. And so that drove me to try to find more writings that are not just about the theoretical beliefs that we can agree to, but how putting them into practice informs and alters them and creates a new theory. Groundwork in particular, was appealing to me because it does so in a way that is conscious. It understands that even how you tell history matters and even how you tell the narrative matters, and that in order for us to really understand the tools and strategies of folks who have come before us whose foundations we stand on, we really need to understand the day to day and the relationships. And I think that I chose this book in particular to talk about with you all today, because in this moment that we find ourselves in, I feel like everybody keeps saying in this moment in time or given these circumstances or in this instance, but truly in this place of, you know, the influx of COVID, the failure or the intentional actions of government, the Black uprisings that have gained prominence for right now, folks who have decided that they can not do nothing, that they have to do something, all of this happening at once and just this overwhelming sense of exhaustion and pain and fear is guiding people to try to figure out how to shake off the paralysis that can come from all of those emotions. And I think that turning to local work and local stories and what people do on the day to day, the efforts that they put forth not only to root us in ancestry practices, but also to keep us alive and push us forward will be lessons that will hopefully help folks understand that it is their actions that they take every day. It is their relationships and how they act through those relationships, that it is those steps that they can take with their neighbors that will have the greatest impact and reverb through so many different levels and hopefully encourage them to continue to fight or jump into the fight where they stand.

21:16 **Page:** I am having flashbacks to -- so all three of us who are part of a campaign called #NoCopAcademy trying to stop the construction of -- under Rahm Emanuel, now Lori Lightfoot, this massive police training compound facility on the West Side. And there was this one City Council hearing, and because it was a hearing, it wasn't as -- we weren't as packed with our folks there, and it was fascinating and horrifying because at this hearing, City Council was honoring Timuel Black's one hundredth birthday and he was an organizer. I don't know -- to be up front, I don't know a lot about him. I knew he was turning 100. I know that he knew Dr. King and that he was a part of the civil rights movement. And I. I mean, no shade to any of those things, but we were there and it was speech after speech honoring his work in the civil rights movement and they were, you know, everyone was just bending -- just jumping over each other to try to say, No, I love him more or no, I love him more! And they were giving him some -- I don't know if it was a key to the city or what, but it was a thing and it was the same hearing that we all get kicked out of, right? And this disconnect between, right, like lifting him up in the same meeting that then you -- then turn around and kick out all almost all young Black people from, who are protesting and fighting for their own liberation. And that disconnect, I think, is it was oh, I mean, there's a lot that I could say about that. It was really tense. Everyone wanted me to yell and I was like, I can't yell at a 100 year old. I mean, I can't like the optics here, right? But I think it speaks to this importance of how power, how much power there is in the story and histories we tell of the civil rights movement and who controls that, that storytelling. And there are. That's one of many examples of ways that the dominant narrative has been used against current organizing. And so I think there's a question I want to ask you about, you know, what are -- I think you lifted up some of it already there that -- the common myth histories or overemphasis that ever gets told about the civil rights movement, you've mentioned already the overreliance on national leadership. And so what are other examples of ways that the civil rights movement gets mis-framed? And why do you think those things are emphasized or just blatantly told wrong?

23:45 **Christian:** Yeah, well, OK. There's a lot I feel like we have been trying to unpack the civil rights movement -- the wave of Black liberation that happened, and as this book extends it to the 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, almost since we were in it, to be quite honest. When I was in college, I was a -- I turned into a history major from -- I can't remember now, from physics and math. I thought I was going to be an engineer, and I met this dope ass Black woman who was like, *No sis, I actually need you to come think about society real quick.* Then I turned into a sociology major, and then she made me double major in history. Thank you, [???] Scott. I will forever, forever be grateful to you. I did a project on the African-American memory of freedom and what the definition of liberation was and how it changed between the Emancipation Proclamation and the centennial that coincided with 1965. And a lot of it was about control of the narrative, what the Black newspapers were saying versus the national newspapers about who had become free and how and what role Black folks had to play in our own freedom versus what the national government had done for us. The federal government had done for us, et cetera, through the Civil

