

SPEAKERS

Kelly Lloyd, Jessica Gaynelle Moss

[00:00:00] **KL:** You're listening to This Thing We Call Art, a podcast about how, "We have to be aware of us reaching that point before we reach that point in these [Predominantly White Institutions], because that is not safe for us. It's not safe for them. It is not healthy for us. And once you've reached that point, it's like, there's no return. So, it's like that care... um, we have to acknowledge it in ourselves, but also each other. Because when we see one another going down that path, you gotta, like, catch 'em real quick before they have nothing left. You know what I mean? Like we gotta get to each other first. Because they will just suck you dry."

I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 15th of September 2021 with Jessica Gaynelle Moss.

Jessica Gaynelle Moss (b. 1987) is an artist, curator, custodian of Black art and creator of platforms and spaces that invest in and support Black artists. Melding her dedication to making art, supporting artists and developing more equitable and just policies, Jessica's creative practice and projects transcend any one medium, discipline or field, coalescing fine art with real estate development, institution-building and philanthropy. Beyond that she runs her own arts consultancy, curates exhibitions and performances, regularly leads art talks and studio critiques, serves on the leadership boards of various cultural entities, and is a frequent speaker on panels on the subjects of artist support, advocacy and stewardship. Jessica received a bachelors in Fine Art from Carnegie Mellon University in

2009; a masters in Arts Administration, Policy and Management from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (or S.A.I.C.) in 2015; and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in 2018.

I met Jessica at some point when we were both in Graduate School at S.A.I.C., maybe around 2013? And then we've been bringing each other into one another's projects since. I spoke with Jessica over Zoom while we were both at home. The audio quality for this season is varied, so remember that the transcripts for all these conversations are available on the project's website thisthingwecallart.com.

Our conversation was 2 hours and 15 minutes-long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in at the beginning ...

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[00:03:01] **KL:** It's funny how, and it seems like you do a lot, I mean, it seems like you do so many things that are public facing, but like, how do you [PAUSE] like have compassion for your audience knowing that like, even if they are interested and are a part of the conversation you're trying to have, like, they may just not show up. For, you know, capacity reasons, which I feel like you can deal with in terms of trying to think through your own accessibility, but also sometimes just for absolutely no reason at all. Maybe they're just like on another thing doing their thing, you know?

[00:03:41] **JGM:** I mean, totally. And in working in and with communities, this is often what happens, right? You meet folks where they are, and you can't ask people to always come to you. That's just, we know that's flawed, right? I think the huge, um, kind of light bulb moment that a lot of people have in working with and in communities is like that realization like, oh, people aren't gonna always come to my party, you know?

And I think there are some moments of learning around that. If you have your party consistently people will come to it eventually, you

know. And we've seen that with some programs, um, like my space in Charlotte, the artist residency that's, it's called *The Roll Up*. Um, and we invite artists to stay for about a year, uh, six months to a year, we pay them 15 to \$30,000 supply material, budget, a car, food, and meal stipend, um, you know, the whole gamut.

Uh, and we don't ask them to do programming, but it's inevitable, you know, the folks who we invite, uh, to participate as residents already have some kind of like deep dedication to Black community as a part of their practice. And, um, it's kind of like one of the, um, metrics in which we consider when inviting artists to the program.

Like, do you have a commitment to your community and is it actually visible? Like, is it a part of your practice and not just a part of your performance? You know, um, and for example, we had a resident Shan Wallace in 2019 from Baltimore, Maryland, and Shan set up every, um, the last Monday of every month at the public library to do free portraits.

And in the beginning, you know, folks who are just in the library kind of benefited from the program. And then the next month, you know, kind of doubled in, in scale. And then as the months continued, there were like lines of people waiting to get their photographs taken. And I think it was that consistency. Like we know the last Monday of every month, Shannon will be there, it'll be free program, The whole, the whole family can participate. It's at the library where you're probably already, you know? Um, and so we saw some success in that program. But also, I was just actually talking to my dad about this, he's in a fraternity he's Omega Psi Phi, and he was explaining the difference between, um, men and members, which is problematic.

But, uh, [LAUGHS] how he was defining this distinction was that there are, um, uh, there is more power in eight men than there are in 800 members. And what I deduce from that is, you know, often in programming that we do as a part of our work, Kelly, um, you never know who's gonna show up. And sometimes it can be five people and sometimes it can be 500 people, but I'd so much rather have five

engaged people participate rather than have an audience of 500 people who are, um, you know, on their phone or disassociation and somewhere else, or like thinking about, you know, other things, not being really present, not being really, um, a part of the experience.

