I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Sandra Jackson Dumont

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Sandra Jackson Dumont conducted by Robin Coste Lewis on September 2, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Narrator: Sandra Jackson Dumont	Location: Los Angeles, CA
Interviewer: Robin Coste Lewis	Date: September 2, 2023

Q: Okay. So I'm recording now. We had to kiki and catch up. So this is beloved Sandra Jackson Dumont, and I'm going to start the interview now. So I really just want you to relax, and as you know, I've talked about the project and also sent you the article. It's really about—for me, and the project as a whole—is trying to, I think, redefine what history is, really, and through oral history offer—I don't want to say corrective, because I think it's something, for me, more rich than that. I think this is what history should be.

So as you know, the Emerson Collective and Jacqueline Woodson, Jackie came up with this idea—the Emerson Collective funded it—about just sending writers of color all around the country to talk to people who are elders, and elders are defined from fifty years and above because of the short lifespans of people of color. Right. And what's really important to me, talking to you as a native Californian, really important to me to help—I wanted to contribute to this project, and I jumped onboard on it so hardcore because we often, when we talk about migrations of Black folks, think about the North and the Northeast so much, and don't talk enough about the West.

My primary area is Southern California, which is why I'm interviewing you because you live there now, but also because you were born in the Bay Area, if I'm not—

Jackson Dumont: That's right.

Q: Okay, in San Francisco. Unlike the interviews you're probably used to doing, it's really just we want to get to know you and your life story. It's not even like—and I'm going to have you say what your name is and your position and all that, and you're incredibly and brilliantly successful in the world, but it's also really about trying to show the kind of arc of migration and what happened to these incredibly brave gestures of migrations and their offspring. That's what's just been amazing. And then these wakes of migration that return, right? That there's so many people like you, like me, who left and then come back, right?

So I've interviewed a few people, and you're one of them now, who—born in California but lived elsewhere for a long time and are back in California or keeps going back and forth, or redefining what home is completely.

So I just want you to relax, and let's just talk about your life, and then Maddie and Kim, who you will meet at some point, I'm sure, will edit it and make it all beautiful and coherent, if I ramble too much. Okay?

Jackson Dumont: Sounds good.

Q: Okay. So let's start by you telling us your name, what you do, where you live now, and just a little brief bio.

Jackson Dumont: Okay. My name is Sandra Jackson Dumont. I live in Los Angeles, California. I am an art historian and a curator and an educator and organizer, focusing at the intersection of art and justice and history and community. I work in museums, and I'm the Director and CEO of the soon-to-be-opened Lucas Museum of Narrative Art in South LA.

Q: Fantastic, thank you. Sandra, when were you born and where?

Jackson Dumont: I was born in 1970 in General Hospital in San Francisco, California.

Q: [*Laughs*] Fantastic. Your parents, where are they from?

Jackson Dumont: My mother is from Mississippi, from a town called Florence, Mississippi, right outside of Jackson. She was born in Natchez. My biological father, I didn't grow up knowing who he is, but I came to know him later in life because he actually lived in our neighborhood. I just know that from what I understand, he read as white to me, but I understand that he identified as having Eskimo heritage from Canada.

Q: When did your mom come to California and how?

Jackson Dumont: She came to California, I would say, in the late '50s, early '60s. She was fairly young. She says she doesn't think it was love. She thinks it was just a man. But it was Charlie [*phonetic*] Jackson, who apparently used to travel from place to place with a music group to

churches, and she met him there and they took a liking to each other, and he sent a bus ticket for her, and she one day decided to get on the bus and ride a bus from Mississippi to San Francisco. Jackson had found a job. He migrated from Mississippi to San Francisco because they found a job as a cook at St. Anthony's Dining Room, which was a soup kitchen in San Francisco.

Q: Wow. It's so interesting how many interviews I've done that migrations also occurred because of desire and imagination. That's beautiful.

Jackson Dumont: It's interesting. I mean, yes, she would have to tell it, but the way she tells the story of getting on the bus was that they lived in the woods. They hadn't yet moved out to a main road. So they lived, like many people did, in these areas that didn't have developed streets, only dirt roads, et cetera. Even the main road would've been a dirt road at that time. She talks about wearing her play shoes, because she would be walking through mud, to get to the bus stop, which was on the side of a main road, next to a general store. And she talks about going up to the side of the building and rinsing her feet off and putting on her church shoes and leaving her other shoes. One time, she says she saw her brother there. Her brother was like, "I'm going to tell Daddy," and she was like, "Tell him that, and tell him he can find these shoes here too."

[*Laughter*] But I just like the bravery. Like the less polished version of the Isabel Wilkerson stories where people get on the bus to go join the movement or whatever. But she was just, "I know I don't want to stay in Mississippi. There's something very curious out there in the world to me." Or she just maybe had a nomadic nature. But she definitely is a bit of a free spirit, and against what she thought might've been something holding her back, she just decided, "Okay,

I'm going to get on the bus," and move literally across the country to a place that she had never been, never really thought about, or anything with someone who she had never, I don't think up until that night, had never spent more than a few hours with in tiny, little increments.

I mean, I'm not doing that. [*Laughter*] I think it's fascinating. It's so interesting. The stories he tells about when he picked her up from the bus station are phenomenal and strange and sad and telling of the time.

Q: What's the story?

Jackson Dumont: So I once asked him, because he's not my biological father, actually. But I once asked him what my mother was like when she was younger. He was like, "Oh, I remember when she came here. I went to pick her up from the bus station, and we were driving," and we lived in the Fillmore in San Francisco. She's always, almost her entire life in San Francisco, she's lived in the Fillmore. And so he said that he went to pick her up. They were driving down the street, and he remembers pulling up to a light, and a police car pulled up next to them on her side, and she looked over, and he said, "I remember her peeing her pants, urinating on the front seat."

He was just like, Oh my God, almost like she was so naive. She wasn't a big city girl, so she didn't really know how to handle that. But when I asked her about it—and she may not think about this now, but when I asked her about it when I was much younger, I told her what he said,

and she was just like, “Yes, I had never been that close to or seen anybody that close to police and not be harmed.”

Q: Yes, I knew that’s what you were going to say. That’s amazing.

Jackson Dumont: Yes. Can you imagine looking literally to the right of yourself and seeing that and just being so frightened? I mean, coming from Mississippi too, no less, deep in the bowels of Mississippi at the height of when, arguably, people were being lynched all the time. I’ve never asked her about that, but it’s just so interesting. She doesn’t speak about race and those kinds of things in her upbringing. She talks about, “We used to pick cotton.” And I’m like, “You picked cotton?” She’s like, “Well, not really. I was little, but we did live on these people’s land, and in order to live on their land, I remember my brother and my father picking pecans,” and that kind of stuff, and taking care of their land. So I put two and two together and thought, maybe they were in that indentured space in some weird way at the time.

But yes, she is very interesting person. I think she would’ve been an artist or some kind of creative, had she had different family conditions. But yes, fascinating.

Q: Sandra, what’s your mom’s name?

Jackson Dumont: Her name is Eadie Mae Jackson, and she goes, in our family, by Sweet. My cousins call her Aunt Sweet, and I’m like, “That’s so funny because she ain’t sweet most times.” [*Laughs*] But she’s the beloved aunt. Then in our neighborhood, if you were to meet someone on

the street, they'd be calling her Jackie. Eadie is her formal, more government name, if you will, but she is a junior. She's named after my grandmother. She would've been Eadie Mae Walker [*phonetic*], had she not been married, and that was my grandmother's name.

Q: Do you know, were your grandparents also from Mississippi on your mom's side?

Jackson Dumont: I believe they both were from Mississippi. I don't know their background.

Q: Wow. I used to have an uncle named Sweet. We called him Uncle Sweet. I love those Southern nicknames. They're so good.

Jackson Dumont: I know. I want something like that. I mean, I'm Neesie [*phonetic*] to them. I wish I had a name like Sweet. But my sister has a unique name—

Q: Your nickname is what?

Jackson Dumont: Neesie. Denise [*phonetic*] is my middle name. But my sister's name, Thula [*phonetic*] is her birth name—Thula Mae—which I love. I mean, she sounds like she should be a literary figure or a poet like you or something like that. But now she goes by Sisi [*phonetic*], but all of our family calls her Sissy because my siblings struggled to pronounce her name when they were little, and so they just called her Sister, and then that became Sissy.

Q: My father's nickname was Brother, then people called him Uncle Brother. [*Laughs*]

Jackson Dumont: Yes, my goddaughter calls her brother Hermano [*laughs*] all the time.

Q: Fantastic. So you were born in General Hospital in 1970 in San Francisco, and you grew up in the Fillmore.

Jackson Dumont: Grew up in the Fillmore.

Q: What is your first memory, Sandra, of your childhood?

Jackson Dumont: What'd you say?

Q: What are some of your first memories of your childhood?

Jackson Dumont: First memories. Well, I grew up—when I say I grew up in the Fillmore, the house they took me to when I was born was on Fillmore and Steiner. So I literally grew up almost always off of the spine of this major thoroughfare called Haight Street. I'm sorry. I grew up off of Haight and Steiner, and Fillmore's just a block over.

So I guess some of my early memories are of my mother working at a place called Al's [*phonetic*], which was on the corner. It was like a diner-slash-bar place on Haight Street. I remember coming up to the counter and just watching her talk to people and laugh. So I think those are some early memories.

The other thing is that I lived a block away from a community center, and I don't know Pam's last name, but there was a Black woman who taught after-school programming, and she had this giant afro. I, interestingly enough, have a picture of this woman. I don't even know how I have a picture of her. I don't know if she gave it out to kids. I used to ask her about her hair because she had this giant afro, and I was like, "How do you keep it so solid?" I had to be five or six years old. But memories of this neighborhood are really prevalent. And I remember she taught dance and arts and crafts, and I just remember valuing her aesthetic choices.

I think about it now, but I guess then, it would've been her style and her decisions about who she is. The art historian in me liked her aesthetic choices, blah-blah-blah, her curation of this. But in this case, it was very much her sheer understanding of herself. I felt, "Wow." When I think back on it, for someone to be that comfortable in their skin and their body at that time—this was in the '70s, so this probably looked like '76, '77, something like that—I may even be all off with my timeline. So elastic when you get older and you look back. But it really left an impression on me, just how she organized us, how she organized herself, her appearance.

I still to this day realize it was those early interventions that made me love Blackness and love Black hair and love Black people and love our stylistic choices and our ingenuity and just a sheer, what appeared to be fabulousness wrapped in political stuff. I remember being a kid and asking her about her hair. She might've been just a college kid or a high school kid, honestly. She wasn't older. But I remember asking her about her hair. She was like, "Well, I wear my hair

like this because there's this thing—you don't know about Angela Davis?" And I was this little girl.

So that the political movement had really impacted style, and of course, I'm this little kid when I'm thinking about it. It's not only until I get much older that my academic self looks back and reflects on those moments that probably were early seeds. So those are a couple of things. The community centers in this neighborhood, or in the Fillmore, were just important, and as important as the Black churches as well. Early influences on me also had to do with just the Word at church, and I mean the spiritual word, the living word, the flesh of the word. All of that, that kind of language was used in church—understanding the weight of the word, and how you say what you say, how you read a responsive reading. You have the privilege of being the person to lead it.

All of those things, I think, were such early parts of what made me value the word, value the written word, value style, text, how those things can be a part of shaping society, and that all was just ambient in my life. It just was. So none of that stuff from theater and dance and all stuff was talked about as a profession. These were just things people were doing. So then I go to college and I study biology because I want to help people and I want to be a doctor, not realizing that I probably needed to tether my mother behind the counter, talking to people and telling stories and laughing and listening about what's happening in the neighborhood or whatever with the word, the flesh, and that with the style and the joy and all those things that had to do with just the holistic ecology of how people should be looking at their lives.

I wasn't taught that as a child. It came to me, or it's still coming to me now. But those were all elements of my youth in this neighborhood. When we moved from Steiner, we moved to a bunch of different areas, but one of the places we moved to was Page Street, and there was a bar across the street, which was where all the Black people went. There was a place that was always a mainstay called Jimmy's West Point [*phonetic*], which was owned by Black folks on Haight Street, and my mom used to go there, and I used to go knock on the door of the club and go in, and be like, "Is my mother here?" just to get whatever I needed. She'd be in there, and here I am walking in the club with those red candles that have the almost fractal shapes to them.

Then we moved to Divisadero Street, which is where I really came of age. We moved there when I was in middle school and I lived there until I went to college, and I lived a block and a half from the One Mind Temple, which is the [Saint] John Coltrane [African] Orthodox Church. And so you look in , and it's like standing outside, looking, it's like the choir is playing jazz, and all of the paintings on the wall are gold leaf paintings of Jesus who basically has an afro and looked like my uncle Butch [*phonetic*], you know what I mean? Or my brother or my godfather, Mr. Sam [*phonetic*]. But Jesus is an artist, and Jesus is a saxophone player, and it's all in this Byzantine, gold-leaf, flyness that is not reserved for us, but was made for us in that moment.

So all of these things, I wish I could say—I could probably tell you a million stories because I'm a storyteller, and I love telling stories. But it's all of these ambient gestures that they're a mural, they're a store, there's a person, there's what we called the "A-rabs" across the street. The international impulse is really that I knew what a *pirozhki* was as a child, but didn't know anything about Polish people. But we had Blackified the *pirozhki*, you know what I mean? It's

just this very strange tetheredness that I realize when people are talking about work-life balance, I finally have come to that place in my life where I'm like, "I don't know that I'll ever have work-life balance because I actually believe in the ecosystem," and it's not as simple as a one-tip, a one-way in one direction. It's all these things in balance, and that's what I witnessed as a child.

I'm literally at fifty-three starting to understand the most valuable lesson that I could ever learn, and I just wish that I had understood it earlier because that's what projects like this do. That's what Zora Neale Hurston was doing. She's like, "Let me interview people for who they are." You can edit all this out. I just think it's so fascinating that—it's pretty incredible when you start to unpack it.

So that's Fillmore to me. It's music, it's Juneteenth on Fillmore Street, it is me getting to perform in Juneteenth as a little hood drill team. [*Laughs*] It's the food. It's the barbecue. It's the mechanics taking us to [California's] Great America [Santa Clara, CA]. What is that? A group of mechanics takes kids? It's almost like they're just—we would call that a youth program now.

Okay, here's something. When I went to college, I came back to my own neighborhood, and I went to talk to—we decided we were going to do an African market at our pretty much white school, Sonoma State University [Rohnert Park, CA], where Ntozake Shange taught, all that, right? I came back and I was in charge of getting vendors, and I was like, "Oh, I know vendors." So I went to my neighborhood and there was the incense guy. I was like, "If you want to make a lot of money, there are a bunch of people up in my school who would buy a lot of this. It's a very

liberal, hippie school. It's like Haight Street on steroids. So come up there." He literally packed up his car with t-shirts, couthies, oils. He bought it all up. I went over to the other guy and was like, "You guys want to make some money? I know you do this, but if you want to even expand it, you would sell a lot."