Civil War, and a lot of my project was about who controls history, who controls historically, who controls the writings of our stories, of the story of this nation and the story of Black people in it. And I think that what groundwork really does well is picks up what -- and they call it a kind of a love letter to John Denver, who wrote local people, which took this framework of national organizations and actually brought it down to the people and said, No, actually, the people did this. And so in addition to it usurping this ideology that we need these large national organizations that control the masses, it also took away or chipped away at this notion that we need charismatic leaders in order for the people to move. And I think that that is a really important contribution that this book makes and that a lot of the historians who are trying to take back the historiography of the civil rights movement right now to root it more in local people and in the grassroots, things that those of us who are doing grassroots work kind of take for granted, the narratives that we're able to push and say, these people did this or this set of people did this. It was young people. It was Black people. It was women. It was trans folks. That type of language comes from -- A lot of this language can be rooted in these historians trying to take back the historiography, the lineage of how we tell the story and say, No, it wasn't national orgs. No, it wasn't these charismatic folks. I mean, they were there, but they did not guide the movement. In fact, we push them. We informed them, we pulled the movement where it needed to go. We were already doing this work. They helped us. They assisted us. And a lot of times they got in the way. There is something to be said about there being problems that we can all source and we can all see. But that solutions are importantly rooted in the context of how those problems are showing up in the spaces that we're in. And I think because we want it to tell historians of the civil rights movement want it to tell a story that spoke to the winds that encouraged people to continue to fight and to move. Or some folks also wanted to say we had won and that we were done. And so to tell a story of triumph was how we ended up with such a limited narrative that is full of themes. But that doesn't really tell us the nitty gritty of who did what, how and why and where they pushed back on. A lot of groundwork is full of what other people would contextualize as failures. Most of the authors are not focused on what they won, but more on the process. And I think that historians who focused on this grand narrative of the civil rights movement originally wanted to focus on the wins and the triumphs as a way to use history to inspire, encourage and relax folks. And that's not the story that groundwork tells. In fact, it tries to disrupt that.

28:56 **Monica:** Yeah, that really resonates with me. And especially what in connection to what Page was bringing up with no cop academy and that campaign and thinking back to how when we lost that vote in City Council, you know, we, you know, a lot of folks were like, you know, no cop academy lost. And then a lot of us were like, we lost. But then we were like, No, we won so much, right? We won so much in terms of the connections that were made on the ground with folks on the West side talking to folks about the cop academy that they had no idea, right? Whereas Emma Mitts was saying, *Oh yeah, all the other residents want this right.* But then when talking to folks, being like *we had no idea, you know, we didn't know.* And then also thinking about the, you know, the Alderman Carlos Rosa, who was the sole no vote, right? But then we --

the work of young people in the work of the campaign, pushed to get more no's right. We got more folks on our side. So I'm thinking about, yeah, all of those wins that we got that are so important that are shaping how the campaign looked for us and what that then branched out to in terms of a lot of the folks that were involved in the No Cop Academy campaign then went on to do other organizing work or continued organizing working in different areas. So yes, it made me think about that. But can you walk us through the book a little bit? How does this book lay out the various narratives that highlight place-based organizing and, you know, the variety of tactics where we're looking at, you know, struggles for freedom beyond voting rights, we're looking at a school desegregation. We're looking at all of these different diversity of tactics, right? So can you walk us through how it played out? And then also, like what history is and what narratives really stood out to you in this book?

