

Transcript of Oral History of Danicia Monet Malone

Interviewee: Danicia Monet Malone

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

Date: December 9, 2020

Location: Indianapolis, Indiana, United States of America

Abstract: Danicia Monet Malone details life as a PhD candidate, experience working with and in the Indianapolis community, the spirituality of space, and different forms of social justice.

Emily Leiserson 00:01

Okay, great. We are recording. Okay. So my name is Emily Leiserson. I am here with Danicia Monet Malone. It is Wednesday, December 9, 2020, at about 1:15pm. And we are or I am in Indianapolis, Indiana. But we're doing this interview remotely. So, Danicia, well, where are you actually?

Dancia Monet Malone 00:38

I too am it in Indianapolis, Indiana right now.

Emily Leiserson 00:41

Perfect. Great. So I am going to start by reviewing our informed consent, as is our policy and these interviews. So it just takes about five, maybe 10 minutes to go over kind of the background of the project and how your oral history will be used. We are doing this interview for the COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is associated with the Journal of the Plague Year a COVID-19 archive. The COVID-19 Oral History Project is a rapid response oral history focused on archiving the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. And during this particular section of the project, our research group at the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute is focused on collecting oral histories that speak to the experience of racial justice and racial justice movements in the context of COVID-19. We've designed this project so that professional researchers and the broader public can create and upload oral histories to an open access and open source database. And also so researchers and the public can retrieve the oral histories and other items in the database. And the intent is to collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19 To better understand the impact of the pandemic over time. So all of this means that the recordings, the demographic information and the verbatim transcripts will be deposited in the Journal of the Plague Year a COVID-19 Archive, and the Indiana University Library System for the reuse of researchers and the general public. Do you have any questions about the project so far?

Dancia Monet Malone 02:40

No, I don't this sounds- No, it sounds good.

Emily Leiserson 02:44

Okay, perfect. Great. Taking part in this study of voluntary you can choose not to take part you can leave at any time and leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you're

entitled. It also your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with Indiana, Indiana University IUPUI or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute. So completely voluntary and any section of it participation is also voluntary. Participation means that your interview will be recorded, we're doing this in audio format, and we'll also have a transcript accompanying the recording. So those will be uploaded into the database along with the informed consent form that you've that you provided me with you kindly and that also means that your name and other means of identification will not be confidential. Any questions on that section?

Dancia Monet Malone 03:56

No.

Emily Leiserson 03:57

Okay. Perfect. Thank you. And then could you verbally confirm that you agreed your interview will be made available under the Creative Commons Attribution, non commercial share and share alike license?

Dancia Monet Malone 04:22

Sure yeah I consent.

Emily Leiserson 04:23

Yeah okay, and then could you also please confirm that you are fine with us making your interview available to the public immediately or as soon as the transcripts are ready?

Dancia Monet Malone 04:39

Yes. I'm fine wiht that as well.

Emily Leiserson 04:43

Okay perfect. And then one last question on that, in addition to the signed document, could you just offer a verbal confirmation that you understand and agree to the terms overall of the informed consent?

Dancia Monet Malone 04:58

Yes, I agree.

Emily Leiserson 05:00

Okay, thank you so much, I appreciate you taking the time to go through all of that. Okay, so we can switch gears to the real meat of the interview itself. I will start this off by just asking you to describe what you do on a day to day basis or tell me a little bit about yourself.