All of us little folks went to our neighborhood people, and we brought basically our neighborhoods to this school and basically called it an African market. People were standing there, getting their ears pierced. They were doing all kinds of stuff. [*Laughs*] But it's just such an amazing thing when you start to think about this ecology thing. So my image of San Francisco as a small child was that it was vibrant and it was very Black, and it was because I lived probably where I lived, in the street I lived on—Divisadero—turns into the Castro District. I went to middle school in the Castro. So when AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome] happened [1981], I remember being in front of what would be the equivalent of Stonewall in San Francisco.

But that's where I caught the bus every day, so there wasn't the same kind of fear. I wasn't afraid of the people. I was afraid of the disease, where the world was afraid of people. You know what I'm saying, Robin? It was a very different Black hippie, Black radical—I mean, I can't even say—we never got invested in patchouli oil, so that wasn't our jam, but you know what I'm saying? It was different.

Q: I am so blown away right now, and only you can decide to cut this out of the interview, and I hope to God you don't because it's so important, about how Black San Francisco used to be,

because San Francisco's a very white city now, and that erasure of Blackness from San Francisco's history—which is one of the reasons why I wanted to interview you, right? But also, okay, and that San Francisco and Fillmore was Black, right? Yet also the Haight and Fillmore was totally the location where LSD [lysergic acid diethylamide], hippies—it was where the movement, that whole thing exploded, right, that would then take over the whole country.

People want to locate that in Woodstock, and I know why for good reason. But it really started in San Francisco right where you were born, right? People don't really talk about the Haight and the Fillmore that way anymore. But also the importance of St. John Coltrane, and all the ways in which these communities that people know nothing about were reinterpreting or rejecting or embracing and flossing and glossing all these different cultures into our own culture. I mean, it's so profound.

I love what you said, "But I was just taking the bus right in front of these places. I was just going to school." And how we were living within history and we were that history, do you know? I mean, I think it's important what you're saying. It's just profound. It's profound for many reasons, but for me, one of the most important reasons is that this isn't in any history book, really, unless it's new history that new academics are writing, sure.

Jackson Dumont: You're right. I mean, and so much of it is there are times I almost feel so sick to my stomach because I wasn't a part of San Francisco's multi-year tradition of Black intellectuals. That's just not where we came from. I also wasn't a part of San Francisco's multi-year, very amazing tradition of Black religiosity either. These are folks that went back after—I

remember as a child, listening to sermons at church reflecting back on when people went to get bodies back from Jim Jones [November 18, 1978], Black ministers from San Francisco. People don't even locate that in the Bay Area, in San Francisco, right?

The other thing is you also had people like—my friend's uncle is Victor Willis from the Village People, and he would come and he would come over and he'd be crazy. We'd be all over. He would just start playing the piano, but it was a very amazing, interesting, in-the-world in a different way, and his family, they went to Third Baptist [Church]. But people don't know that his roots are very deeply San Francisco. Whatever he ends up evolving to be, he comes out of this Black church tradition that is very different, right?

All of that is happening at the same time in the Fillmore in these amazing houses. I used to go into other people's houses off of Alamo Square, which is no longer Black, but all of that used to be all Black-owned. There were pocket doors, secret compartments, I mean, stuff like that. My friend, one of my really close childhood friends, her mother worked for the city, and I remember they lived in this amazing house, a big group of girls, and I remember just being like, "When I get older, I want to drive a car like that." It was a Volvo.

[*Laughter*] She would come home in this—you would've thought she wore the same suit every day, but she did not, but for me, it was the red—it probably was a Jones of New York suit or something like that. But the sweater dress with the sweater jacket over it and the briefcase, and she had cut all her hair off. She was rocking this short cut. I think it was the hair. Had she had a

blowout or a dry-press or whatever it was, I probably would've been like, "Oh, she's just—" But that she had cut all her hair off was just like, "Ms. Davis [*phonetic*] is amazing."

So I think that there are these really interesting things. Toni Morrison, I was dating a guy, and they lived in the Panhandle, Black family, and the Panhandle, which is probably some of the more textured—but in hippie town. But she was married to one of the musicians in The Whispers, and I remember dating him—his name was Rob [*phonetic*]—and he was ahead of me in school, and his mom noticed that we had been dating for a while, and she was like, "So what are you up to? What are you going to do?" And I was like, "Well, I think I'm going to go to City College," and she was like, "Why are you going to go to City College?" I didn't know, even though I was in programs—I mean, I was in MESA [mathematics engineering science achievement]. I was in these programs. But I didn't really think that I could go to college.

We would talk periodically about that kind of stuff. Then one day, she said, "What are you reading?" And I don't remember. I think we were reading *Catcher in the Rye*. It was a school book. And she says, "You should read this book." Oh no, it was *The Color Purple* and I said I had a hard time reading the book because I didn't understand the Mr. Line [Mr. ___], not realizing it was Mr., and whatever. She said, "You know what you should read? You should read *Beloved*." She was like, "Toni Morrison is one of my favorite writers," and she just handed me the book, and today it's still one of my favorite books, today. I don't know if it's the relationship of this woman giving it to me, and she was an elementary school teacher.

Q: Wow.

Jackson Dumont: I think that those things are some of the texture of a city like that. I don't know that that exists that way anymore at all.

Q: Well, I think it's also interesting what you're saying—and for our listeners, I like to offer just editorial commentary, Sandra. I hope you don't mind—I went to school for twelve years and was never given a Black author ever. I was in AP class. I'm about five, seven years older than you. Yes, sure. That's not true. My gym teacher in school gave me a Lorraine Hansberry. But she was a gym teacher, not a literature teacher.

I just want to contextualize for listeners a few things that you've said that I thought were really important, and I don't know if we'll keep this in the interview. But just seeing Angela Davis's afro when she was on the FBI's [Federal Bureau of Investigation] Most Wanted list, right? What that did for little Black girls and boys everywhere, yes, because she was wanted by the FBI and we always knew that that was bullshit, or that was—to be wanted by the FBI was actually honorable because she was sticking up for us, so we actually admired that.

But equally, you keep talking about people's dress and their fashion and their style and their aesthetic and their influence. Up until people start wearing afros—I mean, when people started donning afros, and when Angela Davis was plastered all over the news and newspapers in an afro, it changed—it did more work, just that image of her, did so much—

Jackson Dumont: The shades, the—

Q: —for the world, all over the world. I mean, you could almost correlate it. I mean, I know that the Civil Rights Movement and all that—and I totally agree, and it started in the ’40s and ’50s and hit the ’60s, I totally agree with all of that. But suddenly, you had Black people everywhere blowing out their hair, power to the people, Black Power, fucking—it was on. It just ignited something where the same conversation, I remember being in the car with my mother going, “I want an afro.” And I was, I don’t know, single digits too, and it was just such an extraordinary time. That’s what I really want to say, and I think that’s what’s coming across so much in the things that you’re talking about and how rich a historical time it was in San Francisco and in that neighborhood, and it’s so important that we’re recording this because you can go to San Francisco and walk around the Fillmore and never, ever, ever expect that anything like this or people like this ever happened. So I just want to thank you.

Jackson Dumont: Thank you. You know what’s interesting? There are two things you’re saying that really resonate with me. You can walk around San Francisco—and actually one of the most known photographs of San Francisco of the Painted Ladies, the most well-known houses in San Francisco, are smack dab in the middle of the Fillmore. I mean, literally smack dab in the middle of the Fillmore.

Q: That’s right.

Jackson Dumont: I grew up on the other side of that hill, or six blocks the other way, or two blocks the other way, and one of the most famous Black churches in San Francisco, Third

Baptist, is literally a block and a half from those houses, but you would never know it because that context is really just not talked about. It's that kind of stuff that's really fascinating.

I also think that there were so many opportunities from the mural tradition to really see stuff. I remember one of the community centers I went to was called the Western Addition Cultural Center—it has a new name now. I mean, the building had to be three or four stories tall, but imagine a mural of a Benin mask three or four stories tall. It's just what you take in almost by osmosis is just really fascinating. It's just like, "I see myself, I see myself, I see myself, I see myself." But no one's saying, "Look at that." Although there were moments where we did look at things, at church with the calendar with the inventors in it. It's a little story of the Black inventors, like, "We made shoes or the most well-known cobbler, or we invented the cotton gin." You're just flipping to February or to May, and for a month, this is us for a month.

So yes, my dance teacher as a child—dance and theater—and I wasn't the most amazing whatever—but I happened upon this dance class because I heard music. I was walking from my godfather's, who lived near my church and near what is one of San Francisco's beloved little parks—Duboce Park now—and they used to rehearse in this studio that looked like a house, and I walked in the door just to be like, "Who's playing?" Then I saw these kids taking a dance class and The Whispers were coming out, and I was like, "I know who you guys are." It was my birthday, I remember, coming from picking up a gift from my godfather, and they signed my birthday box. I was like, "Nobody's going to believe I was here." I was shy as a kid. "No one's going to believe that I met you. Can you sign my birthday box?"

It was that day that the dance teacher, who was just rehearsing with these kids, said, "You should come and join our class." This dance teacher was someone who had come back to work in communities. Her name was Judith Holton [*phonetic*]. She danced with Sun Ra. She's on *Saturday Night Live*. When Sun Ra played on *Saturday Night Live*, she's dancing like, "Sun Ra is coming." You know how you had those big groups on? She wrote plays for us, like a play about Egyptology or Kemetic culture called *Reflections in a Dirty Mirror*, and we performed her plays as kids, Black superheroes that came back to save the hood.

Q: Amazing.

Jackson Dumont: Just all these creative—that's what I feel about that city.

Q: And that tie too. I mean, you're making me think about things. The wake of the Civil Rights Movement, right? People continued that activity by doing all these amazing cultural expressions, like you were just talking about the murals, or community centers. You keep talking about community centers. There were so many community centers with teachers who were—this was their side gig, but we didn't know that, right? And they're teaching classes in dance and classes in painting, and it's all with these different kinds of traditions for so many African countries, teaching us things about so much Black history, and it was such a continuation of the Civil Rights Movement for children.

Thinking about the Black Panther Party and the People's Clinic, right, just across the Bay from where you're talking about. It was just such a rich moment. I don't think we talk about it enough,

and it was everything. It was everywhere, in everything we did. I mean, dance classes for little girls. You wrote these plays that contained Egyptology. I mean, I just think the ’70s was such a special, special decade, and the ’80s too.

Jackson Dumont: Yes. I agree.

Q: Cultural interventions of Blackness. It was just such an incredible moment, and we didn’t call it anything. It wasn’t like this super hyper-self-consciousness about it. It was like, “This is what needs to happen. This is what our children need.”

Jackson Dumont: I agree, and you know what’s interesting is that as a child, I don’t think I really learned about the Panther movement when I was a child. I mean, I didn’t know anything about any of that. But I knew who Danny Glover was. I knew he was an actor, and he used to eat breakfast down the street, and people used to be like, “That’s a bad man.” We’d be walking down the street and people would be like, “What’s up, Danny?” Redd Foxx, I remember when Redd Foxx drove down the street, and my brother was like, “What’s up, Redd?” And he just put his fist out the window and my brother grabs it, like, “Redd Foxx is—”

But it literally was “the hood,” whatever. But it’s just such a different—it had a very fascinating texture. And then there was tremendous homophobia too at the same time, which is ironic on so many levels. But your point about this idea of—

Q: Okay, wait, so Sandra's back, and just as a side note, she's telling me about a school. Go ahead?

Jackson Dumont: This is out here in Los Angeles. Some of our neighbors go to a school. It's called Baldwin Hills Elementary School. I don't know a lot about the school. But I went to their final, end-of-year performance, and it's all of the grades, the littlest to the fifth graders, and apparently they voted however many years ago to dedicate the school's curriculum to a Black-centered, Black-led curriculum that hit all of the standards for the public school system, but they wanted to teach through the lens of Black history.

So you have little babies that are five years old, talking about diaspora, and it is just phenomenal. It's a diverse school, but the majority of the kids are Black, from different Black cultures and communities, and our neighbors go there, and one of our neighbors is a little boy who—one of the pieces of history that they shared was the impact of popular music on people in the public, and they did a performance of "A House Is Not a Home," the Five Heartbeats, and they talk about the movie. So there's the orator who is the narrator and the MC, who was his sister, and it's hundreds of kids across the school, but then they perform, these little kids, in gold taffeta suits. These are little nine and ten-years-old, and they're mouthing the words to the song and doing the choreography, and the crowd is on their feet. He's taking the mic down to the ground.

But it is just performing the lessons. Then they have this section where they go back in time and they take you to different lands, and they do it through a time capsule of us showing up at the

campus of the school. It's really amazing. So if there's somebody that—yes, those are some of the more interesting stories.

Q: I should interview her?

Jackson Dumont: This is a little boy.

Q: I need elders, and I only have a few more interviews to do, and I do have a couple slots I could switch out.

Jackson Dumont: There is a woman who is from San Francisco, Andrea Woosham [*phonetic*], that I could probably connect you with. I think her mother was a Panther who recently passed. She is more tied to a different class, maybe. I'm not sure. But I could connect you guys. But she used to work for Oprah. She's more known as a Chicagoan, but she grew up in San Francisco, and probably closer to what I would say Serramonte, which has the big, beautiful houses.

Oh, someone you actually might talk to is Antoinette Malveaux, Julianne Malveaux's sister.

Q: Exactly.

Jackson Dumont: That's who you should speak to. Antoinette Malveaux, most people would want to talk to her sister, but I think you should really talk to Antoinette, and I think there's at least four girls and their mother who grew up off of Ocean, out there. But Antoinette, if you

asked her specific questions, growing up in San Francisco, she would have a completely different take than I would, per se. I did grow up Catholic. When I was a kid, I didn't know no Catholic Black people.

Q: —were Catholic, so I would ask you—because there's a lot of Black Catholics in California because of the Louisiana thing to California, so there are lots of Black Catholic churches. We didn't know Baptist people—I had to beg my parents to let me go to Baptist church, and then they finally let me go, and then my grandmother—except my grandmother—only I didn't know this until years later, I mean, decades. I'm hanging out with my great-aunt in Michigan because my grandmother was COGIC—Church of God in Christ.

Jackson Dumont: Oh, okay. Okay, that is amazing to go from the dance party to the 'I'm strapped down in a seat'.

Q: I know, because my grandmother, my uncle—who I was supposed to interview for this thing and he died right before I was going to interview him. I'm so sad—my uncle got TB [tuberculosis] when he was a little boy, and this is all in New Orleans. And my grandmother's father, who I never knew, Big Papa—so this is Great Migration history in bodies, right? He had gotten caught up in a tent revival, got caught up with the ecstatic traditions of Church of God in Christ and converted. [*Unclear*] Catholicism, of course. Everybody was like, "What are you doing?"

Then when my uncle, his grandson got sick—my uncle was a boy—my Big Papa told my grandmother, the mother, "If you convert, God will save his life." My grandmother told God, "If you save my kid's life, I will convert to Church of God in Christ." My uncle survived, the little boy of tuberculosis—that's what he had or something crazy—and he survived, and my grandmother converted. So everybody else is Catholic, except my grandmother was COGIC. Isn't that
hilarious?