31:01 **Christian:** Yeah. So the book is arranged like an anthology. It is an anthology, it is forward by Charles M. Payne, who already spoke about. And then there's the intro that lays out the definition as they see it of local people and what that concept means and stands for. And they define local people as folks who have a political orientation, a sense of accountability, which I think was really important and an ethical commitment to community. They're not necessarily the folks who were born and raised there, even though, you know, we're important too. But they are folks who have a commitment and ethical commitment to a specific community and a sense of accountability, which is critique that's lobbed at national orgs right at the larger infrastructure of promoting movement. The question of who you are accountable to is particularly important, and I think it plays out throughout the essays in the book. This theme of accountability because in some ways the accountability can be freeing. In some ways it can be limiting, and it talks deeply about why accountability is necessary for doing the work, but also a political orientation. Folks on the ground, folks who are considered local people are theorizing there's more action than theory, or the theory is coming through their actions. They are doing consistently, repeatedly doing, but they also have theory and they're putting that theory into play, and they are conforming their theories through the lessons that they're learning through their actions. They're not just folks who are swept up and swept away by what's happening on the national or international stage. And in fact, they inform a lot of the tactics that folks are using around the country. And so that definition of local people is something that the intro focuses on, as well as disrupting different frameworks that folks have. So this framework that civil rights only happen in the South. This framework that there is a huge distinction between the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. This framework that there is a huge divide between the national top down approach and the grassroots approach and this framework that again, local people are only participants or spectators pushed and controlled by the national orgs. They disrupt that by talking about the initiative, the innovation, the urgency, the context of local activism and the way of life it becomes for folks and positions the national organizing as helping to build a frame and to expose folks to tactics that they learned from dropping into different locations and really supporting the local efforts that were already underway. And so the introduction is very robust.

And if you read nothing else in the anthology, the introduction is the thing to read. And then the rest of the essays in the anthology go from locale to locale, from issue to issue different decades broken up around the country to give you tangible examples of what the introduction is talking about. And something I love about the essays as they go along is that they're focused on places you typically don't see stories focused on. They are some names, you know, but even the names you know, they take, they introduce the essay talking about those folks and then pull away from them and talk about everyone else. And they really talk about it in a group consensus. One thing about this book that is great is that they have, in the very beginning, all of the abbreviations. Those of us who do local organizing understands that sometimes we can just throw abbreviations at folks and something that is difficult as you're reading along to keep up with; wait, that you saw this acronym in this one locale, but it means something completely different in a different location. And so I think that that's great and something that can be used throughout the book. The things that tie the essays together, and they are written in essay format by a myriad of different folks. And so you -- sometimes the essays feel a little theoretical, like they're trying to prove a point by situating themselves in the historiography of the academic discipline. And some of them do not care whatsoever. And they're just trying to tell you the story, right? But the things that really tie these essays together is this understanding of how the local activists and organizers were really rooted in the context of which they were acting. Every story gives you the lay of the land, like what was happening here? What were the politics? What were the demographics? What were the things of the time that were affecting folks around the country? But. And how did they play out? It affected them. Did it not affect them at all? Who are these people? Were they middle aged, middle class where they workers? Were they poor? Were they parents? Were they students? Were they teachers? And something that's beautiful throughout the book is that they show you some of the interplay and tensions that occur between national organizations and their local chapters. It makes it pretty clear that the local chapters, quite often more times than not, heavily disagreed with whatever national organization you were a part of. And actually really pushed their national organization in ways that made the national organizations uncomfortable. Most of the time, some of the credit that we give to some of these national organizations were actually about things that were done on the local level and were done not with the blessing of the national organizations.

37:19 **Page:** More and more, I think we're learning about -- especially women that were a part of the civil rights movement, and we're learning their names in some of the work that they were a part of. But you still have to like, dig a little bit to find that, and it's certainly easy to go to civil rights commemoration events and not have women lifted up. And I think that it seems like there's more folks that are also looking at the civil rights movement as full of young people and youth leadership. And so I'm wondering if you can talk about how this book -- Yeah, what are the demographics of this book is talking about and what does it reveal about who was a part of this and where they were?