And so, That was, like, maybe a dad nugget that he just dropped off this morning. That's been kind of relevant already. [LAUGHS]

[00:07:09] **KL:** Yeah, I've been thinking about that, you know, also just like your insistent, you know, um, cultivation of, of, you know, Black spaces, um, as I think you, you said on the website, you know, what did something like trigger that? Or like was there, or like is, when you know you on your website talk about 2007, Pittsburgh, the creation of that space. You know, how, how are you thinking about kind of this, the spaces that you're attempting to create within the art world that potentially could be more supportive of, you know, in this, in this case, you know, Black people, Black women, Black, you know, women-mothers...

[00:08:02] **JGM:** I think like, um, what is this *Field of Dreams*? Kevin Costner, "if you build it, they will come" like *Wayne's World*, you know, like this? [LAUGHS] Uh, I think that's a part of it, but really that's a joke. Um, I was at S.A.I.C., I don't know, maybe it was like first year and our classes were small within the program. It's like maybe six students. Um, and. I, I was on the same ship that I'm on now, you know, like how can we get free?

And I remember one of my colleagues in the class who identified as Latina, um, asked me why I was advocating so much for Black people and not for people of color in general. That the energy and the vigor, um, that I was placing on this particular group could benefit, uh, arguably like the entire population, right?

Which I received as, um, constructive. And an opportunity to reflect on before, um, responding. Like "Yeah, that's a good point. Um, and I hear you. But I am not you and I don't understand your fight, you know, like I stand next to you. I hope that we can stand next to, to each

other and be accomplices in this work. Um, but I can never speak from your perspective. I can only speak from my own."

And it took me so long to get that language and that clarity. That I can be a support, but I have to be, uh, as an organization, I have to be so clear about my mission, you know? And my mission is about us getting free. And I have to constantly stay focused on reaching that destination.

And in doing that work, it has also become apparent that nobody else is gonna do it, but us, for us, it, it has to be us doing it. And all of the other thing-, you know, like I believe in intersectionality, right? Like all of these things can exist at once. It's a yes, and. But what is incredibly, what I found incredibly important throughout this journey is, um, being in community like having that tribe of, um, like-mindedness? Like, um, some kind of cultural understanding, right? Like a competency? Um, like, uh, this, this kind of universality, you know, like there are things that immediately connect us, Kelly, even though we are so different. Um, and it is so awesome being in a space where you feel that connection with someone and it is just inherent and often doesn't even need to be articulating. You just feel it, you know? And there are moments where I'd be in spaces like that, and I could feel that and it, and it, it just, it became, so, um, it just illuminated that that was unique. And that I didn't have that in every space. And I saw my peers also in those shared spaces, having that same realization and that power that it, that we, that our energies felt when we could have these shared spaces that felt so safe, um, and were ours. And we could make them up. That felt like it was moving along in that direction of finally reaching this, uh, step towards that freedom. That, um, seems to be something that we are all craving. It looks different, but we all know that it's this way. [LAUGHS] and so, um, yeah, the power that, and the energy that just vibrated in, in being in some of those spaces felt just really inspiring. And it became so much more urgent to have those spaces and an acknowledgement that, you know, none of, no one of us are ever doing this work in creating these spaces alone.

This, the space is built based on the people who inhabit the space. It, it's the people always, not even necessarily the physical space. And so again like that importance of the tribe, you know, for us to gather. And this is not also like, you know, it's not, it's not new. You realize that the, those spaces are often just like inherently Blackness, right? Like I think about my mom's kitchen. Which is a gathering space and look so different. It can be so... it is a transformative space. Um, but it is a community gathering space, right? And I'm sure that you have had something very similar in your life. Uh, that feels like a space like that. You know, uh, it's like gathering around art, gathering around food, gathering around conversation, right? Like these are things that Black people just do and have done historically. And there's a reason why we continue to, to center those spaces and to need those spaces. And those spaces are such a threat to whiteness, um, that, that also underscores the urgency of why it is so necessary to continue to reproduce more and more of those spaces, but also protect the ones that do exist.

