Voices of MSU
Interviewee: A.J. Rice (AR)
Interviewer: Liz Timbs (LT)
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LT: Please Introduce Yourself

AR: I am A.J. Rice. I am entering my sixth year in the African American and African Studies [AAAS] PhD program at Michigan State. I attended Michigan State University as an undergrad back in 2004 and graduated in 2008.

LT: Where are you from?

AR: I was born in the hospital of Royal Oak, Michigan, but lived in Oak Park for a few years. Then, I moved to Rochester, Michigan; then I moved to Rochester, New York; then I moved back to Auburn Hills, Michigan and then West Bloomfield. Most of my life, I grew up there. I went to West Bloomfield High School, so that is pretty much the neighborhood that I claim.

LT: Did you move because of family movement?

AR: Yes, I moved because of my dad's job. He got transferred to New York and then back to Michigan and around some different places in Michigan. He worked for General Motors. Then, the division that he worked for got bought by a company called ITT Automotive; that is why we got transferred to New York and then back to Michigan.

LT: How old were you when you moved to New York?

AR: I was. . . I must have been about . . . six, about five or six when I moved out there. I think we only lived there for about two or three years and then we moved back to Michigan.

LT: So most of your school years you spent in West Bloomfield?

AR: Yeah, from fourth grade on, I was in West Bloomfield. I went to Ealy Elementary School in West Bloomfield, which is now actually knocked down and it is no longer there, just grass everywhere, just grass and fields. Then, Orchard Lake Middle School and then West Bloomfield High School.

LT: What was your experience like in the school system?

AR: It was interesting. In preparation for this interview, I was going back and doing a little research. West Bloomfield is a predominately white suburb. You have other groups of folks

mixed in as well. I was just kind of curious about the demographics, so I went back and looked at census data. I saw that the black population around that time was around 4 or 5 percent in West Bloomfield in the 2000 census data. Now, it is over 10 percent roughly. I was living there during the period of transition: racial transition, demographic transition.

It was a nice community in terms of aesthetically. But, especially being in school, you meet people; you deal with other students; you deal with certain teachers. There were times where I did feel like I was treated differently. That was something that I felt in different schools that I was in, but I never really had the language for it at that time.

Generally, I enjoyed the schools that I went to. I had my own kind of core group of friends and we played sports. I was on the high school football team, track team, different stuff like that. I think that educational experience, being a black student in a predominately white space, I was always sensitive and aware of instances where I was treated different. Again, I never really had the language for that. Those experiences definitely influenced me from the standpoint of being concerned about questions of justice, questions of equality. So, that was one of the things that eventually led me to Michigan State and led me to the issues I was interested in.

I wanted to be a lawyer when I came to undergrad, which was interesting, because even that was slightly different than my original goal to go to college. I actually wanted to play music; I was a tuba player. I had solo and ensemble, if you know of these different things. I had gotten 1's across the board since middle school, basically competing amongst competitions. I had numerous awards. I was supposed to have a full ride to Arizona State University to play in an orchestra there, so I turned down some other colleges. Then, they hit me back and told me that they no longer had a place for me.

Long story short, I ended up coming to Michigan State and not on a music scholarship. I had some kind of scholarship. I came as a student majoring in Political Science. It was after the first semester of my freshman year that I transitioned in or transferred into James Madison College.

LT: What were your first impressions of MSU's campus?

AR: My first impressions of campus, wow, s*** was big [laughs]. Campus is huge, that was my first impression. And there was just a lot of things to do, a lot of things to get into [laughs]. That was my first impression. I was curious about a lot of different things. I remember even when I first came here, I was not sure what I wanted to major in. I was thinking about majoring in astronomy because I was really interested in space, physics, and some other things. I was thinking about that and like I said, law.

That first semester, I was just trying to find myself or what I wanted to do. Through that process, somebody had told me about James Madison College and that conversation had taken

place with Professor Bill Lawson, another Professor Darren Davis—who was in political science department—and some other people. I had some pros and cons about James Madison College. What I heard from other people was that if you want to be a lawyer, this is kind of the place to be. So, I ended up transitioning over to that department.

LT: What did James Madison have that you were interested in?

AR: I think students who wanted to debate, always [laughs]. Plus, there was a focus that Madison had on American democracy. I was curious about the basic theories and ideas behind American democracy. That was something that I found interesting and I was drawn to. Ever since growing up, I knew that there were certain concerns about the way different groups of people were treated in this country. All I really knew was that I needed to know more.

I was told there was a lot of reading that you would have to do and I was not really the type of person that liked to read. I wanted to put myself in that uncomfortable position to grow. I had a lot of reservations and concerns about Madison. The one thing I will say is that the college does a good job in terms of preparing students to write well and to read. What I mean by that is to be able to read information, absorb the main ideas, the kinds of evidence that support those ideas. I think sometimes people can just read and miss some of these things when reading just to read. I would really credit that college for teaching me how to read and introducing me to read and write in a way that is persuasive and useful.

LT: You mentioned that you had some reservations about Madison. . .”

AR: One of the things about Madison is that it does not have a lot of students of color: very few Black students, very few Latino students, very few Native students. This is specifically something that I realized in 2004 and 2005. I had participated with the DuBois Society three of my four years in Madison: my freshman, sophomore year—I took kind of a sabbatical my junior year—came back my senior year. From that freshman year—I have seen this not only as a student in Madison, but even as a graduate student now teaching in Madison last school year—I found that a lot of black students drop out after that freshman year. This is anecdotally, but also I have seen the data that supports this.

One of the reasons that I have heard consistently is because students sometimes either are not interested or do not feel like they have the kind of support system or sometimes even actively persuaded from leaving. What I mean by that is having professors trained in one understanding of what American history is and what American democracy is. As Malcolm X said, “American democracy is nothing but hypocrisy.” It is a very different view of American Democracy and that is a view that many students of color, as well as a lot of white students, especially working class or poorer students understand. Any group of marginalized folk have an experience that makes

them somewhat critical or at least skeptical of American democracy and of the benefits in particular.

One of the things that Madison is doing is helping to bolster one understanding of American democracy, which is a very oppressive understanding of American democracy for those who are marginalized. For example, you start off reading the *Federalist Papers, U.S. Constitution*, the *Declaration of Independence*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. But, faculty had us skip over a particular chapter in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's chapter on the three races. We went through this period of democracy without talking about race, white supremacy, very rarely did we talk about class. There was a way in which American Democracy was talked about divorced from what was actually happening on the ground.