37:57 **Christian:** Because it's talking about the folks on the ground, they would have probably had to have been intentional in order to not mention women and to not discuss them. And some of the essays are -- you you want for that. You're like waiting for them to talk more about women throughout their story and they they hint at it and keep it going. But quite a few of the essays in this book do. The book starts off talking about Ruth Batson and Boston, but again, this book pulls from an individual model, so it starts off talking about Ruth Batson and her work and who she was. As you know, this middle aged woman with children in Boston who was very upset, very upset at the way in which the cradle of liberty is what you know, Boston Liberal East Coast, a city that likes to think it doesn't have any problems. But a lot of the chapter is about how most of her fight was about convincing Boston that it had problems, like there's problems here. We're supposed to be desegregated. We're not desegregated. Our children are not getting the resources they want. And it talked about how women in Boston, in particular Black women were fighting against this narrative of Black motherhood as a pathology and how a lot of the reason that they were being given for why the schools weren't integrated was because of Black women and their children. Boston quite explicitly said, We don't have a segregation problem. We have a Negro problem because you guys don't want to do any work. And the schools aren't failing because of a lack of resources, it's failing because of who you are. And so a lot of the campaign that she was waging was against this narrative, both -- that was put out by everyone from the Moynihan report, you know, on a national front, but also on the local area, but also convincing parents that they weren't that and uplifting all of the efforts of Black parents and Black parents going so far as to establishing a bussing system to integrate the schools on their own. And so it really talks about how Black mothers had to do everything all other mothers were doing, in addition to fighting for their children and being told that they're not women, not mothers, not feminist, not all of these things and fighting the narrative on so many different fronts throughout the rest of this book, the story of the women are about the different fronts that women have to fight on and how it's not just these charismatic leaders who are predominantly men and traditional civil rights narrative. Right? And it's not just women are doing spade work, even though that's there too. When you read the story of Women Power Unlimited in Mississippi, who helped basically kept the Freedom Rides alive by providing basic sustenance and things like haircuts to help folks who had come down to Mississippi on the Freedom Rides, in their own words, feel human. Remember that they are human by taking care of them. Women weren't just doing that piece, but throughout were theorizing through their actions. We're theorizing through their caretaking, theorizing through their motherhood, theorizing through their cross class collaboration, which happen amongst women, especially in this book. More times than not, the breaking down of the class barriers in Black communities was because of the women who were using their, the little social power that they had, little capital that they had, those women who were independent, financially independent or came from a middle class, background educated working women in rural areas, especially in Mississippi. It was that work, that relational work that women were doing that comes out very strongly in the book to the point that they have this whole chapter dedicated to the different types of work that women were doing. And you know, one of the authors discussed

the possibility that one of the reasons the narrative focuses so heavily on the national is because the local was women's work, and it's a piece of why it gets completely washed out because of women, so many women were on the ground actually making it happen. In addition to the women in the story, there's a conversation about young people throughout almost every essay. The narrative today that we hear a lot of is that young people will win, young people will free us, young people are at the forefront of the movement. And a lot of that is true in that young people are on the ground willing and ready to do the work and have an experience that informs their actions and their theories, right? But it is an intergenerational struggle and always has been. And part of that struggle is the internal struggle between the generations of folks who are full of fear from the things that they have experienced in their lifetime and the different ways in which they have learned to cope and deal and press forward with that. And folks who are full of urgency because of the pain that they are suffering from the oppression they are suffering from currently right now, and belief that if it's going to be done, we have to do it right now. A lot of those times that those philosophies break down along age lines, but not always. And so it's about young people finding the allies who are willing to do the training and political education and stand out of their way and older folks, older generations of folks stepping back into a framing of holding containers, of protecting young people. There is a chapter in the book about Detroit and the Northwestern High School riots. And that chapter was so -- it was really interesting to me as someone who grew up in public schools for the most part. And, you know, school fights were just, they just what they were. But in Detroit and at Northwestern High School, a race riot broke out between high schoolers backwards and forwards, and it really pushed the civil rights community and Detroit to have to make a decision. Are we going to talk down to our young people and say, Look at your actions, don't give them something to hang their hat on, don't make them angry. Or are we going to support them in this fight that they're having that young people, when you talk to them, are tying back to racism and discrimination in housing and schools and employment, etc. through, I believe in Detroit, it was the it had to be the NAACP Youth Council, but also through other youth orgs as well. And young people created this cross city Assembly called the Youth Assembly to address the issues and to continue tying them back to all of these other issues and invited adult speakers to help build their political analysis of what was happening across the city and tie it back to housing and education, and so again, it was about young people being given the space, the opportunity, the political container and the protection from older generations to know that they were with them in the fight and taking the advice and stories and histories that the older generations were giving them and applying them to the context of today, and not just shunning them out and saying, OK, your time is over. And so it truly was. And the generational piece and you see that intergenerational piece throughout the book, throughout the essays and the book, particularly around the national organizations who are fighting with the local chapters, who were in fighting with the youth councils and the youth chapters, but also in the support, the support that folks were giving young folks and the space that they were giving them to act.