[00:14:33] **KL:** Yeah. [WHOOA] I'm, um, I'm, like currently [LAUGHS], I've been thinking about this a lot... And so, I'm just wondering about your, like, you know, you starting these organizations, you know, um, versus you working for like, you know, Rebuild or working for, you were talking about the Pittsburgh Foundation, like, what does it mean to kind of have your own things, build your own things in the way that you mean to build them, you know? (JGM: yeah) Versus tying yourself to other people's projects and other people's institutions.

[00:15:17] **JGM:** I appreciate this question. It's a challenge. Um, have you seen *Candyman*?

[00:15:26] **KL:** Oh my God. So, the problem is, is that I know I need to see it. I know I need to see it, but I, um, can't deal with scary movies.

[00:15:35] **JGM:** It's like, you do need to see it, but yes, it is scary. [LAUGHS] And I also have been, there's been a couple of incidents where I've said this to somebody like, "Have you seen the movie?" And they're like, "What?" And I've had to say it twice and I'm like, "You have to hear me this time, cause I'm not gonna say it again. I'm not taking any chances." Like, I'm too scared [LAUGHS] I'm - but anyway, I'm gonna say something about the movie, but it's not a spoiler. You know, so many of our homies from Chicago have work in the movie and that so much of the movie is about the art world, right? Like that's not giving anything away. Um, I went to go see it this past week with a bunch of colleagues who a) have work in the sh- in the movie or b) work in the art world.

And there were a number of... jokes, I guess, I don't know, like landings in the movie that felt like they were for us. And, um, it might have, might have hit somebody different if they didn't work in this field. And one of them was a joke that was made (and again, this is not giving anything away) but there was a joke that was made in the movie where it talked about a curator working *inside* of an institution to advocate for change. And everyone in the theater laughed. [LAUGHS] Like, it was like a universal laugh and it kind of, you know, it took me aback for a second because it was like, oh, this is just such an understanding that this thing that we say that we're constantly doing and advocating for and try, you know, like reaching for and trying to work for, um, like down to the bones, right. Uh, is impossible so much that we are laughing about it in this horror movie that just came out right. Like that, that was like a moment that I've been processing. Like, wow, the audience laughed at that, you know? Because this is an argument that I make all the time, like, I do the work within these institutions. Um, and it is, uh, a slight needle shift it feels like. Every time. And is that slight needle shift enough? Is it worth it? I mean, it depends on what it is. These are questions that, that I think we have to ask with each project, right? With each, proposal that comes across our desk that asks for our time and labor. How much of myself am I willing to give to this work for just the slightest move, the slightest shift of a needle, you know?

I think in some way, um... I think in some way it's always worth it. Because they're gonna keep whiting no matter what, so at least we can make it a little bit spicy for a little bit, right? Um, in like the slightest way. Because there will be another Kelly that comes to Oxford, and we don't want that Kelly to have the same exact experience, right? And so, it's often like doing the, that slight... it's worth that slight shift for future us, right? Like this is, um, a belief. This is a school of thought. But also fuck them! Because it's apparent that y'all don't want me here. And, and that is, and I hear- it's heard, right? It's like the Trump sign on your lawn. "Heard that! Thank you for letting me know." And now that I know it's clear and it's cool, cause I'd rather know. I'd rather see the white hood and know upfront that that's what it is that's happening here than have to guess. Or for you to act like a white lib and then you got the hood in your closet. Just let me know front [PAUSE] and fuck you! And I'm just gonna do my thing over year, right? Like I go back and forth. Um, and I don't think it's one. I think we have to diversify. But it's about you and how much you're willing... Like, you know, we have to pay to play. "So how much are you willing to pay to do this?"

And I also think it's okay for us to change our mind. Like you can be in it and then be like, "Oh, that's enough." And then you can always step out, you know? But holding true to your principles and your own integrity, um, and your worth, because you and your energy and your time are worth. And you know, Kelly, I'm sure you've had experiences when you've been operating in a P.W.I. [Predominantly White Institution] and you're like, your energy is just like a vampire has just depleted everything, right? Like you have nothing left to give. And we don't wanna be that.

I have a girlfriend who, um, parties. And I- she parties. And there was one time, only one time where like, we were at a party, and I looked at her and she was on the couch, and she just like... it was as if everything had been sucked out of her. And I was like, "You cool?" and she was like, she looked at me and I'll never forget this look, and she was like, "I have nothing left." And I was like, "Let's go home." And we went home. We have to be aware of us reaching that point before we

reach that point in these spaces, because that is not safe for us. It's not safe for them. It is not healthy for us.