There was a way that the idea of American Democracy, at least a certain idea of American Democracy, was privileged over an American Democracy in history that I would have been much more interested in and other students as well. That is one of the things that stuck with me and I am the type of person that if something doesn't seem right, I will look into it. What I ended up doing was just reading much more on my own. I was basically supplementing my education outside of the classroom. I would be in the classroom; I read something that did not make sense; I would raise objections in class. But, in these classes, you're also marginalized.

For example, I had a professor who didn't support my own intellectual curiosity. We were talking about a particular theory called Kant's "Democratic Peace Theory." Kant is a philosopher who is very important to Western liberal political thought, liberal thought. He made it very clear that the majority of people in the world, Native Americans, Black people, others, were not actually people. Also, Kant said that you cannot divorce his anthropology—he was an anthropologist as well as a philosopher, a real renaissance man—from his philosophy.

Kant says, "No two democracies go to war with each other." First of all, to be a democracy you have to be people, individuals, human beings, but he said certain people were not human beings. I raised this point in class. For me, that theory, Democratic Peace Theory does not apply to the majority of countries in the world that are nonwhite, nonwestern countries. The professor summarily dismissed that by casting aside his racism and moving forward with his ideas. But, for me, you are no longer doing Kant. In fact, he himself said that you cannot do exactly what you are saying to do.

My ideas came from working with another professor and taking a black philosophy class—a 300 level class as a freshman with Professor Bill Lawson, who is now retired from the University of Memphis—reading a book called the *Racial Contract* by Charles Mills. Reading that history and reading that theory provided me with a stronger base to challenge some of these ideas in class. I had white students challenging me saying I was stupid, dismissing it. I had this professor who was challenging me saying that I was wrong indirectly supporting these other students'

positions. I could take that because I had another space I was being validated when I left that classroom. That was a very toxic hostile place. That's something that can be very off-putting to students and it's not something faculty, especially, white faculty could really appreciate.

It's hard to talk about training and people who do this work, but just because someone studies a topic like race, you do not know how they study or how they engage it. Or just because someone studies politics, you do not know what aspect of politics they actually study. You have to look at how these people were trained. This was just one example of the issue that I had in the classroom. I go on at length about that experience because it is an experience I hear at least one student of color every single year in Madison recount a similar experience where they are essentially dismissed in class, at best, and at worst, they feel attacked.

Another student a couple years ago told me that one professor said, "Slavery wasn't that bad." Of course, there are maybe sixty some professors in Madison. At that time, there was maybe one professor, tenured professor of color. One [laughs]. This was a very hostile space for black people and it was something that I realized as I became senior.

I recounted the experiences I had, as a freshman, as an undergrad, but there was a turning point in my undergrad career and that was the summer between my junior and senior year. I had participated McNair/SROP program, which the current president is trying to cut SROP funding. Although the last president in the federal government cut funding for the McNair program altogether, now they are trying to eliminate the SROP program. Basically, the program that I am talking about no longer exists in the same fashion. But, this program was designed to increase the number of underrepresented students who are pursuing PhDs. So, me, trying to hustle, I thought, *You get paid for this program, it will look good on my CV, and I wanted to go to law school.* I ended up getting accepted into that program and doing some research about West Africa cotton farmers, really random [laughs].

I wanted to look at how U.S. subsides impacted the price that West African cotton farmers received for the cotton they sold. I found that U.S. subsidies had a negative impact on the price. In other words, these farmers received less money because the U.S. was subsiding domestic cotton at such a high rate that it depressed or negatively impacted the international price of cotton, which then had implications for these West African cotton farmers. I was challenging a western economic idea. This idea that free trade is better, free trade everywhere. I was suggesting that free trade is not always good. In fact, free trade is not really free trade when the U.S. is subsidizing particular industries. I was just trying to engage that and break that down.

Through that process, I became much more interested in questions of power and less interested in questions of the law. In many respects, the law constrains you; you have to work within the law. I am much more interested in who is making laws, why those particular laws

being made, who is being harmed by those laws, and who is benefitting from those laws. I became much more interested in ideas; it took me on a completely different trajectory. I no longer wanted to go to law school; I wanted to get a PhD, to plug for that program.

Also, during that summer, I was introduced to a woman named Geneva Smitherman, who founded My Brother's Keeper program, mentoring program back in 1999. I met another professor Austin Dorell Jackson, who is here currently. They really helped me to think about some of the issues that black people were facing. I was doing research focused on West African cotton farmers, but I started to see some of the similarities between the experiences of West African cotton farmers, West Africans more generally, black folk on the African continent more generally, and some of the conditions that black people are experiencing here. My major at James Madison College was International Relations, so I was really focused on a lot of things aboard, questions of justice and inequality abroad. Working with those two helped me make connections, domestically to black communities.

Then, come my senior year, that was when we had some incidences of Jena Six where some nooses were hung in Louisiana and some other incidences, but basically a hate crime that happened. I ended up reconnecting with the DuBois Society. I and another friend of mine, Kyle Mays, led this initiative to revamp and reorganize the DuBois Society. We wanted that society to live up to its name, which is named after W. E. B. Du Bois.

According to historian, John Henrik Clarke, DuBois is one of the greatest intellectuals, not just a black intellectual, but one of the greatest that the United States or the West has ever produced. This man—published over 1000 articles, books, journals, et cetera—was one of the first to receive a PhD in history from Harvard. Very learned individual and very concerned about black liberation; he dedicated his whole life to that. He was born in the aftermath of the Civil War around 1865, 1866 and passed around 1964.

The DuBois Society up until that point was kind of a social club. People would get together; they would meet maybe once . . . First of all, at that point, it was just the e-board that was meeting. There was not any connection with the e-board to the broad student populous. Even when those students met, they met to plan a career workshop. For me, I do not necessarily have an issue with that, but I do have an issue if that is the only thing you do. Kyle, some other students, and I ended up reorganizing that organization and making it live up to this role of black liberation as we understood it at the time.

What that meant was using the organization to demand more black faculty, tenured black faculty in particular. You might demand black faculty or faculty of color, but you have to be careful. If you allow administrators to take the lead on that, if you are somewhat ambiguous, they will hire people who have politics that are completely contrary to your politics. It is not just about advocating for more faculty of color, but advocating for faculty who engage specific

issues in a very specific way or have particular ideologies. That was one of the things we pushed. We engaged in a letter writing campaign to the *State News* and other places about the Jena Six incident. We started holding public forums and public talks about different issues on campus and different issues that we thought people would be interested in.