Jackson Dumont: Yes, that is hilarious. So in some ways, West Indians, Church of God in Christ, also the religious traditions brought over from various parts of West Africa, East Africa, whatever, we're hiding things in the Catholic mainstays, right? So there's [*foreign language*], [*foreign language*], all of that is being hidden in Catholicism. But when you peel the politics of respectability associated with Catholicism, the guilt, et cetera, et cetera, the structures, the regiment, whatever. When you peel that back, what you get is something closer to COGIC, which is the dance, the praise, the pulling down of the spirit, the speaking in tongues. All of that is layered underneath that. So while we feel that they are so far removed, they are actually inextricably linked in many ways.

Here's something that I think is fascinating about LA. Where we are building our museum, around the museum is the ever-evolving, across the street from USC [University of Southern California], ever-evolving neighborhood called Expo Park, which is also tied to all the other—whether it's Leimert Park or Baldwin Hills of South LA. It's so expansive, right? But if you walked a couple of blocks from USC, you'll see what looks on the surface. If you go there now,

you're like, "Oh wow, this is a predominately Latinx neighborhood." But I was walking over there the other day and was like, "Oh, it's obvious this used to be a Black neighborhood because there's a Church of God in Christ right here."

And so I grew up—my godmother, one of my close friends who I considered a mother at the time, I was very close to them. They went to Church of God in Christ, and so we would go to Church of God in Christ. Then my godfather was African Methodist Episcopal [AME], which was if Church of God in Christ was given musicality and freedom of spirit and the fruit of the spirit, then AME is giving you history and legacy and just this whole other understanding of lineage because they teach history through that church. You understand what a coptic church is. You understand Ethiopia. You understand all those things.

Then my mother and my godfather's girlfriend went to Baptist, and I grew up going to all three of these churches, but my home church was a Baptist church, which all of them have different clapping traditions. All of them have different hymnal traditions. All of them have different levels of respectability. All of them have all these different things. But they all have one thing, which is accountability and responsibility.

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: And all of them have this inextricable understanding of the oral tradition and what it means to be a great orator and a great teacher. Even if you fail at it, people still understand that they're failing. [*Laughs*]

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: It's an interesting thing. But yes, COGIC. Phew, that there was like, "Oh, wow. This is amazing."

Q: Yes, totally amazing. I love what you're saying too about how what people now call South Central—I mean, growing up, South Central was all Black. It just was. That whole area around USC, around your new museum, around Expo, all of that was Black. Here's my theory, though. I don't know if it's true. My theory is that that area is where people who migrate land when they come to LA. Then they spread out. I keep calling it—Dana Johnson, the novelist, who I also interviewed for this project, Dana Johnson also grew up there. My relatives, my parents, that's where they landed. All of it. All those neighborhoods around where you work, those are all where my people all landed from Louisiana.

I call it the springboard of Los Angeles because people land, they come, they stay ten, twenty years, and then they move out to one of the LA suburbs or towns. So that's just my theory, and now because most of those neighborhoods are more Latino, mostly Salvadoran, right, Mexico, of course, different Latinx countries, migrants, immigrants. A lot of them live in this neighborhood. I love how this neighborhood has been used as a landing spot of migration.

That's just my theory. I don't know. I've seen that neighborhood change now three times. It's not even a neighborhood. It's multiple neighborhoods, including now Crenshaw. So it's just

fascinating to me, and I think it's interesting to connect that with your own experience, growing up in the Fillmore, because I was actually looking for real estate and just looking around. Some of those tiny, tiny, tiny cottages—my cousin lives on Expo and 4th Avenue. I also interviewed her for this project. She used to be a Panther. She bought her house [*laughs*] for two thousand dollars cash. It is now worth one-point-six million dollars.

Q: Can I just say, that's amazing.

Jackson Dumont: It's a cottage, understand? It is not large. It is two bedrooms.

Jackson Dumont: Oh yes, all that along that Expo Park line all feels very much—it's at once industrial, and then it also feels kind of like, "Where's the beach?" It feels like you are in a beach space.

The other thing I would say is what we realized in walking the neighborhoods—so South LA, which is what they call it now, not South Central, because I've been asking people South Central, but it's South LA, and they're different things—but in 2003, Los Angeles formally changed South Central as an entire neighborhood to South LA in the wake of so many other things, right? It's a formal change. They literally changed it. Can I screen with you? Can you let me share a screen? You're going to die when I show this to you.

Q: Yes, I will, but as somebody who was born in South Central—I mean, sorry, in the South Bay, we get very protective of anybody—South Central, South LA, whatever—using the word

South, because you're like, "That's not the South of LA." South LA is San Pedro, Long Beach, Compton, Carson, Torrance, blah-blah-blah-blah. So it's just ongoing.

Jackson Dumont: Can I show you the map that they used?

Q: I'm going to make you co-host so you can do it.

Jackson Dumont: When you see this, you're going to die. When you go to certain places—South LA is like one big hole, but then when you open it up. So I started talking to my team and saying, like, "Okay, what are we talking about?" In a five-mile radius of this museum—let's just say a five-mile radius of USC—there are 501 schools. For every one liquor school in other parts of Los Angeles, South LA has seven as I understand it from our research, right? So let me share this with you. This is what is called South LA now.

Q: No, Willowbrook is straight up South—

Jackson Dumont: So Watts, so this is what they call Historic South Central. So to me what makes this amazing—I live right here. Right here. The only reason this is not all considered South LA is because of this.

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: This used to be West Adams.

Q: Right. Exactly. So Sandra, first of all, we didn't call this South Central nor South LA nor anything. We just called it LA. Before they built the 105—right?

Jackson Dumont: This is 405 I think, right?

Q: No, no, no, 405 is over to the left, going over—but that little square between the 405, the 105, the 110, and the 10? That is considered LA. People from the South Bay—so south of the 105—that's not on the map, so you keep going down. That's where I was born. Compton, all of that, Hawthorne. That's the South Bay, and we call what is being called South LA just LA. Even now, we just call it LA. People in the South Bay are like, "We don't go to LA because we have everything we need in the South Bay." It's just so fascinating.

Jackson Dumont: It's like a boroughness about it. Why go to Manhattan when you can stay in Brooklyn, you know what I mean? We have our own city hall, our own this. So what's fascinating about this is that when I say to people, "I live in West Adam—" What?

Q: Wait, Watts is not South LA. That's bullshit.

Jackson Dumont: Okay. I'm just telling you, all of this is what people are calling it. So what's fascinating about it—

Q: They included Watts in this map because you know they're trying to sell Watts for gentrification purposes because it's right on the Blue Line, and you can take the train right into downtown.

Jackson Dumont: We can trace all of this back to transportation. [*Laughter*] Let me just say that. But let me just show you this other thing. So I'm new to LA, right? So I'm all about South LA right now. But what's fascinating is that a lot of what you're seeing here is—when I talk to older Angelinos, like seventies, eighties, they're like, "All of this was South LA before. Then they came up with South Central, and now we're back to South LA because of what happened around South Central." But the truth of the matter is that a lot of what we're looking at are places where there's a predominance of Black people, period.

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: Then the other thing is that literally I'm just on the other side. I mean, this is West Angeles Church. All these people. I live just on the other side of the 10, and so we're in this little interstitial space where people are like, "You're not a part of the Crenshaw District." Then on the other side, they're like, "You're not Miss City." But what's happening here is what's happened with so many places. This is truly what happened with the Fillmore. It's the center of the city and was considered the bottom before.

Q: That's right, literally. That's why my cousin bought her house for two thousand dollars and now it's worth one-point-six. It's on the Expo Line. It's a two-bedroom cottage.

Jackson Dumont: It's the bottom, but now that we are in the space of convenience, the flight that went out, bigger properties, bigger land, that's not convenient. "We're greening the world." Well, we've been here. We've been here in the bottom where all of this stuff was. The perception was all the terrible things wash off and flow down to the bottom. Think of it. It's just such an interesting thing. And so even within our communities, we have the View Parks, the Baldwin Hills, the blah-blah-blah, all that stuff. But think about it. View Park, Baldwin Hills, all that stuff is just above the Jungle. Even that is shifting and changing.

So I'm interested in this notion that you're talking about. I mean, this deserves a podcast or something on it in and of itself. I'm just like, "Wow." I get an earful every time I talk about LA.

Q: Can we just get in the car and drive around? I want to take you and show you—

Jackson Dumont: I would love that.

Q: All of that. The 105 wasn't there. I remember when the 105 was built. It wasn't there.

Jackson Dumont: Oh my goodness.

Q: I remember when the 91 wasn't there. I remember when the 91 was built. And it's just so fascinating how these freeways and now these trains are creating new neighborhoods, and I don't buy the greening rhetoric at all about why people are moving into South LA.

Jackson Dumont: Oh no, it's affordability. I'm saying that's what it is.

Q: So you have all these gentrifying gestures—I'm being kind by saying that instead of saying what I really am feeling—and suddenly you're walking in West Adams. I remember the first time Arthur [*phonetic*] Lewis, my cousin who you know, also in the art world, used to live in West Adams in your neighborhood. I remember the first time he took me to a restaurant on Adams and we're driving down the street, and I haven't left home in thirty-something years, and there are white people walking down West Adams, and I literally almost fainted. I literally had to grab the door and go, "What's happening?" Walking their dog down the street. It wasn't a bill collector. It wasn't an insurance salesman. It wasn't the police. The reasons why white people would be in this part of town growing up were that they had business there, and usually shady policing business. But this was just white people walking their dog down West Adams, and I literally was in shock, and this was just five, six years ago.

Jackson Dumont: I took someone to dinner, a friend of mine. She grew up in Los Angeles, and she lived in New York for a while, but she is now back here. She's been here for a while. She lives in Koreatown. When I say she grew up in Los Angeles, she grew up in Watts. Her mother still lives there. I was like, "Let's meet at this place." She said she drove down, she got out of her car, she was looking around, and we got into the restaurant, and she was like, "I don't even know what to say." She said, "My mom asked me where I was going for dinner, and I told her, and she looked it up just to see the restaurant." Her mother was just like, "Are you sure you should be going over there?" Even today, it has these certain stigmas attached to it.

You know the neighborhood I live in. I didn't grow up there. You know where I grew up. I didn't grow up in a neighborhood like this. But you drive out into this little patch of what I would say, incredible Black joy, and it's fascinating because it is smack dab in the middle of Los Angeles. And my fear is that this smack dabness in the middle of Los Angeles—when people ask me, "Do you live on the East Side or the West Side?" I'm like, "I live in the middle of LA. I live in LA." They're like, "No, no, but where? Do you live on the East Side or the West Side?" It's like, "I live literally in the center. I don't live on the East Side or the West Side. I live in the center of Los Angeles. I can get to anywhere in this amount of time."

It is almost unheard of for whatever reason. But that's Jefferson Park. That's West Adams. That's Hyde Park. That's South Park. That is literally the center of the city, which has historically been the Blackest part of the city, and now it's more brown. It's so interesting, but it is where the city comes into its bottom, its bones. It's so interesting, and I don't know the details of what to say about it, but I bet Karen Bass [*phonetic*] would have a lot to say about it because she is all about this. She has historically fought for this area. I mean, Holly Mitchell [*phonetic*] grew up in Expo Park. She would have a lot to say about it. These are people who are true, like you, Angelinos who are like, "Okay, wait, what is actually happening in the city versus what is being prescribed or presented as the narrative?"

But yes, it reminds me a lot of San Francisco. It reminds me of the Fillmore. It reminds me of Harlem. It's the same conversation. It's Chicago's South Side. I don't know what the equivalent is in New Orleans, but it's the same narrative in these cities that could easily be experienced. It's

interesting. It's nice to have these histories, like Pico and Union, "I think that's past South LA, but okay."

Q: For our listeners, let me just break down this history in a few sentences. What Sandra Jackson Dumont is really summarizing and meditating on is the acute racism that existed in Los Angeles with regard to property. Black people weren't allowed to own property outside of what is now called South LA and what was called South Central LA. So Baldwin Hills, View Park exists, West Adams exists because Black people who had the money to move into Beverly Hills, Hollywood, places like that—West LA, East LA, it didn't really matter, right? We're legally not allowed to own property in those areas in the history of Los Angeles.

So you now have pockets of incredible neighborhoods that have been traditionally Black—what Sandra's effectively referring to it as the bottom, right?—merely because of the history of Los Angeles's racism toward Black people and Asian people, really, and being denied—red lining, blue lining, all kinds of lines, denied the right to own property in other parts of Los Angeles. It isn't just a matter of, "This is where people landed." It is that these were the only places we were allowed to land and the only places we were allowed to own property.

So when Dr. Jackson Dumont was just talking about bumping into celebrities in the Fillmore, right, what I wondered about is in Los Angeles, in this neighborhood where you're talking about where my parents lived as newlyweds and my grandmother lived as a Great Migration survivor, Ray Charles lived, Lena Horne, all of these entertainers were not allowed to rent hotel rooms in Beverly Hills when they were performing. They were not allowed to stay in hotels anywhere in

the West Side, the East Side of LA, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Silver Lake, all of that, not allowed, illegal. So they would rent these homes in so-called South LA, South Central, right? And be in those neighborhoods.

Then nightclubs spring up that we don't talk about anymore on Central Avenue. I was born on Central Avenue, right? Nightclubs spring up. These entertainers, sure, they would go play Beverly Hills, but then they would come back to South LA and play these clubs because Black people couldn't go to those clubs, right? So this issue of property in LA and neighborhoods in LA has such deep, horrific, heinous history in racism, and as usual, Black people took this way out of no way and made it something beautiful, and now that's why so many Black people just feel so much injustice all over the country because now, because of gentrification, right, suddenly there are white homeowners in the hood, the same neighborhood where Black people were not allowed to leave. [*Laughs*] Right?

It's a bitter pill. It's a very bitter pill. It's interesting and it's also a triumphant history too. So you have houses as beautiful as in Beverly Hills or in Hollywood or whatever in your neighborhood. We're talking about Paul Williams. He was a great Black architect, designing a few homes in that neighborhood you live in, right? Same in Baldwin Hills. Beautiful, gorgeous—

Jackson Dumont: Amazing.

Q: —Black-owned homes in the Hills, in Baldwin Hills, overlooking all over LA because they couldn't move to Beverly Hills. And Black people in the '30s, '40s, '20s, even, began building and commissioning these beautiful homes to be built because they couldn't build in Beverly Hills. I mean, that's another part of this history, right? I'm so happy you're bringing it up because we don't talk about it enough. It's not just that Black people happened to land in South Central. It's that we were not allowed to land anywhere else.

Jackson Dumont: I mean, you see the same thing in places like Harlem, where you can go and where you see the people that are performing on the stage. So performing on the stages in Harlem and in other places, people would come from downtown, go see a performance in Harlem. The audience was mainly not Black people and the only place where many of them could stay would be the Theresa Hotel, which is also interestingly enough where you find other officials of color coming from other parts of the world, whether it's Fidel Castro, or people come and stay at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem on their honeymoon because it's the one luxury hotel that is in a big city. People are coming from Philly and other places to be there.