And once you've reached that point, it's like, there's no return. So, it's like that care, um, we have to acknowledge it in ourselves, but also each other, because when we see one another going down that path, you gotta, like, catch 'em real quick before they have nothing left. You know what I mean? Like we gotta get to each other *first*. Because they will just suck you dry.

And, and that is, and feel no remorse and no empathy. They will just let you do it to yourself. So, we gotta, I really do believe that we gotta catch each other and that's why we gotta see each other, you know?

[00:22:11] **KL:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So real. Um, you were talking about, right, like, what does it mean to have residents that like have as a part of their art practice, this, this participatory gene or something like that. (JGM: yeah) You know, this like, um, feeling of responsibility over their community and willingness to take on that responsibility as a joy. And how did that translate to like us getting leaned on? And like, what does that kind of mean to, like, watch the institution suck us dry because we're the ones that show up for the conversations that need to be had?

And I think I'm especially interested in that in terms of like consistency and stewardship. You know, this consistency that you're talking about in terms of like your, um, you know, artist-in-residence, like, you know, she was there like that one day a month, you know? And she was able to kind of create a community, you know, out of the consistency that she provided, as well as her, you know, um, art. Um, and then like the stewardship that is also required over long periods of time, which I wanna talk to you about in terms of, you know, *The Roll Up*, [and] *Sybil's Shrine*, and, um, what that means to start these projects that you have to steward? You know, and what do you do when you have that moment where you're like, "You know what, I'm out. Like, I just have to, to, like, rewind a little bit, you know, take a pause." Like... (JGM: yeah) and how do you not compromise this kind

of, you know, consistency in stewardship? Like, um, and how do you also not compromise, um, the ability to participate in conversations that you care about, um, by deciding to take care of yourself?

[00:24:18] **JGM:** Hmm. That was a lot of, um, things to touch on. Let's see. Um... yeah, I think, people not projects always. Like that is the pillar that all of it is built on. Like that is the one. It's people. And I feel like across the sector, we often forget that, and we forget the value of the artists. It's so much tied to the artist's labor and like what the artist can produce. And I'm so less interested in that. I really have had so many folks invest in me and like really make a point to check on me and help me and guide me, uh, and mentor me that I see so much value in that.

[00:25:27] **KL:** Mmm...

[00:25:27] **JGM:** And I know that, uh, like without their shoulders, that I would not be, I would not have access to so many of the things that I feel like I have access to. And therefore, I feel like this responsibility to steward, um, that next generation of makers and thinkers, because what has been done for me. It's like a responsibility.

Um, and so much of the work, so much of these projects are keeping that in mind. How, how do we make- I mean, and being a mom now is a whole other part of that, right? Like I'm just constantly thinking about how it can be better for her, in, in every situation. Or how I can make, right- like moulding a, a mind it's crazy. How I can prepare her, better prepare her for situations that I know that she will come in contact with that will not be pleasant. Um, how can I best prepare her, you know? How can I make sure that the same issues that, like I just said, Kelly is having now, future Kelly doesn't have later, right? Like this is the whole thing I think about how, um, if, if I would have seen... [PAUSE] You know, why I like Tocarra so much? Tocarra Mallard at SAIC. Because I came into SAIC, and my cohort was lit with Black women. There were four of us out of like 12. Which was remarkable. I was like, "Oh, okay. We in here." But I saw Tocarra and Tocarra was

the year before me. And I was like, "Okay, I feel safer." It's like when I get on a public transit, like a bus and there's a Black lady bus driver, I'm like, "Hm, I'm safe." [LAUGHS] Like, just, there's, uh, I feel safe around Black women, and, um, I want to make other Black women also have that feeling. That we got each other and that when we see each other, there's, uh, a certain level of care that is here between us.

And, um, I think that's why we do the work. And I think sometimes it can be really small Kelly, like thinking about the question that you just asked too. Like, uh, how can I utilize this consultant role that I'm gonna be in for three months to hire three Black women? Um, if I'm in a situation and I know somebody is looking for a, a particular painting that is of this scale, how can I introduce them to three Black painters who they wouldn't have known before? You know, like it could be small. Um, but it is still happening, you know? Um, somebody's looking for a caterer, let's hire a Black vendor. You know, like these types of things that are, um, gestures... but can ultimately lead to something much larger. Um, or evolve.