One of the things we did during Black History Month was reframing this conversation about Dr. King and Malcolm X. A lot of people think of Dr. King as nonviolent and Malcolm X as violent; we wanted to reframe that debate to thinking about it as passive resistance versus armed self-defense. By reframing those conversations and recasting those individuals in that kind of light, we wanted to show people the possibilities of the conversations that could open up. If you stick with that kind of nonviolent versus violent dichotomy, it clouds the way people view these individuals.

We held bi-weekly meetings and the membership in that organization went from not having any general meetings, only e-board meetings, so basically no members, except for those five, to having about thirty people coming consistently. It shows you that there was a huge demand in interests for what we were talking about. In those meetings, every week we would have a reading. Everybody would have to come to the meetings prepared, read, and we would have different students lead and present. It was fascinating because it created a completely different culture particularly across Madison within the black community and white progressive community as well. It was inevitable that we were going to take the ideas that we learned in those spaces back to the classrooms. When you learn more, it's much more difficult for professor to tell you something or to mislead you and your peers.

One of the things that we learned that was useful and I will always be thankful to Professor Dr. Austin Jackson for this, he quoted Aristotle, "an argument is claim plus proof." Not only can you make a claim, but you have to have proof to substantiate that claim. One of the things you see undergraduates, actually, undergrads, graduates, and a lot of people make claims without evidence. It is not an argument; it is just a claim or assertion. We emphasized in these meetings that that was anti-intellectual. These are intellectual spaces, so we are only going to entertain intellectual arguments, not claims. That bar we established and the students that left that space ended up bringing that bar to other places.

All of the sudden, it is very difficult for professors or other students to start making claims when that's not going to fly. To follow up on a professor, we would ask, How do you know that? What basis are you making that? What evidence supports that? And then people would start to stutter and not have anything to say. It was a useful rhetorical tool for us because even if we did not—especially, as a freshman going up against people who have years and years of education, et cetera—have the knowledge. You just flip the script on them. If that point is legitimate, you have to explain it and provide the evidence. Oftentimes, we found that people couldn't when it came to issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class. We started hearing

feedback from professors who are our allies saying that others were irritated because their classes are not going as smoothly. All of the sudden, students are asking all these questions and challenging other students. That was something that we were really proud of.

There were also some other issues, particularly black female students being harassed that year. We were engaging and taking on those issues as well. That senior year was very active, but it was a very important year for all of us in Madison and a very important year for me. That is where my own activism really began to take root in and flourish.

LT: When you graduated, what were your plans?

AR: Yeah, I really wanted to go to the New School for Social Research to get a master's degree in Political Science. To go on to get a graduate degree, I was not sure if I wanted to get my master's, PhD, or just my master's. One of the reasons that I wanted to go to the New School for Social Research was because of professor Dr. Rita Kiki Edozie—she came to Madison my sophomore year, so it would have been 2005 or 2006. I was gravitated towards her because she was one of the few professors that helped me think through the questions I had in ways that made sense to me.

There were some other professors, Michael Schechter, who recommended an article by so-called scholar named Niall Ferguson. Niall Ferguson is famous for writing a book called *Empire,* among other things, praising the British Empire. The article that Schechter recommended to me was about recolonizing African continent. He was saying that it was a good article and these are some useful, powerful ideas, you should read. My sense was that this was the kind of worldview he subscribed to. I remember reading it and being pissed. I remember talking to Professor Dr. Edozie about this—to Schechter's point, he recommended that I talk with her—we had a lengthy conversation and she validated some of my concerns, but I saw that she looked at the world very differently. She helped me kind of think through some things.

LT: Why did you go to the New School?

AR: Working with Dr. Edozie, I started working with her more often; she was my advisor for the McNair/SROP program that I was working with. She had got her PhD from the New School, so she was always plugging for it. It had a reputation for being very progressive and supporting radical thinkers. A radical philosophy at that point in my life was something that I was really interested in because I did not get that much in the classroom in Madison. I was interested in going to that space. I ended up going to that school and getting my master's degree. It is "Politics" now, they had a debate whether or not to call the department, the "Department of Politics" or the "Department of Political Science." Even those debates were fascinating to me because they raised questions I have not thought about before. But, I even saw the limitations

of that university. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the experience and I still focused on international relations while I was there.

My thesis that I wrote was about humanitarian intervention in Haiti. I was arguing that humanitarian intervention and de facto can only happen in certain countries. You are never going to have humanitarian intervention in western countries, only western countries will intervene in nonwestern countries. It gets back to that "Democratic Peace Theory" as we talked about [laughs]. My argument was that humanitarian intervention was a pre-text or excuse for companies to go in and intervene in other countries to do what they will or what they want.

I was making the case that that was one of the things happening with Haiti in the 2004 removal of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was arguably the first democratically elected president of Haiti. The U.S. government has had this love-hate relationship with him; it has been about 99 percent hate and a little bit of love [laughs]. They had him removed. For a host of different reasons, he wanted to move his people from misery to poverty. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, but it was also the first black country to gain its independence in the western hemisphere in 1804. It was a long history there. Anyways, that was why I was at the New School and what I was doing there.

LT: What did you do after the New School?

AR: After the New School, I came back to Michigan State and worked for a year in the African American and African Studies Program. The year that I had worked there, Dr. Edozie had taken over directorship of that program. I wanted to help her with some of the logistics in terms of building up the program and trying to realize and institute the vision that she had for the program. I was there for a year; during that year, I applied to the Black Studies Program or AAAS at Michigan State and a few other places including University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I got accepted to University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, here, but decided not to stay here. I decided to go to Milwaukee. One of the reasons I decided to leave was because the African and African American Studies PhD Program at Michigan State is not a department. I am the type of person where it is hard to sit down idly and keep my mouth closed when I see certain things. I knew there would be a challenge or at least a temptation for me to get involved in certain things, had I stayed at Michigan State.

One of the things would be the My Brother's Keeper Program that I had been working with since 2007 as an undergrad. I knew that was something I would want to work with. I also knew that it would be difficult for me to be in the AAAS Program and know that there needs to be a political fight for a department. It's very difficult to run a PhD program without it falling apart; in fact, this is the only black studies PhD studies program in the nation that has that model. Out of sixteen PhD programs, all of them are in a department except for this one; there is a clear reason for that. That's why I went to Milwaukee for a year, but that program ended up not

being the best fit for me. So, I applied again and I was able to come to Michigan State. It ended up working out because there were people here I was familiar with and familiar with me during my own intellectual trajectory and development. I knew if I came back here, I would feel comfortable working with those individuals and I knew that it would only enhance my work.

LT: Can you tell me about the atmosphere of the AAAS program in 2012?