46:19 **Monica:** Yeah. And so this book highlights how the narrative that we know about, you know, Freedom Summer is full of these contradictions and erasures right now and uplifts the on the ground work that really was foundational to the, you know, the winds that we are familiar with, right, that you just spoke to. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about why it's important for us today to study movements on such a hyper local level.

46:50 **Christian:** Yeah, I think it's important for us today to study movements on such a hyper local level because if we are looking at movements from a place of study, from a place of political education, from a place of what can we learn from this and how can we apply it to what we're doing today? We have to understand the nitty gritty, the tension, the clusterfuck, sometimes the different relationships. The interplay is to actually get those lessons. I don't know how we get the lessons of what we can apply now. Without that level of study, we can trick ourselves and miss apply certain tactics and strategies when we don't fully understand the context in which they were happening. And we can think that we can use certain tools and certain arenas when we look at things from a glazed over or a bird's eye view. But when we dig deeper into the nitty gritty, we actually learn what it takes and we can figure out if we can apply those things to our current situations when we do that. Freedom Summer is such a beautiful example because you think about this influx of people coming from around the country to a place they were not from to do this work, right? And rarely are folks talking about the folks who are already there, and what needed to happen in order for freedom summer to be any form of success, no matter how much you measure it. The folks there had to be able to support that amount of effort without that support. It flounders without the folks on the ground who were opening their doors, who are opening their homes, who were feeding folks, sheltering folks, moving folks who had the relationships that they needed to pivot around certain situations and to keep folks away from harm. Without those folks, you wouldn't have had what Freedom Summer was. Without those folks being willing to risk themselves, because at the end of the day, everyone else is going home and the violence that those folks are living with, they continue to be exposed to, even more so when they put their necks on the line out for people who are going home. Without those folks willing to do that and almost to their own, you know, not to their own detriment, but with a certain level of agency where they can see that them participating in this work, the support work, actually benefits them in the long run without them being able to make those connections. There's no reason for them to have taken up that work. And so I think it's particularly important to think about the interests of the groups on the ground and why they would allow folks to come in. So often the narrative is backwards and thinking that folks who do national work have any control over what local folks are going to do. And so often people are turning to these national organizations and sometimes national organizations buy into it that you can dictate a movement that's happening in so many different locations across the country that the words that you say are not just impactful, but that people are just supposed to take up and listen to it. And that is this book uproots that, we need to study the local because we need to figure out what opens up people to change, to shift, to act, to move, what actually gets people from the place of being

upset, hurt, confused, frustrated, dejected. What gets them from that place to one of action? And the national story does not tell us that, the local stories, the ones that are rooted in relationships, the ones that are about neighbors talking to each other, the ones that are about figuring out what are the issues facing this location in particular today right now? And how do we tie that to the greater story of power and oppression? That's the piece that tells us whether or not it'll work here and should inform our theories of why.