I don't know LA's history. What I'm sharing with you, some of it is stuff that I've researched and read. Other things are people sharing these stories with me of participating in their neighborhoods in different ways, which I think are histories that are more central sometimes than ones that are presented in other ways of learning. But yes, when I think about San Francisco or I think about my mother or I think about all these different kinds of personality, I'm really fascinated by how they decided to do and build things. You see it in Seattle, Washington, where I lived for a period of time. There's a street called South Jackson, and it's where Ray Charles and

Quincy Jones and all of his people played. It's called the International District now, but that neighborhood was also historically Asian, and it continues to be in many ways. But it was their Chinatown or Asiatown or whatever, and there were these amazing partnerships between Black and Asian people.

Even here in LA, it's fascinating. Koreatown butts up against the Black neighborhoods, right? In Seattle, there's one block in between these historic neighborhoods where Quincy Jones, Bruce Lee, and Jimi Hendrix all went to the same high school—not at the same time, obviously. What is that, right? Then in Seattle, you have Asian people who are Black Panthers in Seattle. With the leather badass jacket, too. It's just these amazing theories of oppressed people from whatever background finding each other in different ways and not buying that they don't have the same struggle. They're buying the bound-upness. So I think that's fascinating and interesting.

I don't know that I saw that as much growing up in San Francisco. I think I saw more Blackness being bound up to each other, but not necessarily other things. More Samoan people, maybe, being engaged in a different way. But the way people have told me about LA is that it's a little bit more nuanced than that. I had an elder tell me the other day, "People forget that California wasn't always liberal."

Q: Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

Jackson Dumont: I'm just like, "Say more about that." It would take him telling you, but it was just like, "Oh."

Q: Oh my God, yes.

Jackson Dumont: LA in particular. But through his lens because he lives in LA. But yes, thinking about San Francisco and growing up there, when I think about Blackness in San Francisco growing up, there was just also a different migratory path for Black people than on the East Coast. So when you're talking about California, the West Coast, I feel like I understood Asian people, and I know that Korean people are not the same as Vietnamese people, not the same as Chinese, whereas on the East Coast, that's not the case. On the East Coast, there's a deep understanding of Blackness and whiteness in a different way. It's like, "Oh no, it's not like that person is white." "That person is Polish." Or, "They're Hungarian."

That's not the language of the West Coast, but we'll talk about, "Why would you say Hispanic? No, that's Chicano right there. That's Mexican. That's different. They're Colombian." It's very different. It wasn't until I grew up and went to college that I realized how expansive and small my world was, right? I had never heard a Jewish joke. Never in my life, ever understood, heard, nothing. I didn't even understand. Just the relationship to land out here, it's just very different. So it makes me imagine what the relationship is between land and people and histories between Canada and the tip of North America, that edge of that relationship there.

Q: But I'm also thinking about there's these great Black historiographies about Los Angeles. That's one thing too, Sandra. When you were talking about Asian/Black relationships in California, partly what I've done—you don't know this yet—for the interviews I've done is I had

to begin including Asian people, and the Asian people I included were Hawaiians or Japanese-Hawaiians, or some kind of haka version of Asian/Blacks, multiple Asian ethnicities within one family, because they grew up in the Valley or they grew up in South LA, or they grew up in Gardena. That's one thing. I went to Gardena High, right? It was half Asian, half Black. That's wasn't unusual. [*Laughs*] That was the most normal thing in the world.

So Gardena was the kind of suburban version of Little Tokyo in downtown LA, but the reason why Gardena is Gardena is because when the Japanese internment camps were closed, they had to put all those people they had interned somewhere in Southern California. And so this neighborhood where I grew up is half Black, half Japanese. Then Latinos, and Mexicans, mostly Chicanos, and Salvadoran, right? Then, of course, Samoans and Koreans and Filipinos. We didn't know Chinese people growing up at all.

So the people I've interviewed, some of whom are my relatives—speaking of Black-Hawaiian, Black-Japanese relationships, which are very, very common in Los Angeles—we talked about the fact that the reason why I think you're talking about and bringing this up and what keeps recurring is the Pacific Ocean and the Pacific Rim.

Jackson Dumont: You're in the Pacific Rim.

Q: We're on the Pacific Rim and we're on the border of Mexico, right?

Jackson Dumont: We are.

Q: Those two factors, I think historically express itself in really profoundly interesting ways, in terms of allyship between communities. Also for the books, Kim and Maddie, I would love to include Joan Kee's new book about Afro-Asian geometries because she's basically talking about this in her new book.

Jackson Dumont: Okay.

Q: So we're talking about what does it mean to grow up in a club where everybody's everything, literally, right? Garrett Hongo gave an amazing interview for this project. He went to my same high school, but he's about ten years older than me, and he grew up going to the Watts Writers Workshop, hanging out—he's friends with all these people, and he was one of a few Japanese or Hawaiian people who were hanging out in Watts, doing art with the Watts Arts Project, Watts Towers, Watts Writers Project, the jazz scene in Watts. It's just crazy that people don't think about this because when we think about migration, we're thinking about people going from Texas to Chicago. But meanwhile, there's this incredible rich history on—I call it in my work the Pac Black Rim, the Pacific Black Rim. It's just fascinating. It's fascinating.

Jackson Dumont: —being a part of—what do you call it? There was MESA, which I was tangentially involved with, but then there was another program where we could get to go and go across, over to Berkeley. I can't remember what it was called. But it was kind of like an Upward Bound kind of thing. I really was tagging along with friends because I didn't have anyone in my family, and I lived across the street.

On Divisadero Street, interestingly enough, there was something called PACT [*phonetic*], a PACT program, and it was something, Partnerships in After-School—something something. I don't remember. But they helped kids fill out applications for college, and again, I was one of those curious but shy kids. I was like, "What is that?" And it was PACT, and then it spelled out what it was. It was something something, Application College something. I just went in, I was like, "Hi, do you help people? What is this?" It's literally a block from my house, across the street from the club called Divis [*phonetic*], and down the street from, I think, Popeyes or Church's Chicken had just set up shop, and Do City Barbeque, and all these other spots, the meat market.

There was a guy, Corey [*phonetic*]. I can't remember. Corey Anderson [*phonetic*], I think was his name. I should look him up. But he lived in my neighborhood, and we decided we were going to apply. He was telling me he was going to apply to Howard [University, Washington, DC] and all these Black schools, and I didn't really know much about them. I was like, "I'm going to apply to them too." So I remember having a Brother typewriter. I borrowed it from someone, and anyway, long story short, I didn't have excellent grades despite being in all these programs. I didn't have poor grades either, but I didn't have excellent grades. I remember not understanding anything about taxes, and then I just sat down. These women helped me fill out these forms, right? I mean, we just filled out the forms.

I didn't feel guilty about not having a parent to help me with it. It was just, they understood. Some people have parents who do this stuff. Some people don't. I chose Sonoma because

interestingly enough at the time at Wash, I had civics, of course. I remember one of my electives in high school was—you could pick a bunch of different things. You switched per semester, if I remember correctly. I took drawing and then I also took film as literature, which is a class I feel like we will definitely teach at the museum. I remember watching *Cool Hand Luke* and dissecting it like it was a piece of literature through symbology and all kinds of stuff, right? Symbolism. To date, of anything I've ever taken, it is still to date one of the best classes I've ever taken on paying attention and actually seeing. It is, to date.

One of my other classes was—we were able to take a psychology class, and can you imagine being a high school kid taking psychology? It was amazing, and I remember my high school teacher for psychology and my high school teacher for civics were two interesting guys, one of which was a smoker. He scratched himself all the time. But on his walls—visual cues again—was [Mahatma] Gandhi, Malcolm X, The Beatles. He had these giant posters of these figures around the wall.

I remember asking them, I was like, "I don't know. I'm going to apply to all these schools," because they would always ask me, "What are you going to do?" "I'm going to go to City College." "Why are you going to go to City College when you could apply to these places? They'd probably give you some money." I didn't really understand it, and the long and short of it was I went to both of them and asked, "What would you do?" So they said, "Apply to all the schools you can." I applied to all these schools, and I remember the guidance counselor saying, "Why are you applying to all these schools? You're really not going to get in. You're okay, but

you're really not a college kid," kind of thing. There are days where I'm like, "I wish she could see me now," but anyway.

I remember being in there with one of my friends who was the college kid, and they were like, "Oh, great, great, great," and I went up there and it was like, "No." It wasn't like I was a poor student or anything. I wasn't taking AP anything. So in the end, those two teachers, once I got accepted to almost every school I applied to, they were like, "Where are your friends going?" I said, "Oh, I have a friend that's going to San Jose State, and another friend that's going to Berkeley," et cetera. He said, "Go wherever you want to go," and then the other teacher said, "If I were you, I would go where I knew no one."

Q: Wow.

Jackson Dumont: He said, "Sonoma, it was founded by hippies." I didn't know who Ntozake Shange was. He was like, "Some amazing literary figures teach there. People who have left places like Berkeley and other schools that you've mentioned left there to go teach at this school because it was founded by the people. It was founded by people who wanted to make a difference in the world." So I was like, "Okay." [*Laughter*]

So I went to this school, and he was like, "You can go to any of these other schools and you will likely be an amazing version of yourself, but if you go to Sonoma, I would bet that you'd be on a journey to find yourself." I still remember that from when I was a kid. I didn't have anyone in my ear, anything like that. The other thing that is really interesting is that once I got accepted, I

went to this little storefront church on the corner of Fillmore and Hermann. What's fake, the stickers that they put on windows that look like stained glass. We were all about all of that. It was like, "Yeah," right? I love this church. I think I still have stuff from my dorm in the basement of this church, and I mean, I really need to—

This is bananas, but one of the deaconesses at this church—her name was Julia [*phonetic*] Spriggs—they lived up the street from me. I didn't really know her like that. She was fairer than me, but clearly a Black woman. She was like a light-skinned Shirley Chisholm type, the pillbox hats on Sundays, the pressed suits, the cropped jackets with the pencil skirt, short, just around the knee, always stockings. I just remember that, the purse with the little strap that you just held yourself, kind of thing. One day, she came. She said, "Are you going to college?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, I believe I am." I was very active in church. She said, "Ask your godfather or your momma, whoever, if you can come to my house." So I went to my mom and I was like, "This mom wants me to come to her house. She lives across the street from DMV." My mother was like, "What?" Then my godfather was like, "No, no, she's fine, whatever."

She said she would help me apply for a scholarship, just picked me out—that's my life. My entire life is, "Let me pick her." Divinely protected, as my mother would say. So I went to her house, and it was then that I realized, oh, I knew her grandson, who actually was friends with my boyfriend whose mother gave me the book. He came out and answered the door and I was like, "You live here?" And he was like, "This is my grandmother's house."

Anyway, so we're there, and she had her nieces who would come back, or grandkids or something, and they were fly. They had gone off to Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs]. I remember they had a lot of makeup on, probably Fashion Fair, whatever. [*Laughs*] So anyway, long story short, she helped me apply for a scholarship from Eastern Star.

Q: Oh my God.

Jackson Dumont: She was a member of Eastern Star. We sat at her table, and her couches were covered in plastic. Everything was perfect in her house, clean. You know, the clean, upright Black person's house. I'm like, "They own a vacuum cleaner up in here. It's really nice." We sat and she put a placemat and she fed me, and then we worked on my application.

I kid you not when I tell you this next piece, you are going to fall through the floor. So I went to school to study biology. I changed my major to art history. I was okay at the sciences, but remember, I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but I still was actively engaged in all these creative acts. I was taking ceramics and I was taking art history class, and then I saw *Boomerang*, and I saw Halle Berry being her fabulous [*unclear*] self, so I thought maybe I wanted to be a graphic artist or a graphic designer. Then I saw this special on the Studio Museum in Harlem [New York, NY] and on the Harlem Renaissance, and yes, all these amazing Black women who were fly with their big necklaces and their short haircuts, the Mary Schmidt Campbells, the Kinshasha Conwills, the Pat Cruises [*phonetic*], all these artists and stuff that are on this special.

So when I go to college, one of my girlfriends who grew up in Hawthorne had gone on exchange to the Caribbean to the US Virgin Islands, and I didn't even have a passport, and she was like, "You don't need a passport. You can actually go and do an exchange." So I decided I'm going to do an exchange to a Historically Black College. So I go to Alabama State [University, Montgomery, AL] for a semester. Yes.

Then I go on exchange to New York. You're only supposed to stay away for two semesters, but I stayed away for a year and a half. I go to New York, I get an internship at—basically Halle Berry's life. I decide I'm going to get an internship at a graphic design company while I'm still studying biology at Hunter College, and while I'm taking biology courses, I decide I'm going to take a drawing course too, and I started taking drawing classes, and they had an externship program run by a Black woman, and I said, "I really want to get an internship at this place called the Studio Museum." So I get an internship at the Studio Museum eventually after calling and calling, and I get it in PR, and then they transfer me around where I'm in the director's office, and all these different places, and education, and curatorial, and it's the most amazing thing.

I go to my first exhibition, my first biennial with all these amazing people. Franklin Sirmans, who was an intern there at the time, was working in the registrar's office. These are all my people, right? Thelma [*phonetic*] curates Black Male, and I'm like, "What is this Black Male thing?" It all starts to happen, right?

So fast forward many years. I'm in the art world. I become a fellow at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York, NY]. I change my major to art history. I do all these different things.

I'm publishing, I'm doing stuff, and then I'm hanging out with my friend Radcliffe Bailey, who's a well-known artist. He comes to New York. He's like, "Let's go hang out with Wadsworth Jarrell," who's from AfriCOBRA [the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists]. So I'm like, "Oh yes." It's north of Harlem, but not quite the Bronx.

So we go to their house and he says, "Oh, and Ed Spriggs is going to be there." So Ed Spriggs is sitting there. Ed Spriggs actually at the time was running the Hammonds House in Atlanta, Georgia, which is a Studio Museum of Georgia, if you will, in many ways—an early, early Studio Museum. So he's there, we're all talking, and AfriCOBRA, they are the visual artists of the Civil Rights Movement. They do all kinds of stuff. I was in graduate school, and some of the professors at Howard at the time were AfriCOBRA. The head of the department at Howard was Jeff Donaldson. The head of the whole art school was from AfriCOBRA.

Fast forward, we're sitting there, and I look, and in the middle of us talking, Ed Spriggs says, "Where are you from?" And I said, "San Francisco." And he says, "Oh, I'm from San Francisco." And I look at him and I'm like, "Is your mother Julia Spriggs?"

Q: No.

Jackson Dumont: His mother is the light-skinned Black deaconess from my church who helped me get my first scholarship to college, and how is it that Ed Spriggs was one of the first Directors of the Studio Museum in Harlem?

When I talk about this tetheredness, this interconnectedness, this ecosystem, what I'm most interested in our work today is how do we make this stuff not feel like happenstance, that it actually can be much more intentional, right? This woman, I literally learned this probably twenty years ago, but by the time twenty years ago, I'm fifteen years into my career at that point, right? And I just say, "No, no, your mother? Did your mother used to live across the street?" He said, "I grew up in San Francisco." I was like, "Oh, Spriggs." I was like, "Oh wow, are you related to Julia Spriggs?"