AR: That's a good question. I think of a couple of things, the shooting of Trayvon Martin had happened before I had entered the AAAS program in the fall of 2012—I think he was killed around February or March earlier in that year— and Rekia Boyd, who was shot in Chicago. Those were two things that all of us were aware of when we came in. When we came in, my class had about eight students or so. There was a real optimistic feeling for a lot of us; we were excited to be in the program.

We had good chemistry for the most part and I think we were excited because of Dr. Edozie, the director at the time. We were excited because of what she was saying, some of the things she was doing, and the speakers she was bringing into the university. She has a lot of energy and is very passionate. We were very optimistic and excited about the different classes we had and the conversations we were having about the history of black studies, black struggle, black politics, and violence toward black folk. We really saw this time as an opportunity to develop into black scholars. That first year we were at all different levels, but collectively we were learning. A lot of us are still learning.

One of the things that the core group of us understood is that to be a black scholar is very challenging because unlike most other disciplines, we don't see ourselves as objective. More generally, we don't really believe in the idea of objectivity. That comes from not only from ideas of the black power, black liberation movements, but also from the black feminist movements as well in terms of thinking about people's standpoint. Everybody approaches particular issues and ideas from particular positions and place in life, et cetera.

LT: As an undergrad you were very involved with the Du Bois Society, did you find an equivalent in AAAS?

AR: Yeah, at that time, it was called Sankofa Graduate Student Organization, I believe. I had gotten involved with Sankofa at the end of my first year in the PhD program. There were some issues that we had, some different concerns, and some people looked to me to help some other members on the e-board. I helped the organization voice some concern to the AAAS core faculty—just some things like we wanted the website to be changed and a couple of other things. The second year, I was the GEU Graduate Employee Union Representative. That year, I started working in WRA [Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures] program as were other students, but we did not have any office space. We were told from the WRAC Department that

the AAAS Program was supposed to provide it and AAAS was telling us that the employer was technically supposed to provide it. There was some confusion in who was supposed to provide office space. There was no confusion in the GEU contract; someone was supposed to provide a certain set of resources and one of those things is office space. That became a struggle that I was involved with in terms of just trying to secure an office space for AAAS. At that point and time, AAAS was in Wells Hall, it had moved from the basement in Morrill Hall.

The reason I go back to that history is that the AAAS program has never had sufficient space for its students and it was something that I wanted to take on along with some other students. We were able to secure what was supposed to have already been provided based on the GEU contract with the university. The office space we have now is not a ventilated office; we still have some issues with that space [laughs]. Nevertheless, we were pleased that we were able to have something, maybe "pleased" is too strong, but, you know, we ended up having something. The following year was when some stuff started to pop-off with our program.

LT: You said when you came into the AAAS program there was a lot of optimism, when did that change?

AR: I think a lot of it changed during the fall of 2014. We were optimistic because we believed that this was a great space to help us develop, not only as academics, but as activists. At least, that is the orientation within Black Studies that I subscribe to. Not everybody subscribes to that, but I do and there were other folks who subscribed to that as well. We thought that this was a great place and Dr. Edozie supported that kind of idea. In 2014, there was some challenges and some rumors circulating that not all the current students in AAAS would continue to be funded in the program. There were some rumors as to why that was. I ended up working with some other students to get together to separate fact from fiction, to figure out what is true and what is not.

AAAS, when compared to all the other PhD degree-granting units in the College of Arts and Letters [CAL], had a budget significantly lower than those other programs. In some respects, we are comparing apples and oranges because AAAS is a PhD program that is not housing a department and the rest of the programs are departments in English, WRAC, other philosophies, et cetera. There is an unequal structure right then and there. Nevertheless, it was difficult for us to figure out the actual budget of AAAS because the university publishes the different budgets of the departments, but they have AAAS as an interdepartmental program. All the department line items—maybe philosophy might have been teetering around this, but, if my memory is accurate—received at least a million dollars. AAAS had five-hundred thousand dollars or less and the majority of the program in terms of its expenses was funding graduate students. That was one of the biggest costs associated with the grad program.

The program was being told in the fall of 2014 that it had too many students and not enough funding lines. If you follow that logic, AAAS had seven or eight graduate assistantship lines, which means that it could only fund eight students total. There has been some debate, but as far as I understand it, the graduate school requires a class to have at least five students. AAAS could have one fully funded cohort every five years or one fully funded cohort of four people every two years, but then go on sabbatical. If you want to have your cohort every single year, there is not enough funding lines. That is the point.

AAAS was able to find out different ways to be able to recruit students. One of the ways was through fellowships within the graduate school maybe even CAL, AAGA [Academic Achievement Graduate Assistantships] fellowships. There were these different competitive fellowships that AAAS incoming students were winning. The way those fellowships were designed was that a student could get funding in their first and fifth year, but the department or the college would be responsible for supplementing the middle, second, third, fourth year. We had students that were winning some of those awards. The bottom line was that it was going to get to a point where AAAS was not going to have the lines to cover students. The director was trying to work with the College of Arts and Letters to get those students funded.

Summer of 2014, She [Edozie] was trying to work with the college to address those issues. The former dean of the college, Karin Wurst, her reputation was very bad that was why she got ousted from the college. She refused to even converse with our director about this issue. Then incoming interim Dean Simmons did not want to have a conversation with the program. She did not acknowledge the conversation that was trying to take place between the director and the previous dean. Some other students had heard things that were going on, but not the full story. That is why we had a separating fact from fiction meeting. I was involved in that meeting and I wanted to show the big picture of AAAS's funding compared to the other units.

Also, the fact, we were not a department and I explained to other students what it means to be a department and what it means to not be a department. A department in the university connotes a particular level of prestige and respect. You can hire your own faculty, control your own faculty lines, write your own job descriptions, which means you can specify what kinds of professors you want to work in that department. You have a committee that would create these searches for different faculty, hire that faculty, and vet that faculty. The chair of that department can make certain demands on the chair they hire. There is usually bigger budgets associated with departments. There are resources like office space, different types of technology, machines, secretaries, et cetera. You are able to control your own curriculum and have an undergrad component. All of these things that are associated with a department, AAAS did not have. I already explained that as students we had to struggle for office space.

Another concern we have is that we do not have any tenured faculty, full tenured faculty in AAAS. In other words, AAAS does not control any faculty lines. There are joint appointments,

but even those and the way that some of those appointments are drawn up, it is clear that the unit that you are tenured in is who really controls what faculty does. If I am a professor who has a joint appointment in English and AAAS, for example, I know that AAAS cannot hire anybody or control my job. My destiny is in the hands of the English chair. I am going to be more concerned with pleasing the English chair than pleasing the director of AAAS.