51:15 **Page:** Going back to how you started this conversation by talking about how the book defines local people, and I will be thinking and journaling about that for a long time. I think it was a really helpful definition, and I think about how so often now people are fighting for these identities of organizer and how the difference between activist, leader, organizer, they're all just compressed into this one like, how many followers do you have and how much influence do you have, is a lot of times what I feel like folks are fighting over. And it feels so important at this reframe of just like, what does it mean to be a local person that has accountability to your place and your neighbors? Maybe this isn't something that the book goes into, but just, you know, looking at a place like Chicago, which has an identity, is a place, right, that shares the geography. But even within Chicago, there is huge differences. And I'm thinking about, you know, if you are -- if you don't work and live in Chicago, you might not know about the tensions that exist between not just like the north side and everywhere else, where there's a predominance of like white folks and affluence, but just the West Side and the South Side. And so, and how you know, how organizing gets erased, the organizing of the West Side so easily and often gets erased. And I think it's for reasons that I think, what you were just saying brings up, and how it is when we focus on looking at local people and the relationships amongst people and that that is the site of organizing and the work of organizing. How does that -- what does that say and what can you say about the West Side and how amazing it is and how it is the shit and all of the things that I just want you to just have space to talk about?

53:01 **Christian:** [*laughs*] Yeah. Well, the West Side is. Amazing, it is the shit. It is home. So I feel like I'm going to have to back up a little bit and just explain my lineage a little bit more because it's -- I don't know, it just, how I understand the West Side is based off of my lineage. So, um, I think it's important to start there, which is something that I think, you know, kind of gets erased that people bring themselves into their work. They bring themselves into the stories, they bring themselves into how they organize and their lineage and who they are and where they come from, are the glasses through which they see their actions and see the world, which is something that I think again, plugging this book, it does a really good job of explaining to you who a lot of people are and how they got to where they were, right? My family, both sides of my family, come from Mississippi, the sunflower area to be specific, and came up to Chicago through the second wave of the Great Migration and started off on the south side and as a lot of Black folks coming through Great Migration did and then migrated west. I grew up predominantly on the west side, was a product of the bussing program that was trying to

integrate the schools better, where they had Black children taking multiple tests to get into gifted programs on the West Side and on the North Side and then bussing us there when we did. And then eventually my folks moved us out of the West Side to Maywood, which is a predominantly Black suburb on the West Side, so that I could go to high school there. And I say that so that folks who are from Chicago listening to this, no, I'm not claiming a Chicago high school. I understand that is pivotal to a lot of folks, rightfully so. What high school you went to is important, but I went to high school in the suburbs and then I'm moseying myself right back onto the west side of Chicago because it was in my blood. My family is super religious, Christian family, or at least I grew up that way, organizing in the churches. And there was really no distinction between the West suburbs and the outer ring of Chicago on the West Side. There were churches on every corner, Black Baptist churches that really contributed to my radicalization because of how much the focus was on care for people and how many social activities we did to take care of folks, whether it was door knocking to make sure that the elders weren't dying in heat or providing food and clothing through kitchens and meals and things like that, or just getting involved in Chicago politics because that's what the preachers did on the West Side and understanding that in order to truly take care of folks, you needed to understand the politics. It is important to recognize, at least on the West Side of Chicago, that churches were locale for organizing and that there was no real distinction between the religious myth of the place and the politics in which we were engaging it, and it was one of the first places that taught me the importance of the relationships that you build, that it's very difficult to move people in a direction or to accomplish things without having those relationships, without being able to walk up to someone and say, OK, I understand that we disagree about this thing, but you're going to have to be around me. So we're just going to keep talking. There is no running away from each other. We are in community with one another. And so because we know we are in constant community with one another, we have to approach each other a bit more carefully. And the conversations that we have with each other are better suited when there is that built respect and trust of folks. And really, folks are not thinking about you if you're not showing up for them in ways that are tangible. And it's very difficult to build the relationship with folks when you are only showing up when you want something. Nobody likes that in friendships, in love, or in organizing. If you just show up when you want something, you're going to get nowhere. And so because the West Side can be a little bit insular, it's even more important to have those relationships and to understand that folks are rooted and grounded in how to make this existence more than bearable for the entire community. How do we actualize our power? How do we make it happen for ourselves because no one else is thinking about that. And it's a different style of organizing, one that is rooted in this idea that a lot of the major reductions that happen. That can happen in movement spaces aren't going to work here. It's not useful to have one level of analysis. It's not useful to just call something racist or classist or sexist. It's not -- the labels don't get as far in terms of moving people. The question is about what does this actually look like in practice? How does this actually inform my life? How are the theories you're talking to me about actually change and mold and shape my very existence today? And how is my use of them