I was just doing this project with, um, the City of Pittsburgh. And there, this is so tangential, and I don't even wanna talk about it, [LAUGHS] but they're, um, reinstalling this piece of artwork. Uh, public art that is in their permanent collection that is a symbol of hate for a lot of people, because it was previously installed in a neighborhood that was in transition, um, that displaced hundreds and hundreds of Black people and Black families and is made by this white artist (this isn't enough about it). Um, and, uh, part of my role is to talk to Black artists about it. And I was like, "This is it. Let's ask them for \$20,000 to do one piece in response- like, let's come up with ideas. How can we, how can we use the position that we're in to leverage? What, what we want, what our needs are, what our goals are. Um, let's hear it."

And I came to the city. I'm like, this is what they're probably gonna ask or be prepared, da, da, da. Well, then we get down the line with the artists and they're like, "We're mad." And I'm like, "I know we're mad, but like, what are we gonna do about it?" And like, we wanna be mad and I'm like, that's, that is your act of resistance and I respect it.

And if you wanna, like, you know, there are again, so many ways to play this. If you don't want this white money, that's totally fine. But this white money is on the table, and you could take it if you want it. Just kind of have to have an ask. I think that's how we often operate in these white spaces Kelly. If we go to Oxford and we're like, "Look, we'll do that, but pay us." Hmm. They might pay you but just ask! I feel like so many people drop or fumble a bag because they don't have a real ask. And sometimes your ask could be like, "I don't want you to be here. I just want you to get me the money." That, you know, just like have an ask, be really real. Think about what it is that you want. It's just a means to an end. But also, are you willing to do whatever it is that they're gonna ask you to do to take that?

There have been events that we've had at *The Roll Up* before that is... *The Roll Up* is a Black space. It is Black artists that come in, it is Black neighbors, we're in a predominantly and historically Black community, it is Black. Um, and we advertise events on our social media and not all of our followers are Black, but some white people show up to our events and we politely tell them that this is not for them. Um, and some people, you know, people receive it in different ways.

There have been moments where we've had funders before come to events because they wanna see, and we tell them that they're not welcome. Um, and some receive it, and some ask questions. And I'm also so happy to answer your questions, um, and point you to a public event. Maybe that's happening at the library downtown or uptown that you can come to in a week. But this is not for you. And I'll be really clear about that.

Um, I think that I also say that publicly in an effort to empower my team. So that when I'm not at events or not at spaces, or it's not a Roll Up thing, or it's not a, one of our, or they're in their own world, that they also know that they can do that. Um, that they can feel power in agency and claiming what is theirs, and that can be time or space.

Um, but it, that empowerment I think is really key. And that goes to us, uh, that visibility of ourselves that I was alluding to earlier, like

why that is so important. Cause we also learn how to navigate in these spaces.

And so, I think that a huge part also in us doing this work in these white spaces is so that we can know that we are not alone in these feel-, like we are not alone. And the feelings that we're feeling are not unique to us, that they are in- intentionally built into these structures and these systems to make us feel this way and to make us want to fold and not participate so that they can continue to be [PAUSE] uh, void of us. And our voices.

[00:33:36] **KL:** I was looking at your CV and it seems like what? You've gotten five grants in 2021? Like what is, how, (JGM: ... is that right?) yeah, how did you do this? Can you teach me a class on this? Like I need to know this information.

[00:33:54] **JGM:** No, you already know it. Wow. You're right. I did. I've done well this year, um, with grant writing. But the thing about it, Kelly is once you do it right once, and you get a big one, then you just pull the language. It's so much easier. Once you get a big one. And once you get a big one too, it like legitimizes it to everyone else that you're worth investing in. This the philan- the, like philanthropy is just fucked. It really is. And it is like a popularity contest. And, um, whatever, we could talk about that later, your question was about, how do you get money?

Um, what my job has been for maybe the past five years is that every day I work on three grants. This doesn't mean that I'm applying to three new ones every day. This just means I'm dedicating three in the queue at all times. So as soon as one goes out, literally another one comes in. And so, if you imagine I do this every day. Um, I get more rejection letters than I think like a, a normal person should [LAUGHS] like have to be confronted with, like, it is constantly, um, letters of rejection in my inbox, up in my phone, like it is just a part of it. And it is not personal, right? It's not about me. It is maybe a superpower to be in that position and know that I'm not taking any of these personally. It's not about me. It's just that I'm not using the

specific dialect that this person wants to hear me speak in. So really, it's about how can I figure out what your language is? So, I can say it in your language. And that is often unique to the funder. But once you get it and it clicks and sometimes it really feels like you're saying the same thing, but you really just have to, like, they maybe said something just differently. You're like, "What if we had a retreat for Black moms?" And they're like, "Or it could be an event that supports Black mothers." And you're like, "Yeah, an event that supports Black mothers."