I know of some cases when junior faculty refuse to engage and work with AAAS because of the demands made on them from English. I could criticize those people, but I also understand the structure and the situation they are in, so I am also sympathetic. They are dedicated to this work, well I don't want to say "dedicated." Anyways, there is this structural difference. I was raising these issues to students and saying, Look we really need to push for a department. Until we have a department, there is always going to be issues of funding and we are never going to have enough to have a consistent cohort every single year. We need to start controlling and having tenured faculty. We need to have an undergraduate program.

Why are those two things important in particular? One, because this is a PhD program and you need to have people that are training in AAAS; they need to have a background in AAAS. If you are bringing people from all these different disciplines, especially people not familiar with basic history, theory, and black studies canon or literature. I know certain faculty that have very important roles don't know that. I don't blame them because that is not their background. For us students, who are going to be practitioners in this field, it would behoove us—it is like having a math program and bringing in scientists, no, you have to have people who do math. That probably was not the greatest example [laughs]. Nevertheless, it was clear that department status is what we needed to pursue and we ended up organizing different students and created a list of about twenty or so demands as Sankofa members.

Sankofa Graduate Student Organization was an organization that represented the interests of all students in AAAS that is predominantly graduate students—we had some AAAS minors as well. We had maybe about eighty percent of the students, about twenty or twenty-five students present to core faculty. They said they supported them et cetera, but there was nothing they could do. They were asking for additional resources for the program and had gone to the dean as well. The dean, the president, the provost refused to provide them with the resources so much so that it was detrimental to have students graduate. It was not just how we would benefit in the future as a department, but the real challenges students were facing now. One concern was that students would not have funding for the upcoming years.

Another concern, in the spring, we needed the 831 class, which was the AAAS diaspora class. AAAS did not have enough money in the budget to buy out another professor to teach that class. We don't have our own professors. We do not tenure our own professors. We are dependent upon using funds to buy time for professors to teach a class. This is another conversation that our director had had with the previous dean and the current dean at this

time, Dean Simmons, who had refused to provide us with ten thousand dollars to teach this class. I know because of the research that I do, in a university that has a budget of over a billion dollars, ten thousand dollars is petty cash. It is like what they spend on coffee, literally, but this dean refused to provide the money for us, which means that some students would have to stay an extra semester, if not an extra school year to be able to graduate and to take that required course.

I told you that we met with AAAS faculty and raised our demands to them. At the same time, we were involved in some activism behind the scenes. We said, This is a travesty and this is an issue. We had workshopped some different ways and tactics to get the university to do something that it did not originally want to do. My experience with student activism is that students oftentimes try to shame the university or bring bad publicity or press, which depends on what it is, but universities are institutions and can weather bad press for some time. But, we figured, What if we pissed some people off internally? And make certain people look bad within the university? That is exactly what we decided to do.

We wrote a fundraising letter and sent it to all the deans, all the chairs, the provost, the president, the dean of graduate school, et cetera. We said, We have this required class, the university, the provost, and Dean Simmons have refused to provide us this ten thousand dollars. We are asking for any donations, a dollar, two dollars, five dollars . . . anything that you can provide to put on this required class or else students are not going to graduate, et cetera. The provost ended up contacting us saying that she wanted to meet with us. We had sent her the list of the demands, so we ended up meeting with the provost.

The first thing she said was "Now, I know that you all are concerned about this class. We're going to fund it. I want you to know that we are going to fund it, but please stop sending around these emails. Please stop sending around these letters. Please stop doing that. It is just embarrassing. Please stop doing that." It was illuminating to me because I realized that this was a tactic that actually worked [laughs]. It was an effective tactic. The university did something that they did not want to do; we were able to ensure that students who were not going to have that class the following semester were able to have that class. For us, that was a victory. It was also a victory that we had assumed we were going to achieve before we even got in the room. In other words, we knew that this was probably the easiest thing to achieve; there was not a whole lot of celebration. It was really an expectation of ours because that is the easiest thing for the university to do and very hard for it to defend. That was something that was taken care of.

There were other things, the structural investments, and the institutional commitment that we wanted. It was something that the provost was not super interested in; it was clear. I will say the other thing that came out of the meeting, although this wasn't a demand, was another project assistant for the program named Teddy or Theodore Ransaw—he came into the

program that spring, at least for one semester. I guess that was supposed to placate us. I appreciate Ransaw and what he has done, but that was a cop-out on the university's side. That was in 2014 and even in 2013, we were mobilizing some of this office space. These years we were really just involved in trying to get basic resources for the program—at the same time that we were here as PhD students trying to do research and the work that we are here to do—asking for things that every other unit had. It was something that was disconcerting at best.

LT: In 2015 these issues came up again in the wake of the Mizzou controversy and the formation of Liberate MSU. Can you talk a little about that?

AR: In 2015, we had already been involved in activism. I think that is something important to note. Depending on the historical record or where you go, there might be an idea that Liberate MSU and some of the other student activism in 2015 was sparked by the Mizzou incident or protest. That was not the case. Not only were students involved in Sankofa and putting forth their demands, but I believe it was around 2010 or 2011, you had Black Student Alliance (BSA), an undergraduate organization putting forth a set of demands as well. There was a huge protest that had taken place on campus. I believe during that time at least a noose, more than one, was hung around campus. There were some other racial slurs and epithets being thrown around at people in person, but also written on doors, et cetera.

There is a professor Ebrima X [unclear], one of the things he writes is this kind of long black student movement. This long struggle that black students have been engaged in to essentially fight institutional racism and carve out institutional space in universities and challenge white supremacy. He argues that this is a very long movement. I would suggest that even the things we were doing up until 2015 and even Mizzou as well, students have been involved in activism for a long time. When we see these surges, upticks, and flashpoints, there should be an appreciation that there are things that preceded that as well.

LT: So would you say that there had been a long black student movement at MSU?

AR: Absolutely, as an undergrad in 2007 or 2008, we had sent some demands to the Dean Sherman Garnett. There was student activism even before that we can go back to 1989 with Dr. Jeffery Robinson and Darius Peyton; they were two students involved with a host of other students that eventually took over the basement of Administration Building. The planning of that takeover was something that had been over a year in the making. They chose that very strategic location because money had to go physically from the university out to banks, to pay people their bills, et cetera.

The idea the students had was, If we occupy this basement, have so many people packed in this basement, the money cannot actually leave. If the university cannot pay anybody and can't do anything with its money, you will cripple the university. In other words, the university can't

function. One of the questions that all student activist have to be prepared to answer: How do you get the university to say, yes when they want to say no? That is a question of leverage. That is always a question that I am constantly concerned about. I think any activist who is concerned about change needs to think of that question very seriously. As did those folks in '89, which ended up bringing Dr. Geneva Smitherman, some other faculty, and students of color as well. They were very successful in that.