I'm not a pedigree person. I'm a person when people say to me, "Oh, you're from San Francisco? What are your people's name?" I'm like, "Oh, my people are the people your people don't know. Really, truly. We don't come from whatever."

When I tell you he said, "Oh yes," I said, "Oh, I had a Sister Spriggs who went to our church who was a deaconess," and he said, "Oh, my mother was a deaconess." I said, "Did your mother used to live across the street from—what do you call it—DMV?" And he said, "Yes, I grew up there." And I said, "Oh my God." I was like, "Your mother, Julia Spriggs, was a great custodian of that little—" That was it. She did that, nothing else. She never asked me about it again. We never did anything. It was just such a fascinating—

So that was how and why I ended up at Sonoma State and why I ended up staying there with that kind of support from them. No strings attached. I never saw those women. No, never, nothing.

Q: I'm speechless, Sandra.

Jackson Dumont: I got other support financially from the government and all that stuff, but that little thing, Eastern Star.

Q: I'm just speechless. That's just extraordinary. I don't know what to say.

Jackson Dumont: I mean, I don't even know. I wish I had gotten to know her better. In fact, I'm trying to go to Atlanta in the near future to see Radcliffe, but hopefully I'll get to see Ed Spriggs. But yes, and I didn't know for years he was an early Director at the Studio Museum at Harlem, pre-Mary Schmidt Campbell. I think he might've been even the second director, third director, something like that.

Q: Incredible.

Jackson Dumont: Anyway, so that's how I ended up at Sonoma State, [*unclear*] and some advisors told me, "Go there and be who you're going to be."

Q: Incredible. I wanted to talk about just briefly something that you said that I thought was really important about applications and forms, right, particularly for people whose families are Great Migration survivors and whose families were sharecroppers or poor or running or domestics, like my family, whatever. Didn't even know, couldn't even, because of the history of Jim Crow and racism, wouldn't even know. The only relationship that so many people had to educational institutions were to clean them or to work there in some way, [*unclear*] being due, or one could

go to these institutions, particularly in the South where you just already know because of segregation that you're not allowed. You would never even think, right?

And so what you said about nobody knew how to fill out an application, that is such a result of American apartheid. We won't even talk about prohibitive literacy and all that, right? If you have a class of people that you make it illegal to learn how to read and write, and then a few generations later, it's illegal for them to go into an institution except to clean it, how could their offspring know about filling out a college application, or even that college is a place that we could go? I mean, other people I interviewed—my uncle, for example—I didn't know I had relatives that went to USC in the '20s and '30s. I had no idea because my parents were very, very working class, right? So I was shocked when he told me this because he migrated to LA from Louisiana a couple of decades before my parents did. He's older.

But I'm just saying that this issue of applications and forms, I don't know that we take seriously enough, our lack of experience and intimacy with these kinds of processes and the effects it's had on generations of people, right? It's just curious. A friend of mine who's Vietnamese and who came to San Diego as a part of the refugee relocation process after the American war in Vietnam [1954-75] talks about the anxiety that her parents felt and her role as translator in Southern California of having to fill out forms for social services.

Instead of people thinking, "This is an issue of class or issue of education or issue of anything," it's an issue of the white supremacist history of segregation and apartheid in America. That's

what it is. So like you, I never felt anything about the fact that my parents couldn't help me figure out how to apply to college. How could they have? How could they have?

Jackson Dumont: It's so interesting. You're hitting something on the head here because I didn't know—so growing up in San Francisco, I was also very fair-skinned and in a Black neighborhood where I'm sure over in the Haight and a bunch of other places, there were a ton of Black—I know that there were. I mean, I had friends that were mixed race too. But I didn't grow up seeing couples. I just didn't have them.

I have to think back. I remember talking to my late aunt, who lived in Carson, about how I used to think they were rich because in Carson, people, it was a mother and a father—like, my aunt and uncle were there. They had the nuclear family, if you will, and they had a car. People came outside and washed their cars on Saturdays and played James Brown loud, and I remember coming here for the summer with my—I think there used to be something called the Golden Bird or whatever, the chicken—[*Laughs*] My mother was like, "Put it in the back, and you're going to eat this on the way to San Francisco, on your way back." But I just remember all of that feeling very specifically different from my experience in San Francisco because we had less, if you will, very humble beginnings.

But my aunt, despite all of me thinking they were rich, I also knew that she worked in the factories, which I know now is Main Street, as I understand it, right? The factories downtown. And my uncle worked at McDonnell Douglas, or McDougal Douglas, one of those places, right? He couldn't hear worth a damn. But that they used to do very LA things as Black couples, which

you didn't see in San Francisco, so I didn't see. So we would go to Dominguez Hills and walk, and you would see people running around. But it was all Black people. You just saw them being about their day. But it was so dramatically different than my regular day.

So in San Francisco, it was just so interesting. I had this imagined narrative [*phonetic*] about my family here. They didn't have any issues. There was no struggle with anything. But in San Francisco, one of the things I would say is that it was clear to me that I was writing my excuse notes because my mom, in terms of writing and comprehension, she can read, but it's functional. The comprehension is just different, right? But she's one of the smartest folks. So I remember taking notes to school, and it was clear that I had written it and she had signed it, but at times, they thought I was forging it. The embarrassment only came when I was called to the carpet publicly. Like, "She didn't write this," and I'm like, "I know, I wrote it. She told me to write this and she signed it."

But then them having to call my mother, and embarrassment that came for her about, "Why would you be asking your child to do this?" It's exactly what I see a lot on the East Coast when you have children and they're in trouble at school, and they have to translate for their parents, and the teacher is saying, "Your child, blah-blah-blah," and the child has to translate what the person is saying about them to their parents.

Q: Yes.

Jackson Dumont: It's the most oppressive and irresponsible thing, right? Or me going to the doctor with my mom. Even now, I even have to roll out my credentials sometimes. I'm just like, "I don't even understand what you're saying." I'm like, "I'm not a doctor. I am an art historian." And then they back up. Credentializing [*sic*] that is like dropping something, which is absurd that you would have to do that. I've even said things like, "I mean, is there an embossment here?" That I even know the word embossment is interesting.

So because they're looking at me through the lens of the patient that rolled in that is not able to advocate for themselves because they are of the generation, "Whatever you say, doctor." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, something is not right here." So that idea that you're saying, like, how could they? I'm only embarrassed because you actually called it out. I'm not embarrassed for any other reason. It's in proximity to you that I'm embarrassed." So yes.

Q: Toni Morrison talks about that embarrassment, that we're embarrassed that they're acting about all these notions just as a human, just I'm morally embarrassed for the person not seeing all of this, right? It's a pity, really. But I feel sorry for them for their lack of morality. That's what Toni Morrison talks a lot about.

Jackson Dumont: You saying that also brings me back to this talk I gave at the Loophole of Retreat, and I have to send it to you.

Q: I've seen it. It is extraordinary.

Jackson Dumont: But it made me realize how deeply—thank you, by the way—entrenched and subtle some of these things are because the fact of the matter is that my upbringing and the limited resources or the lack of this or whatever or me being—I'm the fifth of five children and I'm the first to go to college. That is actually, unfortunately normal.

Q: Yes.

Jackson Dumont: [*Laughs*] I am not special in that. That is just normal unfortunately. But when looking at some of this, when I gave that talk, I was trying to figure out, "What is it that I really am—" The fact that I'm really trying to hone in on here, I for years felt a disconnect between my social life and my professional life, my actual life and my professional life, my everyday existence and my professional existence. The table I sit at for work and the contours of what that looks like, I don't measure them against each other. They're just different spaces to me. But this talk for me was about, "How do I do what I believe and align with how I was raised in San Francisco, how do I connect them together from an ecosystem point of view?"

When I was packing up my mom's house and I started looking at all the objects she had collected, of which I have historically called shit, "Why do you have so much shit? What is this?" And she would say two things. One, "I don't have all the money in the world. I don't want to be throwing this stuff away." So there's a lot in that. One is that I hold onto things because I don't know when I'm going to get another thing. Two, "I hold onto things because I actually am greater than you all." And three, "I actually am tied to these things I got."

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: This ain't a frivolous existence. Everything, I'm tied to it. I'm connected to these things. So for me to look at that, if I just remove my mother from it and I looked at it for what it was, it was a collection of objects.

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: It's like a grand life installation. And why can I not think about Edie Jackson that way, but I can think about Joseph Cornell that way? What? And my whole career is built on living with things, coming to your own place of things, learning about who you are? What a master of it. I'm looking at this room, and I'm in my fifties with years behind me professionally, and I'm just now looking at this.

So you all doing this is so fascinating to me because it actually speaks to much more of a people's history, and we all know that the history is made by the authors. But yes, this thingness, that is so—yes, anyway, I went on a tangent.

Q: —because you're one of the preeminent curators and art historians of our time, and how even given that that is the case—you're the Director of the Lucas Narrative Museum and the CEO. Even that all of this is the case—and we're going to talk about your training in a minute—that your mother can be a collector, or even a curator, her own private curator in her life, and how blind we are to certain things. I love that you brought in Cornell. Right? You can see that, or

[Milton Ernest] Robert Rauchenberg's use of detritus, which I love, and scratchings and newspapers and whatever, found objects, right? But we can't see it in our mothers and grandmothers and grandfathers and uncles.

I think a lot of it, though, is how we've been trained to see and what we've been trained to not see or not take seriously, and that is why I also love this project very much.

Jackson Dumont: Yes, it's impressive.

Q: Sandra, listening to you talk about where you grew up, one the reasons why I became a writer—I would've become an artist if there were any art classes—but one of the reasons why I became a writer is that it was just so phenomenal to me to see what my parent's generation, the generation above them, the generation above them, how they fought, taught, what they fought and talked about, the level of genius, just pure genius in their existence, right? That it's only now that everybody's gone during COVID [novel coronavirus disease 2019]—I know I'm digressing, Kim and Maddie, I'll get back to it—but the level of pure genius.

I'll never forget when COVID was hitting [2020] because I had lived in San Francisco for many years and worked during the AIDS crisis at one of the top AIDS agencies in the city, Shanti Project, and because I'm queer, the moment we started hearing inklings about COVID, I literally started digging up my mother's backyard and ordering seeds and plants to grow a vegetable garden, and my sister thought I was nuts, and I probably was. But I was terrified.

By the time we were in lockdown and a few months later, we had vegetables galore. Basically I told my sister, “It’s a war garden,” from World War II when people used to grow vegetables because there was no food, and basically grew vegetables. My plan was to be able to feed as many people as possible because at that point, there were no groceries in the stores because it’s on the border of Compton and Carson, right? So my sister said, “How did you know how to do that?” And I said, “What?” And she said, “Plant a garden, because we didn’t have a garden.” I was like, “Grandmother.” She was like, “What are you talking about?” I said, “Grandmother taught me.”

The reason why I remembered it is because my grandmother said during the Depression in Louisiana, the reason why they were never, ever, ever hungry, not for a second, is because all these Black people in their neighborhood had their backyard gardens. So they didn’t have any food in the grocery store, really, but she said they were never hungry because they all had chickens, they all had cows, and they bartered through groceries. She said that not a day was hard, not one day of the Depression.

So the thing for me that’s so fascinating about what you’re talking about, especially around your mother and these other people you empower in your neighborhood, and thinking about Great Migration survival instincts and technologies, is how these people who are pretty much invisible to history—history can’t see them—the intelligence level is so high. My grandmother was barely literate. She could read the Bible and she could write grocery lists, a few things. But most people would not think of her as a genius, and I’m telling you right now my grandmother was a genius, and you can’t tell me otherwise.

Jackson Dumont: Right.

Q: —had to survive. She could literally—I told Candy [*phonetic*], "I think I could—" When I planted this garden, I said, "I think I could make ten to twenty people survive off this garden and what we have in here." She was like, "How are you thinking about this?" I said, "Because Grandmother said she could probably feed fifty people from her garden."

Jackson Dumont: Wow.

Q: Right? But my grandmother was illiterate. She was in COGIC. She loved the Catholic church—blasphemy—all these things. But it's just fascinating, listening to you talk about your mother and the woman who was in the church, the deaconess who helped you with your application. I mean, these little seemingly small interventions—or maybe they're not interventions. I think that's what you were trying to say, Sandra. Maybe this is the ecology. Maybe it's not an intervention at all. Maybe it's not a correction at all. Maybe this is just what we do.

Jackson Dumont: My fear is that a lot of that very serious communal stuff is gone, for example, going to church was not about really hearing the Word. It was really about fellowship. It even says that Biblically. But somehow we've traded that in, right? Everyone is in search of fellowship in some way, right? Community, fellowship. I would say that fellowship is very different from community. We do it together. This is a different thing.

One of my siblings passed away, the second oldest of the five, and it's been a while, and I remember when he passed away, it was the most amazing—it wasn't even amazing, I would say. I just had forgot. I had forgotten what happens when someone passes away. When I was going to church, it's like someone passed away. Okay, the people would get together and they'd be like, "Okay, who's going to bring this? Who's going to bring this? Who's going to be there? Who's going to plate the food? Who's going to do this? Who's going to go take food to them on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday?" It's just the engine that does. It's not even an engine that could. There is a benevolent group at these tiny little churches or big churches, all of those, right?

And so even just the naming of some of the stuff, the Home Informed Mission, the Lily of the Valley Circle, the Rose of Sharon Circle, all have these different things that are tied to real deep meanings or whatever. But I remember when my brother passed away and I was thinking, "Oh my God, I've got to do all this myself." And even when my godfather passed away, I was working at that point, and I was like, "I have to figure out how to do this." Being someone that does, I was doing, right? Then people just being like—would not even allow it. It was offensive to them that I would think about doing anything that had to do with the repast, you know what I mean? "I need someone to sing." I'm like, "Who's going to sing?" They're like, "Oh, well, do you like the way Jenny [*phonetic*] sings? Okay, Jenny'll sing." "Well, okay." "Jenny doesn't need nothing. Just make an offering at the church." It's an offering. You're not paying anybody. It's an offering into the communal pot. Now, you pay people, you know what I mean? You need to pay whatever. But it's just showing up. That's what it is. It's literally the show up.

Jackson Dumont: [*Laughs*] We'll see. So anyway, yes, I think that what you guys are doing is so important to this process for all those reasons.

Q: Sandra, I don't want to keep you because I know it's getting late, but I wonder if you can talk to us for a while about after college. I think that it's amazing what you were saying. I mean, I love these so-called accidents, right? I'm so obsessed with accidents, and not related to this recording, but later, remind me to send you an essay I'm writing called "Wake," and it's about the funerary wakes and how I go from thinking that what was most important about my childhood was filé gumbo, and knowing the history of this colonialism as gumbo. But now that I'm older, I think it is the funerary wake, and watching communities show up for people for death.

So I'll talk to you about it later, but just listening to you talk, I think it's right on, and the distinction between fellowship, and that there's something we lost, and that people, when they lose someone, you didn't have to do anything because the community would just come in and hold you, and your only job was to feel what you were feeling, and there was always food, and always everything, right?

Jackson Dumont: To the point of overwhelming. You were like, "Stop, stop. I don't need no more chickens, literally."

Q: —thing, which I put in the essay, is about how we also knew that six months after the death, then you had to check back in and double down because that's when grief really begins. It's just a known thing. You put it in your calendar, right? Right, anyway.