You know, like it, um, you- once you learn that, then it just becomes so much easier. And, and the relationship is also key, right? Like often with these big funders, you have a program officer or something. And the program officers don't always stay with the foundations, but they often stay within philanthropy. And when you've had a good working relationship, those relationships stick. Um, and there could be future opportunities regardless of what foundation they might be with, you know? So, I always think that it's important to continue those relationships and stay in contact with your funders.

Um, I also think that, uh, advice for funding is know how to talk about your projects in like: a cute way; in like a little bit longer way; in like a way that's like digestible to the layman; in a way that could say include all of the buzz- you know, like how are the diff- know how to say your thing in all of the different languages too. So that depending on whom you're speaking to, you can tailor it, right. Um, that's really key.

And, uh, I think maybe what Grad School taught us- me, is how to talk about yourself, cause you're just constantly talking about yourself the whole time. Like every class you have to introduce yourself and like what you're in- you know, did you find? That is just, I feel like a part of it. And it felt like when I graduated, I was so prepared to be in a space and, and um, very, um, succinctly talk about who I am and my work. And that feels like a real superpower. Because you see a lot of people really struggle with, you know, like, "Let's build, I got these ideas", you know? And yes, and, um, it is so different when somebody comes to you with a very clear ask. And um, so I encourage people to

have a clear ask about what they're doing and know how to talk about their work. Um um, yeah, that's maybe some good funding advice. Also, I think. Okay. Here's, here's the last one. This is a good one. Um, I- as someone who has worked in philanthropy and sat at the other side of the table, I, for so long felt like, and I've had roles in development, I've had roles in fundraising and stewardship, you know, like I, I thought I could ask for money.

But when you're sitting at the other side of the table and it's your wallet, um, it, it just became so clear to me that money is really no issue. And that if you are gonna ask for 5,000, you should ask for 20,000. Um, and if you're gonna ask for 20,000, you should ask for a hundred thousand, because the way that these people think about money is just so....

Like COVID-19 happens and all of a sudden one foundation has 5 million that they're willing to contribute to the initiatives. 5 million dollars comes out overnight! And all, and all the staff is like Fu- wait! [LAUGHS] Where did this money come from?! And we're scraping in our own individual budgets, trying to, like, pull money for just like this initiative or just this in, you know, to support Black artists and they're like, "This is all the money y'all got this year, make it work. We can't wait to see the Black artists that you uplift."

COVID 19 happens: 5 million dollars? So, then it's like, oh, oh this, this bag is so big. It is so big. It is so much larger than I can even envision. And all of our hands could really be in it, but these folks are just so keen on keeping it here and hoarding it and preventing and dictating what goes where at what time. Um, and so unwilling to really deputize any of that, or really, um, um, disperse it in ways that could be really helpful, right. Um, or empowering. This is just a part of this, uh, gate keeping. And so, I have no problem, uh, asking for more money than even what you think is what you should be asking for.

Also, um, [SIGH] when I was working at the Pittsburgh Foundation, one of the things that we started as a, which is a precedent now, is that, um, each applicant for just filling out an application gets \$500 as a small grant and that threw the whole

foundation upside down. Um, and this is what I mean - slightest needle, right? Like the little, tiniest thing. 500, what do we have, like less than 200 applicants every year. It's nothing, you know? It is nothing to them. And the staff when our team was arguing that this is what, you know, like this is something that we'd like to do. Um, senior leadership at the foundation was like, "\$500, it's gonna be embarrassing. They're gonna feel disrespected if we send 'em a check for only \$500. What are... what can you even do with \$500?" Like, how much does a gallon of milk cost at the grocery store these days? [LAUGHS] You know, so outta touch, just so... it's like Kanye now, you know? Like stop trying to talk to us like, you're the people. You're so removed from the people you don't, you... you know, it's just, it's complete disconnect. Like you live in such a different reality where you don't understand the value of money... which is what your whole career is built upon, so what are you even doing, you know? And then we got all of these letters from people who were like, "\$500 - I was able to pay my rent." Like, "I paid a student loan deposit." Like "I, I was able to contribute to start the project", you know? And like this influx of letters came in. So happy to compile them into one PDF and send them directly to that senior leader who was like, "Oh my goodness. Wow. Well, you guys, you were right. My word." [LAUGHS] You know? It's like, uh, so disconnected... You know, this is a Theaster [Gates] thing. Don't be afraid to ask for money. [LAUGHS] Don't be afraid.