something that can help me take on that power and shape my world today? On the West Side, growing up on it for me, I learned that the importance of reading theory, the importance of grounding your language and your words, the importance of making things tangible for folks in order to get them to a place of engagement. And it is something in my travels that I've had a hard time seeing elsewhere. This hyper focus on relationships and building through them, and almost to the exclusion of any other tactic.

59:21 **Monica:** So this book just sounds amazing. I cannot wait to read it. I do want to ask, were you left with any lingering questions or is there anything that you wish the book would have gotten deeper into?

59:32 **Christian:** Yeah. I mean, there's a ton of questions because every chapter is a snapshot of the locale, of the story that they're trying to tell. I mean, big ups, the writers of each chapter, it had to be difficult to distill each movement into 20 pages. And something that they made clear to folks was that these movements are long as fuck, like you may be seeing the flash in the pan, you may be seeing the thing that hits the news, but folks have been grinding on one issue for 20 to 30 years. You know, it's the work of building relationships, of keeping pressure, of supporting and sustaining folks as they continue to push pressure that shows up in these books. But I really struggled in reading it and even reviewing it for talking with y'all today, something that is kind of a mind fuck for those of us in movement spaces is this idea that it's the process, right? It's not just the supported wins, whatever they might be. It's not just, did the demand that they make, was that met? Is not just that question. It is really a book about process and I struggled with, OK, so how are we defining whether this was successful or not? And then I kept interrogating myself about, does that matter? It doesn't matter if it was successful or whatever success is. What does matter here? You know, what is it that should motivate you from reading this book? It really just carries home how hard it is, how hard the work is, how it's a life commitment. And I think I struggled with what the point of doing that was. And if I wasn't in this work myself, I would probably have found this difficult to read in terms of trying to figure out why are folks working so fucking hard? And I think it could have done a better job of giving people that why.

1:01:32 **Page:** That's hitting me in the soul because we just keep losing. We're in a moment of, you know, we just had a massive uprising at a scale that, I don't know anyone that was like, Yeah, I saw this coming and expected this in my lifetime. And yet what -- what did we win? You know, like, and what I can -- I can -- off the top of my hand with so many things and people that we've lost that you can't get back, you know? And so I have a very tricky relationship with hope and I struggle. There's a quote that you shared with me before. I think it's that Octavia Butler quote about I'm a pessimist if I'm not careful. Yeah. So I don't want to keep us there, but that's where my, my soul just went. I know we're nearing the end, and when I was reading about this book, I found this quote that was pulled out in another article, and I'm just going to read it briefly. It says "*If you don't know that it was regular folks who did the movement, then people*

don't know that they can do it again. So if people keep saying to you that you need to be like Dr. King to effect change, then you don't know that it was folks like you who did it." And I love that quote. I think it speaks to a lot of things you've already looked it up and already said, but just another space for you to say, you know, why should regular folks who aren't organizers, who are organizing, whatever you call yourself, why should they read this book?