Dancia Monet Malone 05:28

Yeah, those are two very different questions. No yeah. Especially now. So I guess a bit about who I am. Wow, where do I begin there, I, you know, I'm a student currently. Back in school for my PhD, really

enjoying that process, looking to study geography and urban studies and compound what I've been doing over the last, now I think, probably 10 years with relations and community engagement and community development. It's my background, my professional background, and I guess at this point, I can, I can liken it to more of a vocation because it truly feels like a passion, is around creating spaces and, and understanding how to be a steward of sacred space. And I look at sacred spaces, all space that people inhabit, and all space that life and habits. So for probably the last decade, I've been investigating that. I went to school for civil engineering and then transferred into urban planning and kind of got sucked into that world of really understanding what it means for people to inhabit space as we are most, I guess, aggressively the benders of space. You know, I, I definitely believe that ecology and other mammals adjust their space as they need. But we we do so in a very different way. And so I'm always curious about what that means. And that's what my practice has been, as I said, for about the last decade. So now I'm back in school. To continue learning more, I've done a lot of work in many different neighborhoods and communities around the world. And I just [audio breaks up] couldn't find better practices and bridges to also break up some of the systemic barriers that exist in between creating safe spaces and stewarding safe spaces that often get hindered by financial rigmarole. So that's a little bit about my professional background, I guess. And, as I said, that intertwines very closely with my passion. And I do that in many different ways, creative ways. Looking at, you know, you mentioned the word earlier of cultural democracy, which is a lot of what I've been doing creatively with people, and inviting, particularly populations who have been either divested or forgotten, or overlooked into particular places. So an example would be, I worked on a, an activation project, an intervention project, where we, my team, and I looked at what would traditionally be called, like dead zones, or, or spaces that weren't being inhabited and or spaces that were only inhabited by a certain type of people. And brought in this project that was called uprising as a way to introduce new populations to one another. So for example, we had a group of artists and performers and, and the like, just creative folks primarily of color, differently abled, from all over the world. And our first intervention took place in 2013. And we introduced this body of people to what was historically kind of a white institution being the Athenaeum in Indianapolis, and we took over the Athenaeum and have this cultural bizarre and then we did that a second year, 2014. And we did the same kind of thing at what was the speak easy a new kind of startup incubation space that was also inhabited primarily by, you know, very particular sect of people. Be they white or entrepreneurial minded, which also comes with a very kind of firm, I guess, marker of identity. And then the last year that we did it, we had the same type of folks. And each year kind of grew and more people became involved in it. And that year, we took over the old city hall, which had been abandoned and wasn't being used. This beautiful facility that, again, was traditionally inhabited by white males who were running the city. And so we just tried to find those nodes where we could kind of be a little bit of a disruption, but a disruption for the better. And so that's what I look at, when I think about my practice in cultural democracy.

Emily Leiserson 10:59

Wow, that's amazing. I've never heard anyone articulate that spiritual layer over cultural democracy, or urban space. That's, that's amazing. I'm excited to learn more about what you've been doing. So could

you tell me a little bit about what that looks like? What your activities look like on a day to day basis, and also have they changed during the pandemic?

Dancia Monet Malone 11:33

Definitely, they have changed a great deal. And I'm glad that you were able to pull out that there is a big spiritual component to what I do, or at least what I practice, I don't know if it's what I do. You know, I don't know what that means. But what I try to practice daily, and everything has transformed. In the midst of this pandemic, I am able to take more walks lately, which is fantastic. I walk every day, sometimes twice a day. So my morning routine is to get up and walk and just be with the nature that surround me and meditate for about an hour. And that really helps to that helps me to hear better to hear the world that's that's going on around me and I think active listening is it's my number one superpower and I think it's like the thing that can save the world. I really want to find ways to encourage more people to actively listen especially powerbrokers. How can you actively listen to the spaces and people in places that you say you want to work alongside. And so I do that every day. A large part of my practice has now started to incorporate sound baths. Because my family is pretty big. And we come from lots of different places, I've been gifted lots of different types of tonal things, tonal items. So I don't know that I can liken them all to instruments, but things that kind of resonate with the internal energy of our body. And I play with them every day. So they could be crystal bowls, or they could be Djembes or they could be many different things. And I just try and center myself and that spent a lot of time writing. A great deal of time reading not as much for pleasure anymore because I'm, I'm in this PhD program but I am enjoying what I'm reading for my for my discipline. And I just try and spend as much time at least communicating with my loved ones and that includes my dog. I spend a lot of time communicating with my dog.