[00:43:01] **KL:** I mean, so important. Don't be afraid to talk about it. You know that way I can hear these really important things from you about these things... Um, so you went to school in Pittsburgh and then you left Pittsburgh and then you came back to Pittsburgh. Um, what what's going on there? Like, you know... yeah. I'm, I'm thinking a lot about place and community and... right, like where can you build the things that you wanna build? Who can you build them with? Where are they? Where do you need to be versus like, where do you want to be? Or, you know, I don't know, I've been thinking about some of those things.

[00:43:43] **JGM:** Yeah, place is fucked. I think similarly about Pittsburgh as a city with how you're feeling about Oxford. Um, this report came out into 2019 from the mayor's office and the University of Pittsburgh that released all this data that we already know. Um, Pittsburgh is literally the worst city for Black women to live in. Um, like as soon as we move away from here, our life expectancy increases, we have better access to employment, we live longer, our air quality is better, our children have better access to education. It is literally like, like the report came out and it was like, "What are y'all doing here? Clearly, this is not for you." And I think a lot of Black- in, on the table, everybody knew this information already. But when it comes back at you and when white people start saying the things [LAUGHS] that you have been feeling as fact, uh, it kind of hits different.

And, um, I think a lot of Black women receive that as, "You're right. What am I doing here? I'm out." Um, and I think a lot of Black women saw that as, "Yeah, we've been known that, and we're still working here, and we're still gonna keep doing the work." It's three generations in my family are from Pittsburgh, specifically the Hill District. Um, the Hill District is a historically Black community, uh, August Wilson, Teenie Harris, Romare Bearden, all of them came from the Hill District. And Sugar Top is where my dad's side of the family is from, its upper hill, It's like the very, it's the top, It's the very, like the whipped cream topping. And, um, Sugar Top is adjacent. All of the Hill District has very painful history. Like some- Black neighborhoods, period, no matter where your geography, have a long history of legal, racial discrimination happening to them. And like taking some land displacement, like closing up schools, like all of the, you know, like this is not one unique Black community. This is what's happening to us all across the country. And I think when that report came out and a lot of Black women left, they're like, "Yeah, this is bad here, but I'm gonna go to Atlanta, I'm gonna go to DC, I'm gonna go somewhere else... LA." Thinking that the situation will be different. [PAUSE] But this whole shit is fucked.

And no matter where you go, it's still gonna be racist. You're still gonna have to deal with bigotry. There's still gonna be prejudice placed upon you based on your gender. You know, like, it... you can't escape this no matter where you go. It is just, like, hate is just deeply woven into our society. And this is why also it is so important that if you're gonna be in a space, you carve out a space that is for you in that space.

And so, um, I think that that is mirrored in your experience as you've described in Oxford, in that it's fucked. "So, do I stay here and participate in the fuckery? Um, or do I leave where it's gonna be fucked up somewhere else?" You know, that's kind of the choice. [LAUGHS] That you're, that we're all, uh, having to operate in, um, because it doesn't get better anywhere else, you know? It is just, this is the world that we live in so use what you got to make it as good as you can. Um, use the tools that you have to create the world that you want to see, think about who and why you do the things that you are doing. And have that be like implanted on your frontal lobe to keep you focused on why and, um, what you're doing through all of the fuckery, cause it is everywhere. You're going to be, like, deeply remorseful if you think that moving to LA, you won't experience any bigotry or hate or prejudices, you know? In that, based on the imaginary geography and the borders that are placed on this country, white people might treat you differently. Ha! [LAUGHS] Ha! You are always the same to them. No matter where your physical body lands in space, you know? And I have experienced more hate and more prejudice growing up in Southern California than I have in North Carolina, you know? Um, and I think because a lot of it is I always see the hoods in North Carolina. Everybody just holds Bibles in Southern California, it's hard to know. [LAUGHS]

[00:48:50] **KL:** Rough! Ummmm, but you know, it's um... yeah, like I said, I've been thinking about place, place a lot and, you know, how do you think about place if it is the same place? Yeah. Ummm...