In 2015, a lot of attention was directed at the Mizzou incident after the Missouri football players had went on protest in support of some demands that students were making. This group of students called Concerned. . . Concerned 1-9-5-0, I believe is what they are called. I think it was a reference to the first black students who had entered Mizzou in 1950; I could be wrong about that historical reference. With the football players protesting, shortly thereafter, the president of the university had resigned amid some different issues that had taken place on campus.

If you look at who was involved before those student athlete protests, you had black studies students and the black studies program that was involved in helping to organize students, helping to create space for student activists. It was also not just black student activist who were involved in the Mizzou takeover, just the football team, or athletes; it was student activists who were concerned about the fifteen dollar minimum wage. They had been fighting for that as well as some other groups. If you think about the success that Mizzou had with two years in the making, there was a lot of work that had gotten to that point.

Also, it shows the demands that those students put out, a list of maybe eight or so demands; the first two involved the resignation of the chancellor, Tim [Wolfe]. It was those demands, symbolic but true, that were significant; I think that is a victory; I think it is worth discussing nonetheless. You cannot think about their success without thinking about the black students leading it, the support of other folks as well, including faculty members. I remember that one faculty member, a white woman that had gotten fired for trying to stop the media from recording what some students were doing. It is interesting because there is the question of the relationship between the media and student activism. Student activists were trying to negotiate how to engage the media. It is an interesting thing that a lot of student activists are still trying to work out.

Mizzou was absolutely significant. We were kind of involved for about two years before Mizzou. 2014/2015 was the year that we had submitted those demand to the provost and to the faculty. That was the year that students were developing. Then, when Mizzou hit, it created a completely different atmosphere on campus and amongst students in AAAS. Even students on the fence or lukewarm were radicalized, they saw, if those students were able to be successful in Missouri, maybe we could replicate the same thing here.

Another thing that is significant about Missouri, it is about thirty to forty-five minutes away from Ferguson where Mike Brown was shot. Mike Brown was shot in 2014. These are some of the contexts going on during this time as well. Maybe around this time Tamir Rice is killed and Black Lives Matter emerges after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the summer of 2013. Then, they have this rebellion take place in Ferguson. I say "rebellion" intentionally because the U.S. Justice department had sent over 90 percent of the residents at least a warrant or a ticket. The U.S. Justice Department had said that Ferguson had engaged in a widespread practice of discrimination and had violated peoples' constitutional rights. The police were arresting and ticketing people as a means of generating revenue for the city because the city was broke. They had to extract money from black people and that was how they were able to fund the government.

There were all these things happening. That is another reason why what happened in Mizzou was somewhat unique because of that context of activism that was happening there. Not only were students impassioned here, but across the nation, across the world. There were movements in India, South Africa, and other places, other student movements.

LT: As we wrap up, can you relate all of this to what does diversity mean to you?

AR: After the Mizzou protest, a lot of colleges and universities throughout the world started to see this proliferation of student activism on campus. Michigan State was trying to get out ahead of things. When certain kinds of racial conflicts, to quote the former president, "pop-off," people like to have dialogues and conversations. When you are a student activist, they always want to meet [laughs]. That is code for not doing anything but meeting, just talking, but not having any action. The week after the Mizzou protest, sometime in October, there was a town hall on campus. I am still confused to this day; I think it was an event that may have been called by BSA, but in a weird way, it had seemed like it might have been co-opted by the university.

The first town hall was in Brody Hall in an auditorium. You had this room packed with students; I do not think any of us knew why we were there, but a lot of us had concerns and wanted to voice our own experiences of discrimination, et cetera. President Simon was there; Vice President of Student Affairs Office might have been there; I am not sure if Dr. Denise Maybank was there or not. She had a plan of how she thought it would go, but everyone was talking about their negative experiences here. These were students across campus: students in Natural Science, students in Social Sciences, students in Madison. All of the sudden, these students are talking about these instances of discrimination they had either by other students, professors, administrators.

For years, students have been trying to get a freestanding multi-cultural center that was our demand for BSA students back in 2011 and that demand was even preceded before 2011. All these things were coming up that students were voicing. I remember at one point, a black girl

was talking about her experience in a classroom and how a professor was being racist towards her by putting up all these images of gangs and all the pictures were of black people. She was saying that it was offensive and President Simon just shrugged. That whole room . . . and even the girl said, "Did you just shrug at me?"[laughs]. It did not go over the way that the administration wanted it to.

There was a march to the Rock from there. It was, at that Rock, that some other students and I got together. We were saying that something else has to be done because this is not sufficient. It was at that moment that the group called Liberate MSU emerged. We got together in Berkey or Bessey Hall and were thinking about some of the things we should do. Dee [Jordan], the president of College of Graduate Students (COGS), had mentioned that Bill Clinton was coming to Michigan State to give a speech and it was going to be in the Kellogg. She mentioned that maybe we should do something during that meeting. Dee was not really involved with Liberate MSU, at least not for a little while, after that meeting. It was an idea that we kind of tabled at the time. I think even I might have dismissed it at the time, but it was an idea that we did end up coming back to. We held a rally in Brody Hall and easily over a hundred people showed up. After that rally, we marched out over to this Bill Clinton event.

We did not tell people what we were going to do ahead of time. Bill Clinton was there, so we had assumed there would be Secret Service and FBI. We had to keep what we were going to do quiet and research how we could enter that space. We were not naïve this is a former president; we had to be very savvy about how we did this. We had disrupted the event from the outside; we were not inside the event. I think this was maybe the ballroom that he was speaking in the Kellogg Center. We marched over or walked over to the Kellogg center, had different chants, et cetera, disrupted the event, and forced President Simon to come out and speak with us. We ended up speaking to her in the auditorium in the Kellogg. We explained our grievances to her, some about the AAAS program, but about other structural changes that needed to take place in the university. We were not naïve that she was going to consent to those changes right then and there. That was a big event and moment for the Liberate MSU groups and for students to have that opportunity and engagement.