Emily Leiserson 14:07

Animals are good for that. So one other just kind of general background question. I asked you this before we started recording, but I'm going to ask a little more generally, when you think about the common demographic categories that we use, and this could be anything age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socio economic status, or or any any other common demographics. How do you prefer to describe yourself?

Dancia Monet Malone 14:54

I definitely have the response for that. Can you give me five minutes though, I'm now dropping my dog off as I thought would happen.

Emily Leiserson 15:01

Absolutely no problem. I'm gonna stop recording and I'll just wait till you're ready.

Dancia Monet Malone 15:07

Okay, thank you.

Emily Leiserson 15:08

Thank you. Okay, we are back on. Alright, so I was just asking about common demographic categories. When you think about any of those any common demographics that we use in the US, how would you prefer to describe yourself?

Dancia Monet Malone 15:35

I think I want to be described as a person first. And then as a woman, and then as someone of, of culture, I'm not exactly sure that any of the common demographic markers we have truly speak to cultural identity. And I don't believe that I also don't believe that extends into the world of gender. You know, I don't consider myself a female. I consider myself a woman and I think the two- the two occupy the world in different ways. I think one speaks to dignity. And one speaks to something that is less than human. And I try and be very careful with with words like that.

Emily Leiserson 16:37

Yeah, that's very, very interesting answer. And I really, I wish we had more time, so. But I am conscious of your time. Can you also tell me a little bit about where you live your zip code or neighborhood the part of Indianapolis that you're in?

Dancia Monet Malone 17:07

Yeah, so I live in Indianapolis. And I also, I mean, this is my home base. But I traditionally live part time somewhere else. So right now I live in Garden City, which is an old neighborhood in Indianapolis out on the west side. My, my zip code, do you need my zip code? That's not necessary.

Emily Leiserson 17:30

Um, it is helpful for our demographic kind of metadata, but you know, if you're not comfortable with it, that's okay.

Dancia Monet Malone 17:39

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll leave that one out. But Garden City, if you can find Garden City, where I live. Yeah.

Emily Leiserson 17:44

Perfect. Okay, and what do you kind of see happening around you? And has it changed since the pandemic?

Dancia Monet Malone 17:59

Yeah, it definitely has, you know, as I said, I walk every day. And so I, I kind of get to see these changes happen in real time. One great thing that I think is not happening in lots of different neighborhoods. But I know we were one of the first and I'm so happy to see that it still happens. You have a local elementary

school in the neighborhood, and they started doing food and supply giveaways at the height of the pandemic. [Background voice faintly calls out to Danicia] I'm so sorry. I had to pause one more time. They're now calling me in.

Emily Leiserson 18:35

No problem. Great. Okay. So, yes, what do you see happening around you and your neighborhood and your daily walks? And what did you see before the pandemic versus now?

Dancia Monet Malone 18:53

Yeah, so before the pandemic, I think the neighborhood was pretty quiet. And it still is. But since the pandemic I've really enjoyed seeing, we have a local elementary school, and a couple of local parks and even like a baseball field, which is great. And it's been fantastic to see especially at the school they've been giving, are hosting giveaways, food giveaways, and supplies, giveaways for residents in the area, and it hasn't just been for those who attend the school. It's not just for parents or, or families who attend school, but it's really for anyone who's in need. And I think that's just phenomenal. And the more that I this is kind of a side note, but the more I get into my my studies at school, something we're really invested in is this idea of how geospatial mapping can be used for real life problems. And I was listening to a colleague of mine explain how they are actually manipulating GIS technology to find hotspots where people are in need so that they can coordinate these types of giveaways for supplies. And I think that's just fantastic to see how, in my little neighborhood, which is, it is very little to it's an old neighborhood, it's a lot of older people. I looked up the other day to see what like the median income was in my neighborhood. And it's around like 35,000. So it's not a very wealthy space. But to see that our community was one of the first ones to kind of adopt this practice and has been able to sustain it is amazing to me.