Jackson Dumont: "Anybody check on Ms. G? Anybody check on Ms. Robin?"

Q: That's right.

Jackson Dumont: It was just this known thing. As a child, my godfather was a really important person in my life because I didn't grow up with a father that was biological, but I grew up with him. They say he was in his sixties when I was born, so I love old people. I love young people and old people. It's the people in the middle like us that I'm always like, "I don't know about them."

But my godfather used to tell me that when he would give me money, I'd be like, "Oh, no, no, I don't want to get nothing." Even as a small child, I was just like, "I don't want people to give me things like that." He said, "You know some kids always have a handout, right?" One day he said to me, "I want you to stop saying that to me because you know I grew up with oil wells in my backyard." And turns out he played dice and he was a little bit of a numbers runner kind of guy. I went through a lot of girlfriends with him. "Take my goddaughter shopping. Take my baby shopping," whatever. But he was in his sixties when I was born, and apparently he held me before my mother held me, and he was this amazing, amazing person.

And my godmother that my mother appointed as my godmother, they were friends. They all went to Jimmy's West Point together.

Q: Wow.

Jackson Dumont: Which was this Black-owned club on Haight Street, which I think is now a—anyway, it's a different cultural bar. Anyway, so he must've been in his fifties or sixties, but by the time I was a teenager, he was in his seventies. By the time I was in college, he was in his eighties. So he was just this really interesting, older dude, right? And part of what I used to do with him every week was go around his building, and this old man used to go to other people's apartments, and they were shut-ins. He would go to their door and be like, "You need anything from the store?"

So we would take notes and we would go, and that's how I learned about rain checks at stores. Something was on sale, to make sure you got the sale, you've got to rain check, all this. I would go back around and go. "Did we pick that up for Ms. Bertha down in 321 and Ms. Elizabeth down in 722?" Or whatever. "She needs this taken care of. Someone needs to walk her dog." He would go around and do this. Now, he was a spicy person, truly a spicy dude, and my mom, she sounds all sweet the way I describe her, but she wasn't sweet all the time. The reason I want you to talk to her directly, because she'll be like, "I was a bad bitch." She will say stuff like that, or things that are unpublishable, like literally would just be for you.

So these elders, I saw them as people. They weren't the sweet kind of people like that, you know what I'm saying? These are the people that had—I don't know if you've ever seen this. I swear, I wish I had taken this when he passed away. But there was a little kid, like a cherub with their penis out, and at the bottom you put the liquor in the bottom, and you push the head and the pee comes out but it's gin or whatever it is, right? He was that guy.

Q: All these objects. I love it.

Jackson Dumont: Right? These things, right, that they just had in their spaces, and they looked glamorous. They looked bad. And then the minute the wall tapestry that had Martin Luther King, Jesus, and Kennedy, those things that were just made to be—

Q: Like people with the afros and the machine guns.

Jackson Dumont: [*Laughter*] Yes, you've seen that. Like, the velvet paintings. It's just this level. At a certain point, if you're academically trained, you're like, "That's so kitschy." Now, I'm like, "Oh my God, get me all that shit. Give it all to me."

Q: Go for it.

Jackson Dumont: Yes. I'm like, "I have a whole genre space for this right now." But yes, they're just these elders. I think that's the big piece of it. They would curse people at church and curse under their breath at church, but still be sanctified, just this very textured people. So I realize that

sometimes when I'm talking about my mom, it sounds like she's sweet in this other saccharine kind of way, or like she should never be presented as the upright citizen kind of person, you know what I mean? She's not that at all, and she has made some terrible decisions in her life that affected us tremendously. But it's fascinating when we go to any place in San Francisco. You start to realize, I'm like, "You don't know who that is," and they're like, "Oh my God, Ms. Jackson, I haven't seen you in a while." I'm like, "Oh, you actually do know this person."

We were walking down the street the other day, my sister and my mom. We were at the Fillmore Jazz Festival a couple months ago. I just took my mom out to kind of just be out in some decent weather, and this guy walks by and says, "Oh, is that Ms. Jackson? Is that you?" She was like, "Yes, I know you." And she didn't know what she was talking about. But then my sister walks up and is like, "Dang, Tuna Fish, you look good." All these people. They started talking about the Fillmore is not Fillmore anymore. It's not like it was, et cetera. But anyway, I digress. What were you going to ask me?

Q: So many things. But one thing I was thinking about is to get towards where you went after college is just that you were studying biology, and then you became an art historian, incredible leap, maybe, but maybe not because nature is such an exquisite thing to look at and meditate upon. But I guess I want to say why art history? Why was that the thing that caught your eye?

Jackson Dumont: Well, two things. One, it is very real that I saw these shows on public television, the documentary and also this show *Boomerang*. Those two things were very prominent in my psychology at the time. Popular culture is actually so much of who I am. I'm

interested in tethering these two worlds together, very academic space and things that are taking up the popular psychology of everyday existence. Why do those things always have to be so far apart for people to feel important in their spaces, mainly academia?

I also find that a lot of people who work in museums oftentimes are trying to feel more academic, so they take that connection to the everyday out oftentimes, and then people who are working in academia are like, "I need my work to be seen by more than twenty-three people in a class five times a year or two times a week. I want my work to be much more part of the everyday existence of people," which is why the public intellectual has risen so deeply. I feel like those are one of the only reasons why people like Henry Louis Gates [Jr.], Isabel Wilkerson, Cornel West, those are people that they're common names because they cared enough to make things public without compromising the integrity of the work or research, for better or for worse, in some cases.

So there's that piece. But then I also had an amazing three really interesting professors in undergrad that were a part of the matriculation requirements. So general education requirements, which help you figure out what you want to do. So the first two years, you're taking all these courses. So while I was taking biology, you had to take a humanities course, so I took art history, and I took this class, and I remember learning about *Arnolfini's Wedding*. Most people are interested in what's happening in the front of *Aronolfini's Wedding*, two people getting married, whatever. But there's this mirror in the back, and I was like, "What's happening in the mirror? And what's happening outside the window? Why?" The professor was so interested, and I was

like, “And who’s the Black person over here? Why is the dog—” I was so interested in a lot of those kinds of things.

Then fast forward, I had another class that was the most odd—I shouldn’t say odd. The guy was a great storyteller, but he looked like the typical—if you were looking in an encyclopedia, he wasn’t stylistically my dude, but the way he talked about art, it was all stories. So he talked about Artemisia Gentileschi and I was like, “Oh my God.” She was a feminist. Wow. The slashing of the throat, the power of the woman. It was just these really interesting stories that weren't just about, “This was painted on this day by this artist. This is about the artist. This is it.” It was very much about art and history being bound together, which was fascinating to me.

But the one who really blew things out of the water for me was a professor of contemporary art, and he was a younger guy. His name was Michael Schwager [*phonetic*], and he ran the art gallery. So I had learned that you could go eat food at these receptions. I mean, it’s so basic and terrible and just hood like I am. So I would go and eat at these receptions, but it turns out he was a great instructor, and it was in his class that I saw the expansiveness of more women artists, people of color. He was showing everything and tying it to the other courses that I had taken, like “These artists are really interested in the same ideas that Gentileschi is interested in,” and blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah.

Turns out that one of those professors was married to a professor of chemistry, and so that same ecosystem situation happened. But I have to tell you, it really was truly—more than anything, I think I became much more interested in art and culture just as a quick little thing that sparked my

interest because of those two really important—I mean, *Boomerang*, and I could see a career. I could see they were going to openings. They did things that felt probably really simple to me now, but then they mattered.

I wish it was more. I wish I could truthfully say that it was much more of an intellectual decision, but it truly was more of a, "Feels right, I'm interested in that." Which is what's so fascinating about my godson. He was studying kinesiology when he went to school his first year, and he came back, and he's the kid I could give a giant book to when he was seven about Greek gods or whatever, and he would just sit and just flip through the pages. All the other kids are like, "I can't believe you like a book. Don't you want this?" And he's like, "Oh, I really think this is so cool." Then he got out of that space because people were teasing him. Now he's just like, "I really like history."

I wanted to comment upon something you just said about you wish it were deeper than *Boomerang* and—what else did you say?

Jackson Dumont: It's this special I saw on the Harlem Renaissance when they talk about the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Q: Then you said, "Well, it wasn't this intellectual thing. It was this thing." But I think those things are the same, and I don't think it has to be something—I don't know if there's anything deeper than that is what I'm trying to say. I don't think it's out there. One of the beautiful things about the contributions that you and your colleagues have made to how we think about art is

changing how we think about inspiration, influence, intuition, all of these things. I remember being turned out by one poem by Margaret Walker when I was a kid, and merely because I was like, "I didn't know you could do that with English, you got to do that."

Or Toni Morrison and the novel *Tar Baby*, which was my first novel that I ever read for hers. She wrote the word N-A-W-period, naw. It was in some dialogue moment, or maybe monologue, and some character's like, "[*Mumbles*], naw," period, and keep writing, and I had never imagined that you could take Black vernacular and aestheticize it to such a degree that it was sublime, right?

So I think that that is deep, that it was *Boomerang* and a documentary about the Harlem Renaissance that made you do some kind of internal intellectual shift in your psyche about what was possible for your life. That's profound to me.

Jackson Dumont: The way you're talking about this, I need this right now specifically because I think it helps me think even more deeply about this issue of class and how that is at the core of what I think impacts me saying something like, "I wish it were more intellectual. I wish it were more of this other thing," whereas if I didn't have that veil of class, that I probably would just be saying, "It is what it is," right? It is, right?

So there's this interesting—still, yet and still a filter there—not a filter, a sieve. Not a filter like I'm filtering something. It's still going through this sieve of class and coming out on the other

side with almost a, "how do I keep this?" Anyway, I don't know how to explain it. But there is something there that I need to pay attention to.

Q: No, absolutely. I'm convinced now I'm a very well-read person. I have three graduate degrees, [*unclear*] outside of the United States [*unclear*] my life, right? Some of my work is in theology, ancient languages, [*mumbling*]. I grew up on Sixth Avenue. We were very poor, okay? Right now, I am still like—my father, the janitor, was the most interesting motherfucker I ever met, ever read, ever saw, ever thought about, have ever been exposed to, including Abhinavagupta, the ninth century [*unclear*], philosopher, including [Ludwig] Wittgenstein, including everything I've ever been exposed to.

I maintain now ferociously that my father was the most interesting motherfucker I've ever been exposed to in my entire life. Never went to college. Never. He pushed a broom and then a forklift his entire life, and he was fascinatingly brilliant about life, people. He was a philosopher. He was a closet mathematician. And not only that, Sandra, he was not an exception. So was Mr. Kelly [*phonetic*] down the street, Mr. Wally [*phonetic*], Mr. Blah-blah-blah, Ms. So-and-so, my grandmother, the gardener, whomever. People were so fascinatingly brilliant. But no one bothered to talk to them.

Jackson Dumont: Yes, that's the piece, right?

Q: My grandmother would say—she worked in the sweatshop when she moved to LA from New Orleans. She was a master tailor. If you went to her house or you were out with her and you

would say, “I like that suit that woman has on,” she would go, “You like that, Sandra?” You would go, “Yes, Ms. Brooks, I really like that.” She’d be like, “Baby, come back in a few days. I’ll have it ready for you.” She could eyeball your body, tell you where your measurements were, eyeball the suit, and then you could pick it up in a few days. Now, you tell me that wasn’t genius. You just can’t, right?

I digress, but I’m just saying, you are talking about a documentary and *Boomerang*—which, I’m sorry, is a brilliant film. I mean, Richard Pryor—not in that film—but Richard Pryor for me is one of the top critical thinkers of our time.

Jackson Dumont: I agree.

Q: Right? Showed us that comedy, the seriousness of comedy, right? So I’m just thinking about *Boomerang*, going, “Of course, Sandra, of course, that’s beautiful what you’re saying.” And that those two things were able to change a whole life, the trajectory of a whole life, for me speaks volumes about the power of that work.

Jackson Dumont: I’ve been thinking a lot about—you’re right. So it is *Boomerang* and this other movie, and you are absolutely right, and it is also—those things, feeling like the manifestation, the succinct manifestation of this accumulation, the stuff that people like Oprah used to say. “It’s an ah-ha moment.” I’m like, I don’t know that I believe in an ah-ha moment. I feel like you arrive at a place because of all these things starting to come together. I guess there could be ah-ha moments. But there is just this thing.

But I was also just acknowledging for myself, once again, that—I guess it's what I would also describe as intellectual oppression, you know what I'm saying? It is the same thing that happens when I see my mom's stuff, and then I finally get to a place where I'm like, "What? Wait, what?" Right? But all these things that we're talking about, I love from pushing a broom to pushing a forklift. I think that those are all things that are tied to these emotional, physical, intellectual migrations that our families experienced and witnessed, so yes. I don't know. I don't know.

It is a migration for me to go from those very humble, poor beginnings where there's certain kinds of traumas and challenges and joys and celebrations to the space where I am now, which is all those things come with me, all of which have contributed to who I am. They're all tied to all of these trajectories that have to do with Black people overall. I mean, it's just fascinating to me.

Q: I want to now, if you don't mind, go backwards because I think time isn't linear. So I wanted you to talk about your job now, which is an extraordinary position that you occupy in the world. Can you just tell us a little bit about your job, your title, your work, and the mission of the museum?

Jackson Dumont: Of course. Yes, so I am the Director and CEO of the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art. It is a museum dedicated to visual storytelling across time and place, and it is a museum that really explores both contemporary historical underpinnings of how these images have shaped society, and also level-sets, I would say—or the intentions are that it's looking at

canonical work, works that have been accepted into the canon of art history, and have been anointed as such, as the bearers of great, masterful work, and then some. But they occupy the space of art history in deep and rich ways, and they continue to grow and evolve through contemporaneous practice.

And that actually, sitting alongside—not below or in service to or anything like that—words that actually have been a part of the public consciousness for quite some time. So examples might be colonial drawings of any manner of things that were a part of just the public discourse. So they might've been in newspapers. They might have been in publications. They might have been posters or something somewhere. And then you have Yankoshin Avarre [*phonetic*] looking at colonialism.

We're talking about Blackness, so I'm going to pick Black folks. On one end of the spectrum, you'll have Kerry James Marshall looking at superheroes or stories about Black presence in the world, manufactured, imaginary, or real through the lens of comics. So the museum owns one of the *Mastery* series. Then on the other end of the spectrum, you might have comics that were part of the newspapers, or you might have the cover of *Black Panther*, the original artwork, though. So you're putting these things next to each other.

You might have *New Yorker* covers, which have set up shop in the public imagination in so many ways. I think about the *New Yorker* cover where it's Osama bin Laden, it's Barack and Michelle [Obama], and they're doing the fist bump, and then the whole world erupts in

conversation about just this little image because he's Barack Osama, you know what I'm saying, Obama. Barack Hussein Obama.