President Simon met with us again in two weeks. I think it was November 30, sometime in late November, we voiced our concerns. She was not very receptive; I would argue that she was very disingenuous in a lot of things that they said. For example, she had made a comment that AAAS had had an increase in their budget, which was fundamentally not true. In fact, if there was an increase in the budget, it was because of short-term investments. For example, the extra project assistant, a very minimal investment, as opposed to what we wanted with tenured faculty, a department, et cetera. She was disingenuous about that. Liberate MSU had put forward a certain set of demand at the protest with Bill Clinton. Among those demands were not only a department of AAAS, but also a college of race, class, and gender studies. We wanted to create this academic hub that could be a space for social activism, an intellectual space for

activism. Let me be clear, the people involved in Liberate MSU was a mixture of undergraduate and graduate students. At least one white student, other folks were Black, Latinx folks as well, both men and women.

During this process and engaging with Liberate and other folks, we realized that Chicano/ Latino studies had the same problems we had. They were also a program and not a department. From our research, we had found out that Michigan State was a unique model. We were the only university to have a PhD program in Chicano/Latino studies and in African American and African Studies that were not housed in departments, which harmed our program. In fact, William Hart-Davidson, the Assistant Dean in the grad school, made the point that AAAS is structural disadvantaged by not being a department. That is not an insignificant statement from a relatively significant administrator.

We had this meeting with Simon on November 30. She was disingenuous because the demand that we had for the college of race, gender, class, sexuality, she said, it was a "1960s/1970s model" and not something that she is interested in and that having AAAS and Chicano Studies is a "21st century model." It is laughable because I asked other chairs of other departments throughout the nation and they know that is not true. You look at universities like NYU, universities in California, other places that are creating these kinds of colleges; nobody is creating these kinds of AAAS PhD programs or CLS PhD programs. Nobody is doing that. She was very dismissive; it was an idea that existed back in the College of Urban Affairs founded in the early 1970s. In the context of the great migration of black folk coming from the South to North, with all the black folks coming to cities, they needed to recruit black people and prepare them to go back and do work in these cities. That was one of the main reasons why that college was founded.

I know that President Simon was being dishonest with the comment that this was a 1970s model. Clifton Wharton—the former president of the university, who the Wharton Center was named after, very famous prominent African American at the time and even now—she interviewed him two years ago. I cannot remember what the event was. He made the comment that one of his biggest regrets is that they did not still have that College of Urban Affairs. He said that in the context of everything that is happening in cities today. Not only state violence, but poverty, issues with schools, et cetera, are prominent in a lot of these urban communities. The reason that college dissolved was because a lot of racism on campus, racism by administrators, and other faculty who did not see the value and constantly attacked and assaulted that college ever since it was implemented or founded.

Student activist have to think about a very important question: Can the university be perfected? In other words, there is an understanding of what the university is at its core. For me, for many years, I thought the university could become a revolutionary space within the university. I am not certain that is the case. A famous historian, Robin D. G. Kelley—who wrote

this speech called “Black Study, Black Struggle”—pinned this letter around 2015 or 2016, it posed this question, Do you really believe that the university can be perfected? And he says it can be. More and more I am starting to believe that. It does not mean that you cannot be subversive within the university, but you can be “in” the university and not “of” the university.

Depending on how you think about the university, that can also influence the kinds of demands you make on the university and what you believe that university can do. I think that is a question that all student activist need to seriously think about. There are times we thought we were doing some kind of radical things. In many respects, It is sort of reformist; you believe that certain changes could take place in the university; it could live up to a particular ideal. For example, if you had more black faculty or more black students than the university would be a better place. I do not know if I necessarily agree with that.

Not only more faculty and students of color, not just the freestanding multi-cultural center, but concern about mental health services for students of color [pause]. A good friend of mine involved in some of the activism ended up passing away. This kind of activism students have to deal with on a daily basis can take a big toll on us. Some of those demands, even though they are reformatory or reformist, there is something to them.

LT: Do you consider your involvement in My Brother’s Keeper to be part of your scholar-activist identity?

AR: I was involved with the My Brother’s Keeper program since 2007. The program itself was founded in 1990. It was founded with Dr. Geneva Smitherman and an educator in Detroit, Cliff . . . they founded this organization; they really wanted to have a program that mentored black boys. In the context in the late 1980s, around 1988 or so, there was an African centered school movement that had emerged in Detroit Public Schools as a response to the deteriorating educational, economic conditions in the city. Cliff was involved in the mentoring and came into contact with Dr. Geneva. They wanted a program for elementary or middle school black boys. That was a program founded; it worked with the Malcolm X Academy and some other schools. By the time, I got there in 2007; I was working with the Malcolm X Academy and My Brother’s Keeper Program. At that time I was a mentor, I believe the majority if not all of our mentoring sessions were on campus at least that year.

Students will come up to campus three times a year and we’ll go down there three times a year. . . it might be about six times a semester actually. Three times down there and three times up here each semester. The program was supposed to be an intervention, not just an educational intervention, but also a social intervention. It was to give students an opportunity to get out of the neighborhood they were used to, to get exposed to college life, but also get college students here to go see where the students are going to school and the city a little bit. It becomes an exchange and both groups of students are learning from each other. It is a

powerful experience. For me, it is an extension of social activism because the youth are our future leaders, et cetera. A lot of times those students look up to us and it is fun to kick it with them. I think sometimes it is fun for them, sometimes, we are a little boring [laughs]. There is a kind of community created that I think is useful and helpful. We try to instill certain values or beliefs in students; it is a commitment to one another. You are supposed to be looking out for one another.

Recently, we created the My Brother's and Sister's Keeper. It was founded to work with black boys, but now, we are working with both black boys and girls, which is dope. I think about it as activism, but I kind of don't. In many respects, it is just something I did. In that process, there is a lot you learn when you see certain issues with schools. You see this part of the school does not look good, there is some mold over here, or this area flooded. You realize that you go to these black spaces and they do not have the resources needed for basic education. I remember Jeffery Robinson, who helped to lead the '89 takeover of campus and Principal of Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy, one of his students came into his office and his shoes were wet, it was just flooded. It is very difficult, as you can imagine, to educate students in that context. It is just one way to make sure I am part of the community and give what I can.

LT: And the last question, what does diversity mean to you?

AR: I like this question. Diversity is a word that was created by white people, for white people. If one reads the "Black Study, Black Struggle" piece by Robert D. G. Kelley, he breaks it down. Diversity is a product of the liberal multi-cultural response to the black power liberation movements in the 60s and 70s. Basically, certain marginalized groups are saying oppression is real and some radical groups are saying that we need to be engaged in structural change. There are certain fundamental issues that impact, for example, black people. Institutions operate in a detrimental way towards these communities. Diversity, this multi-cultural term, realizes that there are problems. We acknowledge the concerns people had in the 60s and 70s. How do we address them? It suggests not to address the root problems, but try to change enough to accept some people.