Emily Leiserson 20:44

Absolutely. That's, that is really amazing that that sort of new technology can be used in such a real and urgent way. So what would you say the issues are, what issues have concerned you the most around the pandemic?

Dancia Monet Malone 21:11

So many things concern me about the pandemic. I think, so in no particular order, I really worry about the language that we even use around the pandemic, the idea of social distancing as a measure of global practice, is I think, when we start to break down and dismiss the importance of social connectivity, and the social tissue that keeps us all bonded together, is when we start to make room for a lot of the problems that continue to plague us globally. And so my practice has been one of even my work at Purdue has been one to say that we are physically distant, but socially connected, is I think words are powerful. I'm also very concerned about those who are getting lost in the cracks of, of the response. I remember in the beginning, when people were trying to get tested, and then at a certain point, there was kind of a daily use of spaces, public spaces where anybody could go to get tested. But even in those

types of scenarios, they weren't necessarily situated in communities where people didn't have access to first the knowledge that it existed, or second, the information on how to get to it. So what I say about that is, you know, my, my mother is someone who's not tech savvy, she, she'll see something on the news and call me to figure out what it was like, can you find this thing for me? Or she'll see something pass her screen on Facebook? Because yes, my mother has a Facebook account. And she'll say, I don't remember where I saw this. I don't know how to pull it back up. Can you help me? And so there are lots of people like that. Who technology where we we the the bigger world, the status quo world think we can host all information can access that information. And so when my mother had a scare with COVID, because she's a you know, kind of a- What are they call them out first responders, but she is someone who her job did not stop during the pandemic she had to be at work.

Emily Leiserson 23:41

Essential worker?

Dancia Monet Malone 23:43

Yes, thank you. Yes, yes, she was an essential worker. When she got a scare that she might have come in contact with COVID. It was very difficult for her even as an essential worker to find a space where she could go and get tested immediately. And also get those test results back immediately. Because as I said she was an essential worker. So she didn't have time to wait potentially seven days or 14 days before she got her results back because that was affecting her income. As I think about that's another sort of area of concern for me, are those who are getting lost in the cracks as we think about response. Another issue is food insecurity that hasn't waned at all. And when we think about the spaces, where we traditionally encourage people to go to get assistance, food shelters, food, pantries, etc. The measures that we think we can deploy in those spaces versus how people actually operate in space, they don't always align. And so these are just all things that I, I believe should be a part of the conversation on how we all start to think about our responses. collectively to these issues. And they're all things that that hit home for me. So there are many things to kind of think about and many things to be worried about. But those I think are the biggest one. Absolutely.

Emily Leiserson 25:15

Thank you for sharing this. And I'm really struck by your use of physically distant but socially connected. That's, I love that way of phrasing it, as you say, the language there. Do you think that COVID has affected people's relationships around you? Or no?

Dancia Monet Malone 25:41

I believe that has in various ways, but I do think people are hungry for connection right now. And in the same token, maybe at a loss for language on how to describe it, because it is, it's almost antithetical to what we're hearing as the public narrative, to be physically distant from one another, but it's, it's presented to us as social distance. And so it really starts to affect how we manage that in our mind. I also think that people are savvy, and we've been finding so many ways to, to be connected with one another.

And we really put the pressure on technology to be one more accessible, and also more valuable. And I think that is, one of the things I'm really looking forward to in the near future, is how technology can be responsive and intuitive to our needs, and really work collaboratively, collaboratively with us. And we with it you know, I think technology is a living thing as well. And we have to respect it. So those are some some areas that I am very curious to stay aware of.

Emily Leiserson 27:01

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I'm going to switch gears a little bit to get in a few questions, hopefully about racial justice movements. Would you please share any thoughts you have about the movements currently focused on racial justice such as Black Lives Matter?