So what do these images do in the world? So we're interested as an institution about what do these images and the narratives they present do in the world to us, for us, against us, around us? But they influence us. They shape discussions, and we often don't talk about them as being that imperative in the world—like, striking tonal notes that really influence how we actually exist. If you look across time and place, whether it is Alaska cave paintings, the early gestures by human beings honoring animals as the gods that they valued alongside themselves, or telling a story of a seasonal shift or something like that against right now, looking at some of the most important artists who are making work today.

Or you can actually put, let's just say—forget them being in juxtaposition to each other, but looking at the legibility of an image or what it might mean to someone as an heroic act or an aggressive gesture against them. So there's just all these things set up to shape up who we are. We happen to have at the Lucas Museum, as one example, we have a bunch of pinups, and when I first came to the museum and looked at them, I was just like, "Why do we have pinups?" Of Americana, and the woman waving the flag, in a beautiful patriotic suit or whatever. But then as I start thinking about it more, I'm like, "Wow, what better way to talk about the commodification of the female body."

So it doesn't always have to be pretty, right? When I take that into other spaces and think about lowrider pinups, I look at representation of women to sell other things. It is fascinating when you

start to look at the utilitarian aspect of objects, what they can do and be in the world, that actually can be functional, and they also have been. So there's been no political movement that's existed across time and place, or any social justice movement, or campaign for anything that has not had a visual point of view, particularly for those that are not verbally or literary literate. But most people, almost everyone—except for those who actually have vision loss or whatever, and even they, we also have ways of expressing visualization to people who have vision loss.

Everyone has some relationship to the visual on some level. So that's what this institution is about. It's about really looking at those tensions that exist, but mainly it's about unpacking. I think the most interesting part and function of cultural institutions, it's not about just collecting things. It's really about how they have done something in the world. I don't think I know an artist that hasn't wanted their works—even those that were commissioned to do things, even if they were told to do something—and also how artists have been used as tools to shape messaging.

You don't have the Dust Bowl and you don't have us going to war at that same time without the United States saying, "There's not enough empathy for the war, so we're going to create the Works Progress Administration [WPA] and all these other things and we're going to paint these things in banks. We're going to commission artists to do this, we're going to do that." All these things start to happen as a result of the understanding that art can do and be something, an action-based thing in the world, in addition to it actually standing on its own two feet just as a creative act too.

So I think that is kind of where we're sitting at, as an institution in terms of the purpose of this narrative art piece. We also are in South Los Angeles and bringing an eleven-acre campus, and we just planted two hundred trees. The South LA has less tree shade than most other places, and there are a lot of people of color in this area. It's ninety-plus percent people of color. And the amount of health issues associated with the lack of shade is an issue. So there's an entire movement across the world called shade equity. It's phenomenal. But you can see it really tangibly in Los Angeles in this particular area.

So there's a need for us to have greater access to green spaces for our own health, and South Los Angeles, if you fly over it, you can see that there's less green space in this area than most of Los Angeles. So there is a real interest in bringing more green space to this area. So there's those pieces. There's the architectural work that we really want to influence the field around architecture and design. But this is a real opportunity also for us to look at this notion of what it means to be aspirational. So that's what we're working on at the Lucas Museum.

Q: Thank you, and just a few more questions about the Lucas Museum before we talk about your other positions before you got here. As the Director and CEO of the museum, what are you responsible for? These projects just sound incredible. The museum hasn't opened yet. It's new, right? It's going to open when?

Jackson Dumont: So the museum would open in 2025. The building is three hundred thousand square feet, about, and the campus is eleven acres. It used to be a parking lot. The whole space was a parking lot, and we took all of that and put it underground and added more parking so that

it's a resource for the neighborhood and the cultural institutions that are around it. This really should be a cultural destination already, and it is an amazing, amazing place steeped in this incredible neighborhood called South LA.

I am ultimately responsible for the overall running and operations of this institution and all aspects of it, and so lifting it up to its opening, and I tell people all the time when they're like, "Oh, the building, the building, the building—" The building is amazing. It's designed by an architect named Ma Yansong and the landscape is designed by a landscape architect who has done a lot around Los Angeles, and her name is Mia Lehrer. Ma Yansong was a student of Zaha Hadid. He is really an interesting dude.

I would say that it is a two-hundred-plus year proposition we are opening here. This is not a project. It's not a building. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and experience to be able to do something like this, when we think about our cultural institutions. It is the beginning of a long legacy. So that's what we're doing and that's what I'm responsible for.

Q: I think there's [*unclear*], Sandra. And you moved here from where?

Jackson Dumont: From New York City.

Q: Where you were working at?

Jackson Dumont: I was working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I love the leading questions. Keep doing that. [*Laughs*] I was working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was Chairman of Programming, specifically the Education and Public Programs. So all academia, school programs, artist residencies, anything that had to do with public learning, engagement on any level, that intersected with all artwork or the institution as a whole. And so from performing arts to literature to dance to funding sixty-eight fellowships for people that were doing deep work in digital culture to internships to curriculum development with the school system and teen programs.

One of my favorite programs is thousands of teens, five thousand teens come on one night and just take over the museum. But we partner with sixty other cultural institutions. You could do a one-minute play and have two actors perform it from the Victory Theater, or take a ten-minute Martha Graham dance class. So the focus of that was to have one-stop-shopping for young people to be like, "Let me find my creative match." But I met them at the Met, right? Or on Friday nights, it's like choose your adventure kind of stuff, or a soundtrack that helps people, who that's how they learn at any age, navigate the museum. For people who have vision loss, commissioning a fragrance or having fragrance tours of artwork. "So this is what you're looking at, but if you were to look at this painting, this is what we understand it might smell like. You might smell this dirt in this [Édouard] Manet. You might smell this stench because there's an orange on the counter," or something like that.

Those kinds of things are really, truly meeting people where they are, and not in a way that feels pedantic, but that feels rich and deep. Yes.

Q: Amazing. How long were you there?

Jackson Dumont: I was at the Met for six years. Yes, six years, about six years, and before that, I was in Seattle at the Seattle Art Museum, where I was Deputy Director for Education, Public Programs, and a curator there in Modern and Contemporary Art, and did wonderful and fun things there, and worked with a lot of great artists.

Q: What was your favorite show that you curated in Seattle, that you did?

Jackson Dumont: Oh, that's dangerous to say favorite show. But I can tell you about a few that I fell in love with. For a host of reasons, I could tell you about them. So I curated a show. Titus Kaphar, I remember, who is really seeing his moment now. I think he was up for an Oscar for a film he was working on. But I remember the joy I got out of this show that has to do—it was called *A Brush With History* or something like that, and it was all about history. But everyone was reading about the founding of America because of these paintings, and he was pulling back all of these stories about George Washington and Martha Washington and their owning of slaves, but he was repainting these paintings and cutting them out, and just really having people grapple with the function of works of art in history, that these artists, these very important paintings, had told us that America was founded by this way of thinking, et cetera. So it was George *Washington Crossing the Delaware* [Emanuel Leutze].

It's so interesting that now, we at the Lucas Museum, the museum is the custodian of *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware* [Robert Colescott], and we recently had that on view alongside the famous painting, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Met, which is the criticism of American history and the history of museums and presenting that kind of work. There are multiple lenses on one story.

So that was really interesting. But I have to say one of the most fun, truly super fun, deeply engaging, very critical shows was one that I curated of Theaster Gates's work, and it was a listening room, pretty much. I think that's what we called the show, *Theaster Gates: The Listening Room*. And I visited his then meek and small abode of resources in Chicago. Now it's a very different scale altogether. But he had collected all these albums from a record store in Chicago called Dr. Wax that was going out of business because the property was owned by the University of Chicago and the lease was up. This harkens back to the earlier discussion we were having about [*unclear*] of these places.

But we had this fantastic conversation about this collection of vinyl that he had, and I was like, "We should do something with that." Basically, he did an entire exhibition, and the central point was that we took thousands of these records, and we installed them in the wall. We built the wall out and cut out a niche, and then we had put them in the wall, embedded them like they were in the wall, and no one could touch them except we invited every first Thursday of the month a DJ of my choosing, and one that I met through him. We invited DJs to spin from the time you opened the museum to the time you closed from this archive. So they became the ministers of music. And the DJ booth looked like an altar at a church.

Q: Wow.

Jackson Dumont: Then there were all these other items in the room that tied to the history of place. He had chairs. He had sourced the wood from a local police station. They were the floors of the police station, so you immediately start thinking—and you could sit on them and play a little record, which was my childhood record player, actually, that I put in this show. So those were the only ones that people could play, but you were realizing that you were sitting on something that had absorbed all of the history of this place in this jail, right? Or this police precinct. He had at the time one of his famous firehose paintings. He had a few other works in this space. But one of the best things was the conversations that people would come up to the DJ and have. People would dance in these galleries. So then we had Marc Bamuthi Joseph come in and play.

And the thing I loved about it was that Theaster was a part of this other performance at the center of the city, coming to town with all these great musicians, et cetera, and it was about Blackening the Green Movement, and it was a whole play, and it was a hit. So then because all this work was about a communal experience, it was all about fellowship. We also did a feast with community members and all locally-sourced food. Then I, because I had my own social practice and I collect vinyl, I had given a public talk somewhere at a conference or something like that, and there was a bunch of architects from Seattle in a room, and they asked me if I could do something, what would I do? And they asked me to come and speak to their firm.

I said I would love to open a record store where nothing was for sale, where you could just come and listen to music, and you could dance, and I could invite all these voices in, and musicians would spin just from these records, and people didn't have to be DJs. They would just have to come in, and they would play and talk to people about the music.

We had people healing through music. We had the public participate in cakewalks and talk about the history of cakewalks and music. It was only supposed to be a month, and we had all these volunteers, and the elders would come and help me pack up the sign from outside and bring it in. People loaned their vinyl, which is unheard of, for the public to just leaf through and spin. Not a single record was stolen from this place, and there was no police force at the door, anything like that. It was absolutely incredible to see.

So for me, it was these nodal activities that happened throughout the city that tied back to the central place that these things were emanating from, and it was called the museum. It also helped people understand that you can collect things that—the record collection, the way people care for a record, the sleeve, if you've ever talked to anybody who has a record, that they care, that they love, the liner notes are a catalog for the show. The show is the album. The album is the object. So literally, people came from Canada to come to this thing. It was amazing.

Q: Wow.

Jackson Dumont: So it really was about all of it, and it lit up the city in ways that felt like the museum had a place in the city in a different way than—

Q: Amazing. That's incredible.

Jackson Dumont: Those are some of the fun things. But I would say working at the Whitney and working at the Studio Museum were two experiences that I think truly shaped how I—the Studio Museum taught me how to be stylistically myself. I don't know if it taught me that, but it showed me, "Oh, you can do this. You can be Black in this world. You can be stylistically yourself from this point of view." There were also these spaces where it's like you're also trying to be like the other big institution too, so that's complicated. [*Laughs*] Then the Whitney was like, "Oh, we believe in living artists, and we believe that this is an iterative process, and that you can be in the world in a particular way that is challenging certain things."

I was a fellow there in a Marxist theory program. [Walter] Benjamin, [Paul-Michel] Foucault, Stuart Hall, and I would be like, "And Toni Morrison." [*Laughs*] You know what I mean? Why are we not talking—why do we have to talk about Benjamin and history and memory only through that space—which I adore, but you can also do the exact same thing through a critical analysis of Morrison. I just don't understand, but love the fact that Stuart Hall's in the mix.

So there's that. So I felt like I was intellectually prowess in that space. I could be intellectual. But some of it, I just felt like it was so foreign for me. Not foreign because of me not getting it, foreign for me because the architecture of the language felt like it was being acrobatic in so many ways, right? It was unnecessary, and that's where I started saying things like, "Oh, this feels intellectually oppressive." I would say stuff like that in those spaces. Yvonne Rainer?

Okay. But really? And appreciate Renée Green as well. But I'm interested in a different legibility, not this twenty-something people space.

So that taught me that, that I could speak that language, appreciate it, and then also be over here, and what I think I'm experiencing now is the merging of those spaces. [*Laughs*] It is the Studio Museum with that very specific thing coexisting and being fine with them not at times, and being this other person within that space.

Then the Met, I knew going there, I never wanted to work at the Met. It's an amazing place. I went there because I thought, "Oh wow, they are ready for this other thing, and this is going to be exciting and interesting." I really wanted to understand scale in a different way, and it's amazing when you go to work at a place and just sheerly by working somewhere, you're credentialized. It's fascinating to me. I can just not have done anything. Just surely being employed or being with someone or knowing someone. It's an interesting credentializing that one has to be very careful how they receive it and absorb it and exist within that space. The number of people who are like, "Oh yes, she used to work at the Met," it's like, wow. I'm like, "Oh yes, what about I used to work at the Studio Museum? What about I used to work at this other—or what about?"

In Seattle, I went there because I wanted to understand museums participating in the environmental justice issues and climate issues, and I also wanted to understand how people of certain means were deciding to support certain things, and what that looked like. That place gave me the space to—I tried out a bunch of stuff that was really—I just was able to dance in a

different way there and cut a personal path that allowed me to bring so many people under a tent. It was just amazing, so I don't know if that's what you were looking for, but—

Q: It is so what I was looking for. Can you tell us when you were at the Whitney and when you were at the Studio Museum, and under what context? What your jobs were there too? Before Seattle, you were at the Whitney or the Studio Museum?

Jackson Dumont: Before Seattle, I was at the Studio Museum.

Q: What was your job at the Studio Museum?

Jackson Dumont: Education, public programs, and we did things like I curated an orchestra of DJs. I was like, "I want to see how DJs—" I think it was the *Freestyle* show, and DJs were my musicians in many ways, and I was like, "What if I got DJs, like the best DJs, to collaborate with each other? This one would be the downbeat, this one would be the treble, this one's the bass." So we had DJ Reborn. We had Colmar. We had all these amazing people that were there. Reborn is now—I think she's spinning still with Lauryn Hill and everybody else, all these amazing people.

But we did things like that. That was really the moment where I felt like, "I get to go back into the archive of the Studio Museum and pull up stuff that had receded for a long time," but I knew about it when I was an intern because I was cleaning offices. I was cleaning out boxes of stuff and being like, "*The Fine Art of Collecting*? What is this? What? Benny Andrews and Bromere

Beard [*phonetic*] and Elizabeth Catlett?" They were all traveling, creating Black collecting groups all over the place. This is amazing. Stuff when I was an intern, I did.

Then when I went to work there formally in—I think 2006 was the second time I worked there. I'd done projects with them, but I had come to fully work there as Director of Education. Thelma had just come to work there from the Whitney—Thelma Golden—and Lowery had just left the Met to come work there, and they recruited me to come work there with them, and we were like this three-legged little stool, me being the youngest, looking at them like, "Oh my God, they're amazing people." We did amazing work at that time. So that's when I worked there.

Before that, I was at the Whitney, and I was at the Whitney for two or three years, and worked on a program. Somebody else had raised the money. I worked on it, and it still exists today. It's all about helping young people learn to see, like, truly see, and out of that program, there are artists that have come out of it. It's called Youth Insights [YI], and they've changed it, grown it. It's a great program.