1:02:53 Christian: Oh my God. The labels can be so frustrating sometimes. In particular, this organizer, activist, advocate dichotomy. I know the ways in which we love. We love. To bring those labels to the forefront, to explain the different ways that people can contribute to a movement and how, you know, it's all important and et cetera, and it's true. But I think that they can be alienating to folks in their everyday lives who say, I'm not an organizer. I'm not an activist. I haven't read all of the books. I haven't studied. I haven't heard all the podcasts. I haven't experienced all of the things. And I think that this book really does a good job. And one of the reasons that people should read it, is that it does such a good job of telling you that you can move where you stand, you can act from where you are. You can address the issues that are currently facing your life in really concrete ways, and you can't do it alone, but you can do it with the people around you who are your neighbors, and you can start with conversations. You can start with learning a little bit more, or you can just start with moving. Like at the end of the day, and you know, maybe not everyone should trust their gut because your gut is based off socialization and if you're, you know, embedded in these different systems of oppression, you probably want to interrogate yourself a little bit more, but at the end of the day, when you get to a moment of clarity and you just say *This is fucking wrong, this is wrong. This is just wrong.* You can do something about it. And at the end of the day, doing something about it, you being able to do something about it can be as simple as getting together with your neighbors and talking about potential solutions and putting them into action. And you learn so much along the way. You learned so much along the way. And it's about coming back to those moments of learning and saying, OK, what worked? What didn't work? Why? What is this rooted in? What are these systems and you moving and acting will encourage you, should encourage you to learn, should encourage you to read, to talk to folks, to go talk about the elders experience, to figure out what other people are experiencing. It should propel you forward to know that you yourself can do something. Whether it's a small thing, whether it's a big thing, it is something and you don't need the full backing of the movement behind you to do it.

1:05:41 Monica: Well, thank you so much, Christian. Also on that tip of labels, I would really love to get rid of the label activist, I hate. I hate that label. I hate to use it. I'm so sorry everyone who loves it. But sometimes when I get interviewed for things, I'm like, Why did you just call me an activist? That's so weird. But uh, but yes, I love everything you said about especially how you can move where you stand, act to where you are. I love that and I hope that people will hear that and will understand that this work that we're doing isn't going -- especially for new folks that have emerged in this in this year and this moment, that this work is endless and this work is a

daily practice at how we get free together. And not only, you know, like you said earlier, the when, but like the process of how we get free. So thank you so much for talking with us again, for folks listening. This book is called *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movement in America*, and we like to close each episode out with our guests reading a favorite quote or passage from the book. So take it away, Christian.

1:07:01 **Christian:** OK, I cheated. I'm combining three sections back to back. "We use the term local people broadly, but not loosely. For our purposes, local doesn't mean provincial. It is not meant to contrast people who struggle with local issues, with those who took on national or international matters. Indeed, community activists often saw the national import behind the local issues they face and linked their immediate struggles with national and international concerns. By local people, we mean a political orientation, a sense of accountability, and an ethical commitment to the community. As such, local people were those who struggled with and came out of and were connected to the grassroots. Local activists came to see their struggle as national and international, that the problems they faced often affected Black communities across the nation and the world, as federal, that these injustices demanded federal attention and redress as local, that real political change could only come at the ground level and as an autonomous that Black people must provide solutions and avenues for liberation and self-determination within the Black community themselves. They reveal that the local is where the national and international are located. That national events and policy outcomes are driven by local movements and grassroots people, and that often national mobilizations and even national organizations were created as a way to aid the local front."

1:08:57 **Page:** Thanks so much for listening to another episode of the Lit review podcast, where we interview people we love and respect about books to help grow our movement. We are your co-host, 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. Want to 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 shout out on Twitter or Instagram. Our handle is [@Lit ReviewChi](https://www.instagram.com/Lit_ReviewChi). Financial support for the production of this podcast is thanks to our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a Patreon at [Patreon.com/The Lit review](https://www.patreon.com/TheLitreview). Keep reading!