Dancia Monet Malone 27:27

Yeah, my, my overall thoughts are, I'm glad that it exists. I think it has to because there's been such a time in our history. And in our present where we've had to, we've had to share it as an alternative. We wouldn't have to see it, if there wasn't a problem. So I'm glad that it exists. I think in anything, there's always more room for conversation and more room for review. One thing that, because I come from all of this kind of through the lens of the user experience, which is a term heavily used in the idea, and in the practice of user design, is how everything can be data. And I try and be very careful with that. Because I don't want people to be dismayed by or be disillusioned by that in thinking that there's no human essence in the idea of data. But when you start to look at everything that somebody does, as I point to learn something about them, I think then we can begin to understand how we can all communicate better with one another. And so that's, that's something that I always want to just encourage in all of these movements. You know, I love that there are so many racial justice movements right now, in particular that Black Lives Matter has seen a global impact and has been able to scale to a degree. And my, it's not even a critique, but just my one point of feedback would be okay, how can we? How can we all who participate in that agenda, continue to stay iterative in the process, and not get stuck in one particular idea of what we believe is supposed to be, without investigating why we think that should be? I think we have to ask a lot more questions and constantly ask questions. And have ways to apply what we learn in the moment. So it goes hand in hand. It's not just about having conversation, but it's about applying what you learn.

Emily Leiserson 29:45

Yeah. And so to that point, have you observed changes in the racial justice movement this year, when you think maybe March to the present, December How do you think it has evolved? If it has.

Dancia Monet Malone 30:03

Yeah, I think that it has evolved in so many different ways. And evolution to me is not it's not a linear, cyclical, it's circular. So I think there are, there's more room for communal care. There's more room for self care. There's more room for divergent conversations, such as how does the idea of class play a role in conversations of race? I think there's more room for conversations around environmentalism. And I'm



not saying environmental justice. He's I think environmental justice is something that we talk about, specifically when we're talking about people of color, or marginalized. But environmentalism is universal. We all occupy the environment. So I don't want to pigeonhole it, to just think that this idea of respecting space and being a good steward of space should only be part of conversation when we're talking about the inequities that exist. So I think there's been a lot of room for each of those things to play a role.

Emily Leiserson 31:29

Yeah. What do you think has driven some of those changes?

Dancia Monet Malone 31:36

I think time, you know, just time really, more people are learning more about themselves, more people are investigating themselves more people are reading more talking more sharing more, and maybe we're just opened, maybe we're experiencing kind of a spiritual chasm right now, where things are both flooding in and growing out. I don't know that I have a solid answer for that, besides just the phenomena of life.

Emily Leiserson 32:13

Yeah, have you attended any protests this year?

Dancia Monet Malone 32:22

No, I have not. I've been trying to be very careful and understanding who I'm responsible for. And while I respect the public gathering for protest, I've been investigating other ways to share my voice into the, into the movements of work. And I just want to be safe, you know, there's a lot that's still not known about how COVID works. And I just don't want to be arrogant with my, with my body right now.

Emily Leiserson 32:52

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I can understand and respect that. And there are as you say, so many ways that you can participate or that all of us can participate. How do you think your experiences this year have transformed the way you think about family, friends, community, society?

Dancia Monet Malone 33:28

My experience is this year you know, for me in many ways COVID has been a blessing who has granted me time, its granted me space. I think that you know, if I remove if I remove COVID as a factor from the year so much has happened. I've I think I have shed some skin this year. I think a lot of the people that I care about I've been able to have much more intentional conversation, which may be for me just took time because I'm not a very fast talker, as you can see. So I sometimes need a bit of a bit of time to like digest my words and and it's just it's been a great year for intentionality. It's been a great year for exploration. And it's been a great year for investigation.

Emily Leiserson 34:41

Absolutely. We talked early on about cultural democracy, and you have amazing things to say about spirituality. I guess I do want to ask you what you think the role of art and creativity is in, in the movement for racial justice.