Diversity becomes, let's get some more black faces in the room or more black CEOs, black presidents, black students, black faculty. But, that does not say anything about structural inequality or changing basic systems of inequality that reproduce inequality. For example, even if you were to have more black students to Madison, but the faculty stays the same, Madison can say they are more "diverse." That is for them, that institution, not for those students.

Even, ok, Madison, we are going to bring in some more black faculty. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt when they say that this faculty they bring in are super conscious and have subscribed to radical politics. First of all, usually that is not going to happen. The institution themselves does not support that kind of politics, so why would they have somebody . . . that is

contradictory. Even if they bring people in, they are still a minority. It does not say anything about Madison: Who are they recruiting? What kinds of experiences are those students having at Michigan State University?

One student said during the protest, "They put my face on the brochure, but I won an award and during the awards ceremony they never mentioned my name." Even that is not asking that much, you are "diverse" because you said my name in this space. For me, diversity is not really something I have ever been concerned with. I am concerned with how to change institutions that produce and reproduce certain unequal outcomes. If you don't focus on institutions and systems of inequality, you get caught up in a lot of side conversations. For example, Barack Obama was elected president, so you can't question diversity now because he is president. If you define diversity in that way, you are privileging certain things over a host of other things. Also, what does his election say for the masses of black people? I am not saying it doesn't say anything, but one has to be very clear about what that says. Based on my analysis, it doesn't say much or do much for changing conditions.

Now it is laughable. Even the Provost, June [Pierce] Youatt says that one of her missions is to pursue and increase diversity around campus. What the h*** does that mean? Again, why it is beneficial to white folks? Because you can do anything and say it is diversity. You can bring in more international students who are going to pay and say that we have "increased diversity." If you are not going to address certain underlying issues—white supremacy, patriarchy, sexism, and classism—but introduce "diversity" in the conversation . . . How do you think diversity is going to be understood? All of those other things are going to inform how leaders of institutions think about diversity because it has not changed leadership or the way the system operates. The same people are running the same institutions and you just introduce a buzzword. And what is the buzzword used for? It is used as a recruiting tool most of the time [laughs]. Diversity is something that is not only beneficial to whites, but it can harm those that it intended to help because it marginalizes the radical views that say we need structural change and privileges diversity, a picture on a brochure. As you can see, I am not a huge fan of that word [laughs].

LT: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

AR: I do want to say one last quick thing. One of the things that I am realizing with Sankofa, Liberate MSU, and the DuBois Society, is how powerful, insightful, and integral those spaces were for my own intellectual and political development as well as the other people involved in those spaces. You create a kind of cohesiveness, kind of family bond. I think that is one of those things that students and nonstudents interested in political change need to be aware of. If you look at the Civil Rights Movements, they were the product of people getting together concerned about issues. Those organizations were super powerful and useful.

AAAS does not have a department; it has a PhD program. With that structure of not being able to tenure your own faculty, I have sometimes questioned the commitment some faculty have to the program. I am not necessarily questioning their dedication, but looking at, *who pays you*? Because you have a material interest in certain people more so than others. If you have a family—the intellectual in me takes my emotions out of it and looking at it structurally—you are paid by this person and not paid by this person. You are going to be more concerned about this group of people. Because of that, I realized that PhD students were more so on their own in AAAS than in some of these other programs.

The university, arguably, put the AAAS program in a moratorium. Moratorium where you can't accept students. The program has not accepted students for three years maybe going on fourth year. The university and provost lied to us and said that it would not last longer than two years. They lied about that. There were some AAAS faculty who supported the idea of moratorium and the idea of abolishing the PhD program altogether. I am recently getting sympathetic to this [laughs]. One of the reasons why is because if the university is not going to be supportive. Then why have it? I am not there. But, I am starting to see that argument a little more. Some of us did not feel like we had to institutional and faculty support; we had to take on a unique role.

The history of Black Studies departments have either been established by the university, top-down, or it has been a product of student activism. We are the only program founded as a PhD program in 2002 and we wanted to establish a department afterwards. How do you do that? I do not know of any model as to how to get there. You have graduate students fighting for a department as opposed to undergrads fighting for a department that are linked to particular faculty who might want to be in that department. Not everybody was our ally. Some people were hostile to us and towards the program.

With Sankofa, especially in the context of this moratorium, the university wants us to leave before they accept any more students. I read that as wanting to eliminate our institutional memory. The memory of our activism, the memory of us, and the memory of the original intentions of the program. All the original founders have either retired—Professor Harriette McAdoo has passed away, unfortunately—or they are no longer at the university. All the people that founded this program, had the idea, and vision for the program are no longer here. The people that are here are junior faculty or faculty that have not really been involved in the program and do not know that much about Black Studies.

One of the things we wanted to do at Sankofa was create and preserve the institutional memory or the history around the program: why it was founded, what its original goals and intentions were, and what kind of students the founders wanted to produce. In other words, we wanted to preserve the history of AAAS.This past school year 2016/2017, we created this program called "Voices from the Vineyard"; we interviewed four out of the five original founders of AAAS. Our first interview was Dr. Curtis Stokes in November, Smitherman in

December, Dr. Bill Lawson in February/March, and Dr. Darlene Clark Hine in March/April. They were powerful interviews. It was powerful to hear about their goals and who they are.

The founders of Black studies have a very different history and come from a very different historical moment, very different conditions, very different set of experiences. All those people were profoundly impacted by things that were happening in the 60s and involved, which is very different from a lot of the younger faculty today. That influences how they think about black studies. It was powerful to capture that history in the "Voices from the Vineyard" series. We wanted to preserve that history, so it could be passed on to AAAS students. If they looked, they could find this history, learn about the program, and understand what the founders had intended. Even if when they enter, that history or memory is overlooked or forgotten.

It should be clear for the record because a lot of things have been said, student activism around AAAS did result in some concessions from the university. In 2012, we had eight total students; we demanded twenty-five fully funded students every year. As a result of the meeting and protests, the university did respond to us in 2015 or sometime in 2016; they were going to increase from eight to twenty students. The program should have twenty reoccurring lines in the future. I am saying that for the camera, if they don't someone needs to hold them accountable. That was one change.

We now have a full time director. Our previous director was running a PhD program, which had over forty students, she helped build/expand to about twenty or thirty undergraduate students there. We had an academic unit that was responsible for educating over seventy students. And we had a director who was about half time. That was about it. That was a black woman. There are other issues we have to look at race and gender as well. She is Nigerian, so there might be another component there as well. There were some gains that took place as a result of some of that activism, although we were not satisfied with the totality of that response.

[End of interview]
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