I've developed youth programs everywhere I've gone because I love young people. At the Studio Museum, we had a program called Expanding the Walls built out of sheerly looking at if you could blow the museum like it's a balloon and just expand the walls to a level of transparency, particularly for young people, then what does that look like? What would it mean to them? So that program has been in existence for almost twenty years, and the basis of the program, what they all study is James Van Der Zee's work because the Studio Museum is custodian of the largest archive of James Van Der Zee's work, and they have a show every year.

Yes, these are all places where I feel like I've had a great time, and I look back on it and I think, "Wow, we did amazing stuff, bringing people out of retirement." The stories I could tell you about everyone from Ruby Dee reading found Black love letters with Carl Hancock Rux, and people fanning themselves in the audience, to bringing—oh, oh my goodness, Gordon Parks calling me on my office phone, me answering, and him saying—I started a program called Books and Authors, and we partnered with Kave Khanam [*phonetic*] and all these other people who, I was just like, "Our people need to sell their books." So we would bring out all these authors.

We were having Gordon Parks come. He was publishing, I think, his autobiography, a book of poems, and something else, and we had him come out. He was like, "You know, it was going to be my birthday," and I was like, "What?" And he said, "Yes." The day before, he said, "Do you think you can get me a piano?" I literally answered my phone. "Gordon Parks here. Is this Sandra?" I'm like, "My God." And I said, "Absolutely. Would you like a seven-foot or nine-foot?" I hung up the phone, I called Jason Moran. I was like, "I need a piano." [*Laughter*] And he was like, "Okay."

But I've never seen an artist be treated like—I felt like the paparazzi to the point where I was like, "You need to back up." But people wanted to take pictures of his hands playing and all this stuff, and that was his last birthday.

Q: Wow. Wow, Sandra.

Jackson Dumont: This one is a funny one. Oh my God. Katherine Dunham, the great dancer, author of the Dunham technique. We had a volunteer at the Studio Museum. Lowery had curated a show, Lowery Stokes Sims, on Black modernism, I think it was, and I was like, "Wow, it would be great to invite a great Modernist dancer." I was like, "I don't know who she is." My husband is Haitian, and she has a major place in the ecology of Haiti, right? One of our volunteers was like, "Oh, I know Kat. I know Ms. Dunham. I go and I sit with her. She's in this—" Wherever she was staying. And I said, "Oh, can you connect me to her?" So she said, "Yes."

So I called and I spoke to Ms. Dunham. I was like, "We would love—would you—we'll send a car, anything you need to get you here." So we get her there, and I asked the ladies if there's anything she likes that she needs to feel comfortable, because I heard that she's a grande dame, right? It's like Carmen de Lavallade showing up and all these legendary people, and she comes with an entourage. [*Laughs*] So we go, and I'm nervous, and so we've set up the chairs and everything, and there's a little stage so everyone can see her because Studio Museum doesn't really have a stage, so everyone can see her. And she comes, and they bring her to the second floor, which is pretty much our ad hoc green room, which is the reception for the Studio Museum at the time.

She comes and she sits down, and the person told me that she likes Haitian rum, and we have family members that had just came from Haiti, and I was like, "This is Haitian rum actually from Haiti. It's Barbancourt." And she was like, "Oh." So they sit around and they talk, and all of them are really deferential, and they're like, "No, no, no, we don't want any, blah-blah-blah,"

and it's a ton of people sitting up there. We get downstairs and she's using a wheelchair, and I said, "Ma'am, can you stand?" And she was like, "No." I remember the PR person at the time and the security guards, they sat her in a chair. I can't even remember the wheelchair. But they picked up whatever chair she was in together, and she was a sizable, substantial woman. They pick up the chairs together and they sit her on the table, and they turned to me like, "Oh my God, I was so nervous." It's solid weight.

They pick her up, they sit her on the stage, and the crowd is screaming, screaming, screaming. She does the interview. After the interview, she stands up and takes a freaking bow and steps off the stage. [*Laughs*] I was just like, "What'd you do? Did you literally do that? Wow. Wow."

Ossie Davis, I called. He was a member of the museum. I did what is unthinkable. I called him up. I got his number. It was terrible. I should never have done that. But I called him up and he answered the phone and I hung up. I was like, "Oh my God. That was him." He has such a recognizable voice, right? So then I called back and he was like, "Did you just hang up on me?" I was like, "I am so sorry, sir. I really am. I was just so shocked that you answered the phone." "Who did you expect? You called my house." I mean—

Q: [*Laughs*] That's hilarious.

Jackson Dumont: So anyway, he comes, he wouldn't even take a dime for me. He was like, "Just pay for my car from New Rochelle." We paid for his car. We got there. It was him, Betye Saar. Betye Saar had illustrated a series of essays by Zora Neale Hurston for the limited edition press,

and I asked Betye Saar which one she would like for him to read, and she said, "Now You Cookin' With Gas." So on a Friday evening in Harlem—

Q: Jesus.

Jackson Dumont: —Ossie Davis sat on a chair on a stage and it looked like he had just come from his living room chair, and he read to people in Harlem on a Friday night. You know who was there? Do you know—

Q: Oh my God.

Jackson Dumont: Oh, it was amazing. Then they told us, "He needs to get out of here at a certain time, blah-blah-blah," and I was like, "We've got to get you out of here." He would not leave. He had such a good time. Then Betye Saar gave him one of the images from the book, an original from the book.

But there's eight thousand stories like that, whether it's Suzan-Lori Parks or it is August Wilson or it is—I mean, all of these people. August Wilson, I think that is maybe the only time that he ever missed a curtain call because he was so blown away by the number of people that wanted him to sign his book. It was amazing. Jimmy Heath. I mean, it was just like amazing musicians. There's those kinds of things that you're just like, "Wow," you know?

But Gordon Chambers, do you know Gordon Chambers?

Q: No.

Jackson Dumont: Gordon Chambers rewrote, I think, or recomposed or something like that an Aretha Franklin—she did *My Funny Valentine*, right, later in life? But he wrote for Brownstone. He's a writer, a musician, really amazing. But I remember him sitting in the audience that night when Ossie Davis read. I invited Ossie Davis back again for another panel, and I hope that's recorded somewhere because he gave other artists an earful, other directors of films and all kinds of people.

But there're just so many things like that at different places where I feel very privileged, and yes. So we'll do a lot of fun things like that here. But I feel like I've just talked to you. I have not [*laughs*] [*unclear*].

Q: I'm supposed to be interviewing you to tell me about your life. That's exactly what's supposed to happen. Just phenomenal. I feel so honored, and I feel like this project is so lucky that you're going to be a part of it, everything you've just talked about. I'm just speechless. I'm speechless, Sandra. Thank you so much.

Jackson Dumont: Thank you. I sit in such tremendous gratitude for truly how generative you are, and also just the place from which you work. I don't know. I feel like the geography from which you come has this incredible route to it, or this mapping in it that feels truly like it's shaped you in a way that allows you to be generous and generative and fair and honest, and at the same time,

extremely rigorous. I mean, I really am appreciative of that in a world that is absolutely just overwhelmingly congratulatory in the worst sense of the world. So I am amazed at so many things. Someone asked me how I knew you, and I was like, "I was a fan. I literally went to a book signing and was like, oh my God."

I mean, I wish she were more well-known. Suheir Hammad, I still hold *Born Palestinian, Born Black* at the center of my chest. I mean, your writing, her writing, there's all these people, and then there's other people that I think people give a lot of air time to who I think are fantastic. But I appreciate the conversations also that I've witnessed. So I don't know. Yes, I'm grateful, and I don't know that I—hopefully you make some sense of what I've just said, in a way.

Q: I love what you said. You keep using this word 'ecology,' and I love it so much because I met you. This is not for your interview, so don't worry. I don't think it'll be a part of the interview. But you came up in line for me to sign your book, and the moment I met you, I was like, "We're supposed to be friends." I just knew it. And when that happens, I pay attention, and it's never wrong. This intuition, I was like, "Who is that?" And I told you, I was on tour. I was in four cities a week, and I kept your card. I was like, "I'm supposed to know this person. I don't know why." And here we are.

Jackson Dumont: And here we are.

Q: Here we are. We've been this "Here we are" in a few places. It's so special. So I'm really grateful. I'm so grateful, Sandra. You're so special, and I'm so grateful that you said yes for this interview. It's just going to enrich this project so much. I'm just really, really thankful.

I'm thinking about a question someone asked me recently in a Q&A when I was on tour for my new book. She said, "How did the women in your life shape your aesthetic for this project?" I want you to think about that. But before that, because I want to ask you that same question. But also what you were saying about my work, partly what you just said about *Born Black, Born Palestinian*, or *Born Palestinian, Born Black*, and my work, partly why our work is not in that public sphere is because poetry isn't in the public sphere. At least not this kind. Poets talk about it all the time.

Jackson Dumont: At least not this kind.

Q: Right. Well, what I was going to say, poets talk about it all the time. Best Books of the Year are fiction and nonfiction. They don't even have categories for poetry, right? I mean, it's just ridiculous. So whatever, who cares, that's stupid.

So tell me in closing, how do you think, since you were raised by a single mom, it sounds like, mostly, and a community—which I think is incredible—how do you think your relationship with your mother shapes your work now as an art historian and curator and director?

Jackson Dumont: In many ways. I mean, I think all of us have things about our parents I would assume, that we're like, "I don't want to be that way, that person does this." So that actually is instructive too, right? Then there's the other things that I call the plate of food effect. My mom used to—the barbershop people downstairs, I remember. I mean, if we were having a big meal or whatever, she would make sure that the folks in our neighborhood got a plate or something like that. So to me, that kind of generosity is important without—it's not like I'm giving this to you to get something back. I'm just giving it, right? It's just a plate of food, right?

It wasn't until later that I realized when I tried to explain that to someone, they were like, "What do you mean?" I'm going to fix a plate. Fix you a plate, fix me a plate. That is a very cultural thing. That is not a saying with everyone, right? So I think what I've learned is how to fix a plate, you know what I mean? How to fix a plate for people, how to get a plate, who to get a plate for, when you get a plate. Who gets the plate first? Who gets up to eat first? And all those kinds of things. So there's that.

There are parts of my mom that are very shockingly entitled, and then there are parts of her that are not. I don't know if that's an age thing or just who she is at times. I've learned a lot about that. I think at one point, I went too extreme around not letting people do certain things or not sitting in my space because my lesson was, "Oh my God, I didn't like when someone treated someone a certain way, or my mother treated someone a certain way." But on the flip side of that, I actually learned that there are things that people—it wasn't until an artist said this to me. "I need you to not do that so I can see you in this other space. You don't need to put out all the chairs. I need you to not do that all the time."

So my mom, I think I learned from her how to be also a little tougher, how to hold my own in the world. I think I learned how to be soft from my godfather. So that's interesting. My expectations of roles are very different than sometimes other people's are. Now that my mother is older, I tell her all the time, "I don't know how you became a sweet old lady in your eighties. Where was she in your sixties or in your fifties or whatever?" What's fascinating about that is that she is so affectionate, and she said this to me when I was very young. "Little girl, you know how you're divinely protected?" She's always acted that way. You are divinely protected, so act like it. So I've learned all those kinds of things. I've also learned to make something out of nothing. You need to hustle for what you need at any moment, from her.

But from other women in my life, I've learned so many other things too. Deb Willis, I've learned so many amazing things from her as someone who just is invested in creating community in ways that feel fascinating. And I've learned from people like Thelma and Lorner [*phonetic*] and all these other people, sometimes you just can't give a shit about some of this stuff. Even if you do, this is how you address it, and be rigorous always. There are all these people that are just a pitch above my age that I've felt very lucky to be in this course with.

Then I feel like I learn a lot from the little women in my life, like my little person. Appreciating that I haven't given enough grace to other people at times and really owning that, because I'm sometimes not given enough grace. The unfortunate reality is that I have to wrestle with the fact that as righteous as I think I am [*laughs*] and as on the team as I think I am, there are moments where I'm probably having this lesson because I didn't behave right at some moment, you know

what I'm saying? Or maybe this is a lesson for another day, or maybe some generational shift. I'm getting some karma from somebody else, whatever.

But to answer your question, I think that I've learned what not to do and to do by seeing my mother and witnessing, yes.

Q: Thank you so much, Sandra.

Jackson Dumont: I don't know if that's—yes, I don't know.

Q: Amazing.

Jackson Dumont: My mother, I will tell you this, she gets up every day and she puts on red lipstick.

Q: [*Laughs*] Why do you think she does that?

Jackson Dumont: I think it is interesting. She used to say this all the time, and this is the part of that talk that I gave in Venice. She used to get up and she would say—she'd put on her lipstick and dab a little here, dab a little here, and rub it in because you can always use lipstick as blush. But it's her way of putting herself together, and even if she's not getting out of bed, if she's not doing anything else—I spoke to her yesterday morning. It's six o'clock in the morning. I'm like, "Did you not wash your face last night?" She said, "No, I've been up. I put on my lipstick." It's

just what it is. And so there was a moment where she used to do that, and she would pull the mirror up to the face, and she'd be like, "You a bad bitch." She would say stuff like that, right? Like, very much that.

But I'm going to send you the talk I did. I haven't edited it down since I did it. I need to do that. But this is the talk from the Loophole of Retreat, where I realized in my mom's dementia that—if you end up talking to her, which I hope we do, there're all these things that are revealed. There's the not generous part of dementia that's just like—yes, but it's strange. It's not like she's—she's not experiencing what we're experiencing. She's not experiencing the repeat. For her, it's new every time, right? So it's not even frustrating for her. It's frustrating for me, but it's not frustrating for her, right?

But what's coming through are things that I've never heard before, you know what I mean? Stuff like, "I was going to be an artist, but my daddy said I couldn't make a living at it. I can't believe that. I can't believe he didn't want—I would've been good at it." Which may be why all these years, I thought it was because I grew up broke and we didn't have that many resources and not that much education, and it was just a win that I graduated from high school. The fact that I did these other things is a whole other thing.

But it's fascinating because it might be because she understood already. [*Laughs*] Also, the level of restraint. I think about the amount of restraint Black women practice, Black people practice. I think it's such a skill. It's not a credentialized thing. The act of having to filter, constrain, confine, turn yourself into these other things is such a specific skillset that dementia actually has

cracked that open where she's not practicing some of that restraint in the same way. And so stuff that has been held back for so long is entering into some of our conversations in ways that I'm just like, "Oh, okay."

Q: Yes. Yes.

Jackson Dumont: So these things that were on her walls were little portals, like little loopholes where she's like, "Look at my baby," or, "Oh, I remember." It's these markers for her to get back to the thing, you know what I'm saying? So I'm finding it fascinating to witness her do these things and process it through my little perch I have over here, and that has caused me to actually be less frustrated at times. It's not always. There are times where I answer the phone and she's like, "Give me the phone. Get out of here," and I'm just like, "Oh God." [*Laughs*] But this is one of those things where I really realize that there's something she's experiencing that is both generous and grueling at the same time, so anyway, that's all I got.

Q: Amazing. Amazing. I'm going to hang up, but Sandra, I wanted to tell you if you ever want to talk—I'm going to turn off the recording. Thank you so much on behalf of all of us at Columbia University and at the Emerson Collective. Thank you.

Jackson Dumont: Thank you.

Q: I'm going to turn this recording off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]