Dancia Monet Malone 35:15

I think it's everything. I don't know that. Allow me a moment to ponder on that.

Emily Leiserson 35:28

Yeah, of course.

Dancia Monet Malone 35:44

Yeah because I don't want to say something that's, you know, trite without any thought behind it. Especially as a, as an artist, and a practitioner in that world. I understand both of the both of the zones of being like an urban planner, and community developer, and how art is sometimes used, and abused and exploited. And I also understand as an artist, what it means to want to create what comes from your heart, what comes from the depths of you, and share that with the world, and how you navigate both of those spaces. But I definitely think that art has a role in everything. And not just this, I mean, we don't walk down, we don't exist in a world without creativity. And we can look at that in the kind of mechanical ways and think about, you know, billboards and advertisements and color schemes and designs of space are of a building cetera. But creativity is everywhere you think about just the layout of trees in a park, or you think about the songs that you hear from a set of birds who are flying by you think about the dance that squirrels play with one another, you know, there's creativity everywhere.

Emily Leiserson 37:09

Yeah.

Dancia Monet Malone 37:11

So I think those of us who practice art and expression intentionally, our role in that is to do that. Without pressure, you know, to do that, simply because we like, how do I say that we have to, it's almost compulsory, it just comes out of you. It's like breathing. But not because you feel like you have to meet a deadline and not because you feel like you have to say something profound, and not because you feel like you're in competition with some other creative who, who may be getting a spotlight in the moment. You know, I think one of my favorite, one of my favorite quotes about the idea of creating is by Toni Cade Bambara, who says something like, like the role of the artist, or the role of the creators to make revolution irresistible. And I, I think that speaks exactly to what I feel like, you have to do it. You can't not do it, you know, if I personally, if I see a piece of blueberry pie, like I can't not eat it. It's irresistible to me. And so I think that's the role of creating as well as like, Oh, my God, I have to put this down. I have to write this song. I have to do this. I have to do this.

Emily Leiserson 38:39

Yeah.

Dancia Monet Malone 38:40

And I think it could play into the- Yeah, you know, I think it can play into the role of, of these movements, because they really are social movements, and you start to break down the words, right? Like, it's a social movement is meant for us to connect with one another. It's meant for us to connect with ourselves. And artistic expression is one of the most basic ways that we learn to listen to our internal selves.

Emily Leiserson 39:10

Yeah. Yeah, it's part of, so it's part of who you are. It's part of who society is and kind of by extension to your earlier points, how community is, what communities are and what spaces are all of that. Okay, we are out of time, basically. Is there anything else you would like to talk about? And also is there anyone else you think that we should be talking to about this?

Dancia Monet Malone 39:46

Oh, wow. I don't know it's been a great conversation. I whatever you want to talk about Emily, we could talk about it.

Emily Leiserson 39:54

I know I really enjoyed it. Amazing could talk all day.

Dancia Monet Malone 40:02

Yeah I have so many people that I think would be great follow ups for this kind of kind of talk. I mean, are you wanting to, to know more about like the history of of something or just people who have found fascinating stories?

Emily Leiserson 40:16

Absolutely. Both. And we can talk more by email, too. So that's yeah,

Dancia Monet Malone 40:22

I'd be happy to send you a list of names of folks who I think would be great. Wonderful, so many, there's so many.

Emily Leiserson 40:31

Oh, that'd be wonderful. Thank you so much.

Dancia Monet Malone 40:34

Thank you.

Emily Leiserson 40:36

Well, thank you so much for your time, Danicia Yeah, I know, you're super busy. So, you know, maybe we'll have time to talk again. But if not, I am just really grateful that we were able to have this time together.

Dancia Monet Malone 40:50

I appreciate it as well. I appreciate you being patient with me. And getting back to you with an actual time to do this. So thank you so much.

Emily Leiserson 40:59

No, no, thank you. Thank you for making the time. All right. I'm gonna turn off the recording. But I'll stay on just for a second. Thank you again. Okay.