[00:49:08] **JGM:** I also think that the place is the people. Like I don't, you know, I, when I was at The Arts Bank, uh, in Greater Grand Crossing in Chicago... and I loved that job, that was like a dream job. And people would walk in there immediately and they, and I'd be like so excited to engage people and show off all the collections and everything that is in the space. And, "You're not from here, are you?" And I'm like, "Why do you... yeah, I mean, I- I'm from here." And then I, you know, I'm not from there. It's, it's just because it was very apparent to people that I am not from the place. You, you, you think about community and what does it mean? Um, I'm claiming that space, I work in that space. I've dedicated to that space, but, uh, people who were actually from there knew that I wasn't. And I believe in watering yourself where you're planted and blooming where you've been seeded. And it seems so important to do that work for *my* people in *my* community, in places that are important to *me*. And that's what brought me to Charlotte and what continues to bring me back to Pittsburgh. Um, it hits different when it's for your own people, you know?

[00:50:31] **KL:** Yeah. So, last question. Did we talk about what you thought we would talk about? Or do you have any questions for me? Or is there anything else you'd like to say?

[00:50:44] **JGM:** Yes. I did think we would talk about what we talked about. Um, and yeah, I have one more thing I wanna say. I have a project that, um, I'm about to start next month, where I'm converting one of the properties in the Hill. Um, that right now functions as affordable housing. I'm gonna turn it into a Black airbnb for artists. So, luxury oasis in Historic Black Community, that's the vibe. Um, all Black vendors and contractors for the rehab of this space. Um, Black architects, Black designers, and Black artists will inhabit it when it's completed in, I think about a year.

So, um, this will be a space that you can visit when you come. And, um, you know, I am creating partnerships with different art organizations in the city, so that also when they have Black artists, like the Carnegie International, for example, they can stay in this space.

Um, it's a two-unit, two-bedroom, one bathroom. Um, each one will have its own washer, dryer, uh, its own library. I've gotten some artists to donate books, so they'll have libraries that are just dedicated to them in the space. Um, so you have some insight into different Black artists and what their research is. And all of the work in the space will be, uh, by Black artists, interdisciplinary. And so, I'm really excited about this, and I think it's just like, uh, the next iteration of this work. You know, like when you're making a painting, you know, like another- it's just a continued exploration of the same subject matter. And so, I wonder how this experiment will result. Um, but I'm really excited about this next project.

[00:52:59] **KL:** It's just so important to create these safe spaces for people and then obviously, you know, to create employment opportunities to, you know, um, to see a need like, yeah, to create community in this way. Yeah. I mean this, along with all of your other projects, just seemed like so, so great. So, thanks for talking to me about them.

[00:53:24] **JGM:** I really appreciate you and your time and your energy and having an opportunity to catch up. It's been a second. Um, I'm grateful for our continued friendship throughout all this time. And opportunities to work together, you invited me to the ICA [Baltimore] show, and you were in Black Blooded. It's nice to also be in, in dialogue with you throughout your, your thesis. So, keep me updated about ways that we can continue to support each other. I'm really proud of you.

[00:53:59] **KL:** Ah, same. Yeah. I'm really proud of you doing great shit. (JGM: Thank you.) And let me know if I can ever help with anything. Um, but also, I'm interested. So, you know, if you ever want me to be there to do a thing, like sign me up, you know, I like working with you and talking with you and what you're working on.

[00:54:20] **JGM:** Yeah, same.

[00:54:20] **KL:** So, we'll keep this going.

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[00:54:29] **KL:** Epilogue. On the 9th of December 2022, Jessica wrote this to me, “My curatorial project SHRINE at Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania will close on the 31st of December. I just wrapped up Art Basel 2022 (showing work and curating an exhibition at PRIZM aka Black Basel). I’m getting ready to launch some new projects in partnership with the Pittsburgh Foundation including launching a local wiki-day so Black Pittsburgh-based artists can have a larger footprint. And I’m still working on my Black BnB in the Hill District (just secured another grant \$17k!).”

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[00:55:06] **KL:** Jessica Gaynelle Moss is participating in Malcolm Peacock's piece at the 58th Carnegie International until April 1st, and her curatorial project The Vault (featuring Black art from Black collector's collections) will open at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina on July 1st. You can find the links to these events in the episode notes on the project's website (thisthingwecallart.com), and you can find more information about Jessica and her work at jesseplane.com.

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Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week for my conversation with Shannon Stratton.